



Heatstroke (Private Encounters #15)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: One touch. One storm. One heatwave they never saw coming.

On the sun-drenched island of Sainte-Margot, solitude was all Daniel Voss came for. A burned-out trauma nurse, he wants silence—not surf lessons, not sunshine, and definitely not the barefoot lifeguard who keeps showing up wherever he goes.

But Thierry Batiste is impossible to ignore. Bright, fearless, infuriatingly warm, he crashes through Daniel's emotional defenses like a wave—slow, relentless, and inevitable.

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ONE

SALT BURN

The moment his feet touched the dock, Daniel felt the heat claw up his spine like an unwelcome hand.

It was the kind of sun that bleached the air, thickened it, and made it cling to the entire surface of your body. He stepped away from the gangplank with a restrained exhale, the linen of his shirt already damp and clasping his back like a second, disloyal skin.

All around him, the little port of Sainte-Margot buzzed in undisciplined jubilation—tourists calling out in laughter-drowned French, engines hacking at the tide, music coming from no single source, instead seeming to bleed from the trees themselves.

His watch beeped once—a rude, insistent pulse—marking the hour with unasked-for precision. He silenced it with a thumb and let his arm fall. Already the band had printed a ring on his wrist, pale and irritated.

Daniel loathed arrivals.

The boat crew, all bronzed skin and loose-limbed ease, shouted something in Creole and tossed the next passenger's suitcase over the railing with elegant indifference.

One of them—barefoot and singing—held up a bottle of something orange and

passed it along the line like communion.

There was no urgency to anything, only a slow, salt-blind rhythm that grated against Daniel's need for silence, order, reprieve.

He had come to Sainte-Margot against his better judgment.

A favor for a friend-of-a-friend with a guesthouse in need of a tenant and glowing reviews on social media.

" You'll hate it for a day and then fall in love, " the voice on the phone had promised, syrupy with nostalgia. Daniel hated it already.

Dragging his duffel behind him with visible disdain, he navigated the cracked walkway toward the mouth of the village.

The buildings—mostly two-story structures in fading colors—seemed to lean into one another like they were gossiping.

Rust bloomed on balconies, and vines crept freely through shutters left forever ajar.

The air smelled of mango rot and engine grease, and above it all, the blunted beat of a bass drum vibrated faintly.

It felt as if the island's heart were thudding right beneath his feet.

The sign for The Breakline was nailed crookedly over a paint-chipped veranda. Bar, guesthouse, café—it didn't know what it was and had made no attempt to choose. A tangle of frangipani arched over the front railing, and inside, the reggae was loud enough to disturb the teeth.

Daniel stepped into the tiled foyer and immediately regretted it.

The music—he recognized the voice, Peter Tosh or someone trying to be—boomed up through the floorboards as though the foundation itself were suffering through the verse.

Somewhere to the left, a fan ticked on a slow axis, managing to move only the scent of warm rum and lemon balm.

"Room Three," the girl at the counter said, without looking up from her phone. "Key's in the door."

He said nothing. He had planned to ask whether there was a quieter section, perhaps one facing the back garden. But the idea of engaging in any further transaction—with this place, with the day—repelled him.

He climbed the stairs instead, the duffel thumping on each riser like a second heart, and entered the room with the weary precision of a man rehearsing escape.

The ceiling fan above the bed was already spinning, though no one had turned it on.

Daniel closed the door and leaned against it for a moment.

Sweat gathered at his collarbone and ran, lazy and unhurried, down his chest. The air was hot and almost sticky, though the ceiling fan was starting to do its job.

Outside the window, a bird cried once, harsh and mechanical, like a screwdriver against glass.

Then came the screaming.

It came not from the town, but from the water. A high, slicing wail that turned into gasping panic. Daniel peeled himself from the door and moved, driven by instinct. His body knew how to respond before he'd consented to it.

Down the stairs. Through the foyer. Past the girl who had not looked up before and still didn't look up now. The beach lay beyond the back terrace, and already a loose collection of people was running in no particular formation toward the surf.

Daniel saw the boy in the shallows, thrashing, until he wasn't.

He ran.

His shoes sank briefly in the wet sand before he kicked them off. A woman to his left was sobbing into her hands, her husband shouting uselessly at the horizon. The tide had pulled the boy outward, and now he floated, facedown, in the churn where the reef dipped just out of reach.

Daniel's breath shortened with each step. The heat, so consuming a moment ago, dropped away into a kind of tunnel. He marked the angle of the waves, the spasm of the tide. He moved into the water, the coolness slicing up his thighs.

And then a flash—dark limbs, strong and fluid—cut through the surf beside him.

A man, barefoot and bare-chested, dove with astonishing grace beneath the current. No hesitation, no drag. A pair of sunglasses vanished beneath the waves with him.

Daniel paused only long enough to watch the man reemerge with the boy in his arms.

Together, they staggered backward, Daniel reaching to support the child's head. He dropped to his knees as soon as the sand was beneath him, fingers already at the neck, behind the jaw. No pulse. No breath. Water gushed from the boy's mouth like a

confession.

The other man stood beside them, hands on his hips, breathing with practiced calm.

"You're a doctor?" he asked in French.

Daniel didn't answer. He was counting seconds, tipping the boy's chin, beginning compressions. His voice, when he finally used it, was clipped and exact.

"Check for obstruction. I need space."

The man crouched beside him and obeyed without question. The muscles across his back, sun-dark and slick with seawater, rippled as he turned the boy gently. His movements were deft, respectful, professional.

Daniel felt a faint return of rhythm beneath his fingers.

He exhaled, barely.

Behind them, the tourists began to cheer. He hated that.

Daniel stood on the wet edge of the beach, salt itching at the seam of his trousers, the damp hem slapping gently against his ankle with each step toward dry land.

His hands—still trembling with the residue of adrenaline—hung by his sides like tools not yet stowed.

No one asked for his name. No one needed to.

The boy was alive. That was enough for them.

The crowd had already begun to dissolve into themselves again, resuming cocktails, sandals, plastic-tipped laughter.

But the man hadn't moved.

He lingered in the breath of space beside him, feet buried easily in the damp sand and water dripped down the ropes of his sun-bleached dreadlocks. Each strand trailed over bronzed shoulders like seaweed clinging to driftwood.

His chest rose with easy control, breath deep and unhurried. Swimmer's lungs. His board shorts, plastered to strong legs, bore the salt with the comfort of long habit. And there was that smile again—mild, open, with a mischief that made Daniel itch.

"You don't sound local," the stranger said at last, in English this time. His voice had that ocean-soft warmth of islanders, round at the edges, low in the chest.

Daniel glanced at him without warmth.

"I'm not."

"Mm," he hummed, eyes scanning Daniel's linen shirt—half-transparent now, clinging to his lean torso, the tattoo beneath it a blurred dark bloom of ink. "That shirt gives you away. Linen is what tourists wear when they want to feel tropical but end up looking hot and vaguely betrayed."

Daniel didn't respond. The salt was drying on his skin, tightening across his olive-brown arms. Sweat gathered again at the back of his neck, soaking into the collar of his shirt. The field watch strapped to his wrist gave a discreet beep—four o'clock. He dismissed the alert without looking.

The stranger stepped closer, still barefoot, toes making small half-moons in the sand

as he bent to retrieve Daniel's discarded shoes. He held them out casually.

"Doctor?" he asked.

Daniel took the shoes in silence.

"Or do you just enjoy dramatic CPR in linen?"

"There was no one else."

"I was there," the man said, lifting his brow. "Like lightning. Cut through the water like I was born for it."

Daniel arched a single brow. "You talk a lot."

"I'm friendly," he corrected, grinning. "And you look like someone who forgot how to be."

Daniel turned to leave, brushing sand off his forearms.

"Thierry Batiste," the man called behind him, light as a sea breeze. "Occasional hero. Full-time local menace."

Daniel's shoulders tightened beneath the linen. He paused at the edge of the boardwalk, already resenting the fact that Thierry's voice seemed to echo louder than the others, as if the island conspired against him to amplify it.

"You're barefoot," Daniel said without looking back. "There's reef in that surf. You want infection?"

"The sea knows me," Thierry said with a shrug. "Besides, I walk soft. Are you ever

going to tell me your name?"

Daniel paused. "Daniel Voss. Good luck with tetanus."

That amused Thierry. He approached again, this time walking a slow arc around Daniel until they were once again face-to-face.

The sun was behind him now, throwing his silhouette long and golden across the sand.

His eyes, honey-brown and maddeningly bright, dipped to the exposed skin on Daniel's arm.

"That's new."

Daniel followed his gaze and saw, too late, that his sleeve had ridden up, and the black ink of the tattoo stark against his arm: a coiled lotus encircling a caduceus, thin and delicate lines intersecting, curving along his arm.

"It hasn't healed properly yet," Thierry went on, not touching but close enough that Daniel could smell the salt and citrus clinging to his skin. "Hurt?"

Daniel tugged his sleeve down with deliberate calm.

"You're observant."

"I like stories," Thierry said simply. His expression was unreadable now. "Especially the ones people don't want to tell."

There was no accusation. Still, the words dug under Daniel's skin.

He gave a final, withering look, then walked off.

The sand was coarser near the guesthouse path, flecked with fragments of coral and broken shell.

A cicada whined somewhere in the palms overhead.

His feet, even in shoes now, felt the grind of each step.

He passed a young couple sipping coconut water from a chipped ceramic bowl, their legs intertwined like vines. The woman laughed—too loud, too free.

At the porch of The Breakline, the reggae returned. It was deeper now, the bass line thick as syrup, bleeding through the walls of the guesthouse. Daniel pressed past the beaded curtain and up the narrow stairwell, the scent of rum and old varnish riding the humid air.

His door was ajar. He closed it with a heavy hand, the clap of wood and brass echoing through the small room.

Inside, nothing had changed. The fan turned overhead, indifferent to the press of heat.

The air held the faint tang of mildew. His linen shirt stuck to his back.

He peeled the fabric from his chest and dropped it on the bed.

Through the open shutters, the sea sprawled into evening, a smear of violet and steel.

And below, barely visible through the balcony slats, Thierry walked away—still shirtless, still barefoot, his step unhurried, head turning briefly to glance up at the windows above.

Even from that distance, Daniel saw the smirk.

He shut the window with more force than required. The glass trembled in its frame. The tattoo throbbed faintly under his skin, as if it, too, resented the attention.

He sat at the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, and stared at nothing.

What unnerved him wasn't the rescue, nor the crowd. It was Thierry. The way he spoke directly, like someone who wasn't afraid of being wrong. The way he looked, not at, but into.

Daniel had built his life around silence, around not being read. And yet here, on an island he'd hoped would forget him, someone had seen far too much in a single afternoon.

And he had a feeling this Thierry guy wasn't finished.

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TWO

BODY HEAT

That instinct proved right by morning.

Daniel found him again—though truthfully, it felt the other way around—lounging barefoot atop the cracked tile of The Breakline's open-air bar, shirtless as ever, with an iced drink sweating beside his elbow and an unread book in his lap.

The reggae from the battered speaker warbled low, mingling with the chatter of late risers and the rattle of cutlery from the tiny kitchen out back.

Daniel had come down only for breakfast, still groggy, still irritable, hoping the sea air and strong coffee might dull the throb behind his eyes.

Instead, he found Thierry already grinning at him like they'd planned this.

"You look like you lost a bet," Thierry called. "Or got bit by a dream."

Daniel slid into the farthest corner booth and made no reply. He ordered coffee and fried plantains from the girl behind the counter—barely glancing up from the menu board, though he knew full well what it said.

Thierry arrived before the coffee did.

He didn't sit so much as sprawl. His skin was gold-bright and damp from the sun, a

film of salt still visible in the hollows of his collarbone. He carried with him the scent of the sea—mineral, faintly citrus, and unmistakably human. No sandals. No apology.

"You always eat alone?" he asked, dragging a chair out with his foot.

"I don't always eat," Daniel muttered, then frowned at himself for responding at all.

"Tragic. But today, I come bearing appetite." Thierry reached across the table without ceremony and plucked one of Daniel's fries from the still-steaming plate that had just arrived.

Daniel blinked. "Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious about fries," Thierry said, chewing with infuriating delight.

"You can order your own."

"But yours are here," Thierry replied, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. He reached for another. "And they're hot. The universe delivers."

Daniel forced himself to breathe through his nose, to maintain that crumbling facade of Dutch politeness, the brand he'd worn so long it nearly fit. "Do you ambush every guest who wanders onto this island, or just the antisocial ones?"

Thierry leaned back, his gaze unflinching. "Only the ones pretending they don't want company."

That landed harder than Daniel wanted to admit. He said nothing. Sipped his coffee. Refused to meet the honey-bright eyes staring into him like they had a right to know.

"Eat faster," Thierry said suddenly, standing. "We're going to the market."

Daniel stared at him. "We?"

"Unless you've developed a twin since yesterday."

"I don't need?—"

"You do. You just haven't figured out why yet." Thierry's grin deepened. "Come on. You look like someone who forgot what fruits are supposed to taste like."

The heat had thickened by late morning. At Marché Ti-Flamme, it lay over everything—fruit, skin, metal, spice—making the air taste like cardamom and oil. Daniel walked through it reluctantly, his linen clinging again to his back, his brow damp despite the wide awning strung above the stalls.

Vendors shouted prices in French-Creole, pushing plantains, limes, bundles of herbs wrapped in banana leaves.

Steel drums echoed faintly from some far courtyard, their syncopated clang adding a strange rhythm to the chaos.

People moved easily around him, chatting, bartering, bumping shoulders without apology.

He hated it.

Yet Thierry moved like he was part of it—calling out to vendors by name, tossing greetings like pebbles into the tide of bodies, catching laughter in return.

His dreadlocks had dried now, bleached strands shining under the sun.

He held two mangoes in one hand, inspecting them as if choosing between lovers.

Daniel was about to slip away—feigning phone signal, feigning anything—when Thierry turned, caught him mid-step, and pressed a mango into his palm.

"You're not leaving," he said, low and final. Not threatening. Just certain.

Daniel glanced down at the fruit. "This isn't going to change my opinion of you."

"Not trying to. Just trying to remind your tongue what pleasure feels like."

He held the second mango up and used a small blade— where had that come from? —to carve a thin strip of skin away. The scent hit instantly: ripe, sweet, alive.

Then Thierry dipped one finger in the juice and, before Daniel could react, touched it to the corner of his mouth.

Daniel froze. The contact was fleeting. His pulse wasn't.

"Try it," Thierry murmured.

Daniel didn't move.

Thierry leaned in, his voice quiet beneath the din of the market. "You've got this wall around you. Concrete and glass. But even those get hot enough to crack."

The silence between them deepened, loaded.

Daniel licked the juice from his lip—automatically, without thinking—and hated how his breath caught.

Thierry stepped back as though he hadn't done anything at all. Turned back to the mango pile, casual again.

And Daniel stood there, the fruit sweating in his palm, unsure whether he wanted to throw it at the man's back or follow him deeper into the crowd.

Thierry was already halfway through his own mango and laughing with a vendor like nothing at all had just passed between them. The juice on Daniel's mouth had dried to tackiness. The burn beneath his skin hadn't.

He moved before he could think, jerking backward through the throng of people, catching elbows and apologies as he went. He dropped the mango in the first crate he saw and turned down a side lane choked with spices and the sour stench of fish.

A vendor tried to wave him over, shaking a bunch of thyme in one hand and a toothless grin in the other, but Daniel barreled past, the sound of his sandals snapping against the baked concrete like a warning drum.

Behind him, Thierry didn't call out. Didn't run. Didn't laugh.

But Daniel knew, with nauseating certainty, that the man was smiling. That maddening, sun-drunk, knowing smile that didn't need words to reach the bone.

It was the most frustrating thing Daniel had ever experienced.

By the time he got back to the guesthouse, his shirt was soaked through, his breath uneven, his chest tight with a feeling he couldn't name.

He slammed the door shut—not because he felt as if Thierry was behind him, but because the presence clung anyway, like ocean salt on skin after the water's gone.

The air inside was thick, the ceiling fan indifferent as usual. He stood in the middle of the room for a moment, as if the right posture might return him to composure. Then, when it didn't, he tore the damp shirt from his back and flung it at the bed.

The lotus on his shoulder flexed with the motion, its lines dark and clean against olive-brown skin. Below, near his ribs, the pale scar drew itself like a mouth that never quite closed.

He opened the small refrigerator, retrieved a bottle of water, and drained it in three swallows. The cold did nothing to ease his pounding heart.

What the hell was that?

A finger to the mouth. A mango. That stupid, effortless touch.

He paced, barefoot now, the floor warm beneath him. His waterproof watch clung tight to his wrist, as if it too were bracing. It was nothing. Nothing. Dumb, stupid nothing.

Thierry didn't know him. Didn't know the things Daniel had seen, done, held between his fingers as breath slipped away.

The man—no, boy —had never worked an emergency shift in a war zone, never watched a man call for his brother with half his face gone.

Thierry flirted with life as though it couldn't break him.

And yet.

It was his face Daniel saw when he closed his eyes—those honey eyes lit with mischief, the damp gleam of salt above his navel, the smirk that asked nothing and promised too much.

He stripped the rest of the way down without ceremony and crawled onto the sheets, not caring that the sweat hadn't dried. The fan clacked overhead, a lazy, rhythmic

complaint.

He didn't mean to fall asleep. But when he did, the dream took him quick.

It began in darkness, not like night but like breath held underwater. And then a figure started forming. Suddenly, Thierry was there—of course he was—sitting on the edge of the bed like he'd been waiting. He was shirtless again, always shirtless, but it wasn't the bare skin that undid Daniel.

It was the attention. The way those sunlit eyes tracked him. Not possessive. Not pleading. Just... focused. Like Daniel had become the only thing of interest on the island.

He touched him. Not roughly. Not sweetly either. Just real. A hand on the thigh, palm to sweat-damp skin, tracing the long curve of muscle with lazy expertise. The heat pooled fast, impossible to ignore.

Thierry leaned in. His mouth hovered near Daniel's jaw. He didn't speak. He didn't need to.

Daniel reached for him. That was the worst part. He reached. For him.

And then he woke up with a jerk.

The ceiling fan ticked like a metronome above him. His sheets were tangled. His skin burned. His pulse ran quick and ashamed. His pillow was damp with sweat.

"God damn it," he muttered aloud, dragging a hand over his face.

The air reeked of sleep and heat and sweat and something too close to longing. He swung his legs off the bed and sat, breathing hard, like he'd sprinted across the island

instead of just across some dream.

He hated this. Hated the crack in his armor, hated how easy Thierry made it all seem. As if desire wasn't dangerous. As if it hadn't cost Daniel pieces of himself before.

He stood, got dressed without turning the lights on. There was a long evening ahead, and he needed solitude like a man needed air. Thierry Batiste could smile all he wanted, but Daniel would not be drawn into this game.

He just couldn't afford to be.

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THREE

FRICTION

The rain came down in sheets, sudden and slanting, as though the heavens had waited precisely for the moment Daniel stepped outside.

He was halfway across the veranda of Ital Brisa when it began, a thunderclap rumbling through the belly of the island like some ancient, restless god clearing his throat.

A few patrons groaned in unison, dragging their drinks and beach towels inward. Daniel remained where he stood. The fine linen of his shirt had already been clinging to his spine, the air dense with ozone and salt.

He had not intended to come here. In fact, he had not even intended to leave the guesthouse of The Breakline. But they had run out of bottled water, and the market, too thick with people and unwelcome sensation, had become intolerable by noon.

Ital Brisa was a bar a few streets away. It was tolerable, usually quiet during the day. He had entered with every intention of taking a table in the back—alone, dry, undisturbed.

But then the scream came.

It cracked across the bar like a blade, small and high. A child's panic, unmuted by rain. In a moment Daniel was already out again, bare feet thudding down the stone

steps to the shore, through puddles that had not existed two minutes before.

A boy lay at the edge of the shallows, no more than ten, perhaps less.

His arm was curled inward at an unnatural angle, skin torn raw and blooming red where the coral had kissed him.

His mother knelt beside him, speaking a frantic mixture of French and English, her own hands trembling too much to help.

Thierry was already there, crouched beside the boy. Rain sluiced down his bare back, his eyes darting over the injury with that odd blend of calm and concern that Daniel had begun, reluctantly, to associate with him.

Daniel's voice cut through it all, firm, low, the kind of tone that expected obedience without having to demand it. "Move. Let me see."

The mother didn't hesitate. Thierry did.

"He cut it bad," Thierry said, not moving from his place.

"I can see that. Let me in."

Something in his tone—or the authority that laced it like steel under silk—made Thierry finally shift aside.

Daniel knelt, the wet sand seeping through his linen trousers, and studied the wound with a clarity that came as instinct despite the rain.

He asked the boy's name—Andre—and kept his voice calm as he examined the arm.

Dislocated at the elbow. Not broken. Laceration across the radius, deep enough to need stitching. Coral embedded. Not life-threatening, but it would scar if left untreated.

"You're going to be all right," he murmured to the boy, whose breath came in hiccupping sobs. "I'm going to move your arm. It'll hurt for three seconds. I need you to be brave for four."

The boy, pale now, nodded once. Daniel looked up at Thierry. "Hold his legs. Tight."

Thierry didn't argue. He moved in beside the boy, murmuring something low and steady into his ear, one hand on each small thigh, anchoring him.

Daniel braced, counted under his breath, and moved the arm back into socket with a sure, precise motion that earned a single, strangled cry from Andre—and then silence.

Daniel exhaled.

Despite the rain, which had softened just the slightest bit, a small crowd had gathered—tourists, locals, staff—all watching with a kind of reverent stillness.

Thierry glanced at Daniel as if seeing him properly for the first time. "You're not just here to tan and sulk, then."

Daniel didn't answer. He didn't look up. He tore a clean strip from the hem of his shirt and began wrapping the arm with practiced hands.

Minutes later, the boy was stabilized and handed off to his frantic but grateful father for transport to the clinic. Daniel stood again, wet through his clothes, sand clinging to his knees.

The rain had slowed to a steadier rhythm now, thick drops pattering against the thatched awning above the bar. Thierry stood beside him, still barefoot, still golden, even under bruised sky.

"You're really not going to say anything?" Thierry asked, voice low, amused. "That was... impressive. That other kid too, a few days ago."

Daniel shook water from his wrist, jaw tight. "I didn't do it for applause."

"I didn't say you did."

A gust of wind swept up the shoreline, warm and erratic, sending palm fronds into a noisy dance. Someone inside called for rum. The bartender obliged. Daniel turned to leave, but Thierry moved with him, not blocking, not interfering—just there. Always there.

They ducked back into Ital Brisa, the wooden floor damp beneath their feet. The inside was almost empty now, save a few diehards nursing their drinks and watching the downpour like a boring film they'd seen before.

"Looks like we're stuck here till it passes," Thierry said. "Unless you want to swim home."

He spoke to the bartender in the local Patois, too quick for Daniel to understand right away. The bartender reached below the bar and gave Thierry two towels. He tossed one to Daniel.

Daniel caught it and wiped the back of his neck. "I've been stuck in worse places."

Thierry led him to a U-shaped booth tucked into a corner, unseen from plain view, and tilted his head. "That what you were doing wherever you came from? Being

stuck?"

Daniel's eyes narrowed. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"That thing where you pretend to be asking casual questions."

Thierry shrugged, undeterred. "It's not casual. I'm curious. You act like no one should look at you too long, but you keep showing up in public."

Daniel snorted softly. "You think I'm performing solitude?"

"I think you're bad at it."

Daniel glanced out at the water, now silvering under the murky light, and said nothing. Thierry waited.

"You don't know me," Daniel said at last.

Thierry leaned forward. "Then tell me something. Anything."

Silence again. The kind that pulled tight rather than soothed. Daniel let the towel fall across his lap and finally sat, slow and wary.

Thierry smiled. "See? That wasn't so hard."

"I'm not here to talk."

"You keep saying that," Thierry murmured, "but your eyes say otherwise."

And for a moment, Daniel said nothing, because the man wasn't wrong, and that was the most dangerous part.

The air between them was no longer neutral.

It pulsed now, damp and faintly charged, like the stillness before another storm.

Beyond the warped wood of the bar's open shutters, the sea heaved slow and gray beneath the bruised afternoon sky, and rain pattered softly on the corrugated roofing like a secret trying to be kept.

Thierry hadn't looked away. His gaze, direct and unreadable, bore into Daniel like a tide neither resisted nor acknowledged. There was no grin now, no irony, no performance. Just a stillness, coiled and watchful.

And beneath it, something dangerous yet irresistible. Something that asked nothing but demanded everything.

"I'm going to kiss you now," Thierry said, voice calm, as though it were a forecast rather than a proposition.

Daniel's jaw tightened. He didn't move. Didn't nod. But he didn't retreat either—and that was enough.

Thierry reached out, one slow hand behind Daniel's neck, not tentative but measured, as though they'd done this a hundred times in another life. The touch was warm, damp from the rain, the fingers sure. And then the kiss.

It was not soft.

It was not careful.

Their mouths met with a clash that was more collision than courtship. Thierry pressed forward, Daniel pulling him in harder still, their teeth clashing briefly in the hunger of it. It was all instinct now.

Daniel's hands found Thierry's dreadlocks, dragging him close by the roots, yanking until Thierry moaned against his mouth, that low, involuntary sound of surrender that shot straight through Daniel's spine like a live current.

There was no grace to it, no rhythm—just heat and fury and the unbearable inevitability of it. The kiss was not a yielding. It was a bursting dam, a reckoning.

Daniel bit Thierry's lip and tasted blood, salt, rain. Their breaths tangled, heavy, ragged. Thierry grabbed at Daniel's waist, fingers curling into damp cotton. He was murmuring something now, into Daniel's throat, half-words lost in skin and breath.

Daniel didn't care. He pressed him against the bar's wood paneling, kissed him deeper, and let himself vanish into the pressure, the feral want of it, the throb in his temple.

And then, as quickly as it began, Daniel tore himself away.

He staggered back like he'd been struck, chest rising hard, mouth red and wet and open. Thierry looked dazed but not surprised. His lip was bruised. His hair hung loose in damp ropes where Daniel had pulled it. His eyes, darker than usual, stayed on Daniel as if tethering him in place.

"What the fuck was that," Daniel rasped. It was unclear whether he was speaking to Thierry or to the room, or to whatever reckless piece of himself had just detonated without permission.

"A kiss, Daniel." Thierry's mouth curved—crooked, slow. Daniel realized this was

the first time he'd heard the man say his name. "I'd say you liked it."

Daniel stared at him a moment longer, a dozen responses snarling behind his teeth, none of them coherent. He turned.

He walked.

Out of the bar. Into the rain. Down the steps. Past the stone path. Past the palms. He didn't run, not at first. Not while Thierry could still see him.

But as soon as the building fell from view—he ran.

Barefoot on the muddy path that curved inland from the shore, the drizzle thickening again into proper rain, leaves slick beneath his feet, the scent of petrichor dense in his nostrils.

He ran as though something might catch him, as though what had just passed between them might still be on his skin, might linger in his mouth.

His breath came short. His throat burned. His lips— God , his lips—still tingled with it. With the taste of him.

What the fuck was that?

The question rang through Daniel's skull with every pounding step. Not disbelief. Not denial. Something worse. Recognition.

He stumbled once, caught himself, and he realized he was close to getting lost. He circled back, kept going, finding his way back to the narrow trail that led to the guesthouse. The trees leaned in overhead, full of rain and insects and old gods that watched and said nothing.

By the time he reached the porch of The Breakline, his shirt was soaked through and his heart still galloped like it hadn't realized the danger was past.

But the danger wasn't past.

It had just begun.

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FOUR

SHACK SHADOWS

The rain had steadied outside, drumming steadily on the metal awning, a low, insistent percussion that gave no quarter.

The guesthouse was dim, its single lamp casting a weak yellow glow over a room that felt both too small and too large. Daniel's clothes clung to him, skin damp, hair slicked to his forehead, but he made no move toward the towel thrown carelessly across the back of a chair.

Instead, he paced.

Barefoot on tile, damp shirt sticking cold against his spine, Daniel walked the length of the room like an animal rattling the cage it built for itself.

Four steps to the window. Turn. Four steps back. Again. Again.

Each circuit edged tighter. His jaw ached from how hard he clenched it. Every breath he drew in was loud in his own ears, as if the air were pressing back.

He wasn't going. That was final.

He wasn't that man—not anymore.

Except he was already standing. Except he hadn't sat down at all. His body moved

before his mind decided. Again. Like it had on the dock, at the bar, under Thierry's hand. His lips still burned, and no amount of pacing was cooling them.

They ached with memory. Every time he dragged his tongue over the edge of his own teeth, he could still taste Thierry—salt and rain and blood. It made him furious.

He dug his nails into his palms. "This is fucking stupid," he muttered.

He stopped by the window, one hand braced against the frame, the other pressing to the pulse hammering at his neck. Outside, the path that led back toward the water glistened in the lamplight.

Somewhere out there, beyond the palms, was the shack. The surfing shack frequented by those who wanted to learn. Most importantly, it was Thierry's shack. Daniel was familiar with it from the occasional flyer posted randomly. He'd seen it enough times in passing to know the quickest route there.

The quickest route to Thierry. A man who did not coax, did not beg, did not flatter. Thierry did not even flirt. He simply stood in the world like it was built to want him—and worse, it did.

Daniel shut his eyes, exhaled through his nose. His breath came hot, his spine locked tight, the internal debate losing cohesion as something far older took hold of him. Need, that was the simplest word for it. Hunger, maybe. Or the feeling of an absence that had remembered its shape.

He cursed, soft and vicious, then crossed the room in four quick strides.

Keys. Door. Night.

He stepped out before he could change his mind.

The rain was warm now, the sort of tropical downpour that saturated everything without the courtesy of cold. Trees arched overhead, and the path was soft underfoot, mud squelching between his toes. He didn't bother with shoes. He didn't bother with excuses.

He walked fast, head down, breathing hard, the world around him slick and urgent.

Lights blinked faintly across the inlet.

Far off, a boat creaked in its mooring. The night pulsed with the music of insects, water, and that particular silence that only the tropics could shape—a silence that felt alive.

The shack was as exactly as it was in the flyers—half boat-shed, half dwelling, a weathered structure with its windows open and its interior spilling faint yellow light across the sand. The front was the actual surfing school, and around the back was where Thierry's residence had been placed.

A single bulb dangled above the entrance, swaying slightly with the wind. The rain thudded on the tin roof above in rhythmic punctuation, a sound that seemed to drive into Daniel's bones.

He didn't knock. He didn't need to.

Thierry opened the door before Daniel's hand reached it.

For a moment, they said nothing. Thierry stood back slightly, bare-chested, a towel around his waist and damp from the same rain, his locs tied back loosely. His eyes were unreadable in the half-light, but his mouth—Daniel's gaze caught there too long—was parted as if in question.

Daniel's throat felt raw.

Thierry stepped aside. A silent invitation.

Daniel entered.

The air inside was dense with something not quite tangible. Not musk. Not damp. Something more human. The smell of wood oil and skin.

A hammock hung loosely to one side, strung between wall beams, a single bottle of dark rum beside it, half-drunk.

Tools lay in orderly chaos along the back wall—ropes, knives, sanded boards, spare rudders.

The place was not clean, but it was arranged in a way that made sense to few. A man lived here. Fully.

The door closed behind them with no ceremony. No lock turned.

Thierry didn't speak.

He simply watched Daniel, gaze slow and sure, until Daniel found he couldn't keep still. The storm outside roared against the shack's roof, and yet it was quieter in here than it had been in Daniel's chest for days.

"Say it," Thierry said at last, voice low.

Daniel frowned. "Say what?"

"Tell me to stop."

It wasn't a dare. It wasn't a game. It was a way out.

Daniel didn't take it.

He didn't speak.

And that silence—sharp, aching, deliberate—was the beginning of everything that came after.

Thierry moved first.

Not quickly, not recklessly—but with the deliberate precision of a man who knew the weight of every motion, every touch.

Who understood that desire, like woodcarving, required patience, reverence, the slow surrender to shape.

His fingers found the edge of Daniel's linen shirt, damp from the night's rain, clinging translucent to his skin like a second, desperate confession.

He didn't ask. Didn't hesitate. He simply took the hem between his fingers, the fabric lifting, dragging achingly slow over the planes of Daniel's torso, catching for a heartbeat on the scar just above his right hip.

A long, pale line.

Thierry paused.

His breath stilled. His fingers followed the ridge of it, tracing the memory of violence, the ghost of something Daniel had tried to bury.

Daniel tensed, every muscle in his body drawn wire-tight. He hadn't thought of that scar in months, but now it returned to him like a blade pressed to his throat—old pain, half-healed rage, a wound stitched shut but never forgiven.

His shoulders hunched instinctively, not from shame, but from the animal urge to protect, to hide.

Thierry said nothing. His thumb brushed the scar's edge, feather-light, before he bent his head and pressed his mouth to it—not a kiss, not quite. Something more dangerous. A benediction. A claim.

Daniel flinched.

Not from pain. Not even from surprise.

From recognition.

He knew what this was. This tenderness. This unbearable softness. It was not what he had come here for.

Thierry didn't pull away. His lips lingered, warm and deliberate, before lifting just enough to speak against Daniel's skin.

"What happened?"

Daniel's voice was rough, stripped raw. "Bad decisions."

A beat passed. Thierry nodded, as if that were answer enough. Maybe it was. He rose then, his gaze traveling over Daniel's bare chest like a man mapping a country he intended to conquer.

His eyes caught next on the tattoo across Daniel's arm, the one he'd noticed the first time they met.

"You picked it?" Thierry asked.

"I earned it," Daniel said.

Thierry's mouth curved, dark and knowing, before he kissed him there too, gently against the skin that was almost healed. Slow, deliberate, his lips tracing the lines of ink like a man reading a story written in a language only he understood.

Daniel's hands stayed at his sides, but his breath betrayed him, turning ragged, uneven, as if the act of holding himself together was beginning to fracture.

He hadn't meant to come here.

Hadn't meant to let it go this far.

But Thierry gave him warmth and certainty, and Daniel felt himself unraveling, adrift in a current too strong to fight.

When Thierry stepped back, gesturing toward the hammock with a look that was both invitation and command, Daniel didn't follow at once.

He watched the way Thierry moved—graceful, effortless.

He settled into the swaying net like he was born to it, bare skin against rough weave, head tilted, one hand resting lazily on his thigh.

Daniel hesitated.

Then his body decided for him.

He stepped forward, knees bending without permission, climbing into the hammock with a roughness that made the ropes groan. It tipped wildly beneath them, unsteady as Daniel's pulse, until Thierry caught him—one hand firm at his hip, anchoring him, stilling him.

"Here," Thierry murmured, voice low, velvet dark. "Stay with me."

Their mouths met again, but where the first kiss had been war, this was surrender.

Daniel's fingers tangled in Thierry's hair, dragging him deeper with the same desperate intensity that had driven him to flee hours before.

The hammock cradled them, rocking in time with the rain, the rhythm of it primal, inevitable.

Clothes fell away like afterthoughts. The air between them burned. Thierry's hands were everywhere, steady, unhurried, relentless. And Daniel—who had always guarded his body like a fortress, who had always been the one to dictate, to control—let him explore.

Gasps replaced words.

Every touch was answered. Every breath met. The hammock creaked beneath them, the sound a counterpoint to the rain, to the thunder rolling low across the horizon like the growl of some ancient beast.

Thierry's mouth moved down Daniel's throat, his sternum, lower—each kiss a brand, a promise, a ruin.

When it came—release, unraveling, the sharp, sweet collapse—it came like drowning in sunlight.

Daniel bit down on Thierry's shoulder to stifle the sound tearing from his throat. Thierry groaned his name, ragged and wrecked, before murmuring something else against his ear, something hot and filthy and devastating?—

" So good for me ."

It shattered him.

The next morning, they lay tangled in the hammock, skin damp, breath slow. The rain had softened to a whisper. Daniel woke to birds taking shade from the rain, chirping in what appeared to be hunger.

He stared at the rafters above, his body humming, his chest hollowed out. Still asleep, Thierry's fingers traced were splayed gently on his thigh, possessive even in stillness.

It should have felt right.

It didn't.

The intimacy of it—the effortless, terrifying closeness—suddenly lodged in Daniel's chest like a knife. Something too sharp to keep. His heart pounded, not from pleasure now, but from panic.

He sat up too fast. The hammock lurched.

Thierry murmured something half-asleep, reaching for him, but Daniel was already moving—stumbling out, grabbing his trousers from the floor, yanking them on with hands that shook.

The rain had stopped. Dawn was bleeding into the sky, pale and unforgiving.

He didn't look back.

He opened the door and vanished into the light.

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FIVE

EMOTIONAL UNDERCURRENT

The morning air was cool against Daniel's bare arms, the sky a bruise of violet and gold, the kind of dawn that felt like a secret.

He didn't look back. Couldn't. If he turned, if he saw Thierry's face again—sleep-soft, unguarded—he might do something unforgivable. Like stay.

He dressed quickly on the porch, fingers fumbling with buttons, the fabric of his shirt still damp from last night's sweat, last night's rain.

The wood beneath his feet was rough, weathered by years of salt and storm, and he stepped carefully, avoiding the warped planks that groaned under pressure. Silence was his only ally now.

Inside, the shack was still dark, the hammock swaying gently, Thierry's breathing deep and even. Daniel hesitated, hand on the doorframe. One glance. That was all. Just one.

Mistake.

Thierry lay tangled in the netting, one arm thrown above his head, the other curled against his chest like he'd reached for Daniel in his sleep and found only absence. His lips were parted, his lashes dark against his cheeks, and for a heartbeat, Daniel couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

The sight of him like this—undone, unarmed—was worse than any argument, any fight they could have had.

He shut the door before he could think better of it.

The next forty-eight hours passed in a blur of evasion and bad decisions.

Daniel turned his phone off first. Then, when that felt too much like cowardice, he turned it back on—only to ignore the steady stream of messages lighting up the screen.

Where'd you go?

Talk to me.

Daniel.

Please.

He didn't care where Thierry had gotten his number—probably from the receptionist at The Breakline. It didn't matter, because he left them unanswered.

Instead, he walked. The island's eastern trails were steep, overgrown, the kind of paths tourists avoided. It was perfect. He climbed until his lungs burned, until the sweat on his back had nothing to do with memory and everything to do with exertion.

But even here, even now, Thierry haunted him. The scent of crushed ferns underfoot reminded him of the scent Thierry used. The rustle of palm fronds sounded like his laughter.

At sunset, he sat on a jagged outcrop overlooking the sea and tried to write in his

journal. The pages were water-warped, the ink smudged from last week's rain, but he scrawled anyway—half-formed thoughts, fragments of dreams, anything to quiet the noise in his head.

I don't know why I left.

Lie.

I don't know why it matters.

Lie.

He snapped the journal shut.

The next morning, he went into town.

The market was crowded, the air thick with the smell of fried plantains and diesel fumes from the fishing boats idling at the dock. He bought coffee he didn't want and drank it standing up, his back against a sun-bleached wall, watching the tide of tourists ebb and flow around him.

Then he heard it. A laugh. Bright, unburdened.

His head jerked up.

A woman stood a few feet away, her hair a sun-bleached blonde, her sundress fluttering in the breeze. She was grinning at something her companion said. Her face was open, easy. Alive. And she looked like Jolene.

The coffee turned to ash in Daniel's mouth.

Her vitals were stable when I left.

The memory hit without warning—sharp, surgical. A hospital room. The beep of a monitor. The way the light had caught the woman's hair, just like this, before the code blue alarm shattered the illusion.

She was fine. She was supposed to be fine.

His hand tightened around the cup. The cardboard crumpled, hot liquid seeping through the cracks, but he barely felt it.

He'd promised Jolene she'd be fine, and she'd died.

"Shit."

He dropped the ruined cup into a bin and walked away, his pulse a drumbeat in his throat.

Back at the guesthouse, Daniel stood under the shower until the water ran cold, scrubbing at his skin like he could wash away the past. It didn't work. Nothing ever did.

His phone buzzed from the counter. Again.

He knew without looking who it was.

Thierry wouldn't give up. That was the problem. Daniel had spent years building walls thick enough to keep everyone out, but Thierry?—

Thierry climbed them like they weren't even there.

He picked up the phone.

Thierry: You can run all you want. I'll still be here when you're done.

Daniel exhaled, slow and ragged.

Then he typed a single word.

Daniel : Why?

The reply came instantly.

Thierry : Because you're worth the wait.

Daniel shut his eyes.

Damn him.

Damn him for knowing exactly what to say.

Thierry showed up just after sunset, when the cicadas were loud enough to drown out thought and the sky had gone that gauzy, pinkish gray that made everything look slightly unreal.

Daniel heard the knock before he saw the shape behind the screen door—a silhouette that was all tension and broad shoulders, one hand braced against the frame like it was the only thing keeping him from breaking it down.

"You weren't answering my texts before," Thierry said when Daniel opened the door.

"I got them," Daniel replied, flat, almost bored, though his heart was hammering like

a warning bell in his chest.

Thierry stepped inside without invitation. "You don't get to use me and vanish."

"It was just sex," Daniel said, and hated how thin it sounded the second it left his mouth.

Thierry stilled. His mouth set into a hard line, but the real betrayal was in his eyes—those sharp, intelligent eyes that had once looked at Daniel like he was something worth discovering. Now they searched him like a crime scene.

"Don't do that," Thierry said, quiet now, which was worse than yelling. "Don't pretend like it didn't matter."

Daniel folded his arms, a useless shield. "You're reading too much into it. People have sex. It happens."

"You think I'm angry because we had sex?" Thierry stepped closer, heat coming off him in waves. "I'm angry because you ran. Like a coward. Like none of it touched you."

"It didn't," Daniel lied.

Thierry laughed once, but it was sharp and mirthless. "Liar."

Daniel opened his mouth—what for, he didn't even know—but Thierry was already halfway out the door.

"Lie to yourself all you want," he said, pausing on the threshold. "But don't lie to me."

And then he was gone.

The room felt bigger when Thierry wasn't in it. Empty. Daniel moved through it in a daze, each step heavier than the last. The air was too still, the shadows too long.

He poured a drink he knew he wouldn't touch and stood by the open window, staring out at the ocean. From here, it looked like another country entirely—distant, unreachable.

He didn't remember throwing the glass. Just the shatter. Crystal against wall. It exploded like a gunshot, shards skittering across the tile.

Then he was on his knees.

The sob caught him off guard—raw, animal. He hadn't cried since the night Jolene died. Not at the funeral. Not during the investigation. Not even after her husband asked him, voice barely holding together, if there was anything else he could've done.

Daniel had said no, but the guilt had never left. It had only waited. Waited until now, until this—until Thierry.

He didn't try to stop the tears. He let them come, shoulders shaking, breath stuttering. He let it wreck him.

When the worst of it passed, he reached for his phone with trembling fingers.

Daniel: I'm sorry.

He stared at the screen until his eyes blurred again.

Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned off the light.

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SIX

CORAL STEPS

The reply came at dawn, when the sky was still the color of bruised plums and the air smelled of salt and wet earth. Daniel's phone buzzed against the nightstand, pulling him from restless sleep. He reached for it, throat tight, expecting anger, exhaustion, some final dismissal.

Instead, it was an invitation.

Thierry : Anse Mistral. Sunset. Bring goggles.

No plea. No demand. Just those five words, simple as the tide. Daniel exhaled, his ribs loosening for the first time in days.

Anse Mistral was a crescent of white sand tucked between black volcanic cliffs, the kind of cove locals shared with only the most special of tourists. Daniel arrived early, his rented fins slung over one shoulder, the neoprene of his dive socks still damp from yesterday's rain.

Thierry was already there, waist-deep in the shallows, his back to the shore. The dying sun gilded the water around him, turning his skin to liquid bronze.

Daniel hesitated at the shoreline, his toes curling into the wet sand where the tide licked hungrily at the beach. The last molten rays of sunset painted the water in liquified gold, each wavelet crested with fire as it rolled toward shore.

His chest rose and fell in quick, shallow breaths—not from exertion, but from the weight of what lay beneath that shimmering surface. The goggles dangling from his fingers suddenly felt absurdly inadequate, like trying to armor himself against the universe with children's toys.

Thierry turned.

The water reached his waist, swirling around the sharp angles of his hips where his swim trunks hung low. Droplets clung to the ridges of his abdomen, catching the light like scattered diamonds. He said nothing. Didn't need to.

That slight tilt of his chin—an imperceptible movement that somehow carried the gravity of a shouted invitation—was enough. Then he was gone, sliding beneath the surface with the silent grace of a predator, his dark form dissolving into the deep blue.

Daniel exhaled sharply through his nose and followed.

The ocean swallowed him whole. The shock of coolness against his sun-warmed skin made his breath hitch, the sudden silence pressing against his eardrums like a physical presence. When he opened his eyes, the world had transformed into something from a dream.

Sunlight shafted through the water in golden columns, illuminating particles that swirled like distant galaxies. Below him, the ocean floor dropped away in terraces of living rock, purple sea fans waving lazily in the current, their delicate fronds trembling with each pulse of the tide.

Ahead, Thierry moved through the water with effortless power.

His body cut through the blue like it was his natural element.

The muscles of his back flexed beneath skin gone amber in the filtered light, his shoulder blades rising and falling with each stroke.

Schools of tiny silver fish scattered before him, and their synchronized movements created flashes of light like scattered coins.

Without thinking, Daniel found his rhythm matching Thierry's, their kicks falling into sync as if connected by some invisible tether. His pulse, which had been a frantic drumbeat in his veins for weeks, slowed to match the ocean's timeless cadence.

Here, surrounded by this ancient, breathing world, the ghosts that haunted him seemed small and far away. The water demanded presence, required complete surrender to the moment—there was no room for yesterday's regrets or tomorrow's fears when every breath was measured and precious.

Then—contact.

Thierry's fingers brushed against his wrist, the touch feather-light but electric in the water's silence. He guided Daniel toward an outcrop of brain coral, its convoluted surface resembling a petrified thought. With his free hand, he pointed.

There was an octopus.

It pulsed between the rocks, a living inkblot test of shifting hues. As they watched, its skin morphed from slate gray to mottled ochre, then erupted in sudden electric blue rings that flashed like warning lights before dissolving into a pattern of intricate stripes.

Its eyes—dark pools of alien intelligence—fluttered open just the slightest bit and regarded them with cautious curiosity. The pupils were horizontal slits that widened slightly as it assessed the intruders in its domain.

Daniel felt laughter bubble up in his chest, escaping his lips in a rush of silver spheres that spiraled toward the surface. The sound was strange and wonderful to his own ears.

When had he last laughed like this? Without irony? Without pain?

Thierry's answering smile was slow to form but radiant in its completeness, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that made Daniel's stomach flip.

His hand lingered near Daniel's hip, the warmth of his touch palpable even through the water's chill as they hovered together in the weightless dark, suspended between surface and depths.

When they broke through to air, the world had transformed. The sun hung fat and red just above the horizon, setting the clouds aflame in streaks of violet and tangerine. Daniel pushed his hair back from his forehead, the water streaming from his limbs as he gulped in great lungfuls of briny air.

"It changes color when it dreams," Thierry said, treading water beside him. His voice was rough with salt and exertion, but his eyes shone with quiet delight.

Daniel blinked saltwater from his lashes. "What?"

"The octopus." Thierry wiped water from his face with one broad hand. "Its skin. The locals say it mirrors whatever it's dreaming about."

Daniel laughed again, the sound breathless and bright. "Bullshit."

Thierry's grin was unrepentant.

"Maybe." He drifted closer, the waves nudging them together until their knees

bumped beneath the surface. "You're smiling."

The observation caught Daniel off guard. He hadn't realized the expression on his own face, hadn't been aware of the unfamiliar stretch of muscles long unused. The knowledge sat between them, vulnerable and unguarded, like one of the fragile sea urchins clinging to the rocks below.

Thierry's gaze dropped to Daniel's mouth, lingered there just long enough to make Daniel's pulse stutter, then lifted again to meet his eyes. "Come under again."

This time, when they dove, Thierry didn't let go of his hand.

The reef rose to meet them like some ancient, submerged city, its coral spires glowing amber in the fading light. Daniel braced one palm against a rough outcropping and found the texture both abrasive and strangely comforting beneath his fingers.

Thierry crowded close, their legs tangling in the lazy current and the warmth of his body palpable even through the cooling water. Salt crusted their lips, their eyelashes, catching in the hollows of their collarbones like tiny crystals.

When Thierry kissed him, it was slow and deliberate, a communion more than a conquest. The taste of salt and something indefinably Thierry flooded Daniel's senses as the ocean cradled them both, buoyant and forgiving.

Daniel sighed into the contact, his body arching instinctively toward the heat of him, his fingers finding purchase on the solid planes of Thierry's shoulders.

They broke apart only when their lungs demanded it, surfacing into air that smelled of iodine and impending night. Daniel's breath came ragged, his thoughts scattered like the first stars appearing overhead.

"I was scared," he admitted, the words torn from some deep, untouched place within him.

Thierry pressed their foreheads together, his breath warm against Daniel's lips. "I know."

No judgment. No demands for explanation. Just quiet understanding, as constant as the tide lapping at their shoulders.

Then Thierry was kissing him again, deeper this time, his hands sliding down Daniel's back to grip his hips with possessive certainty.

The coral scraped against Daniel's thighs as Thierry guided him backward, the rough edges a delicious counterpoint to the slick heat of their bodies moving together.

The water lapped at their waists, warm where the day's last sunlight had touched it, cool where the ocean's deeper mysteries still clung to their skin.

Around them, the sea pulsed with life—the darting shapes of nocturnal fish beginning their dances, the distant cry of gulls heading inland for the night, the eternal whisper of waves against shore.

And for the first time in longer than he could remember, Daniel was exactly where he wanted to be—not fleeing toward some uncertain future or haunted by ghosts of the past, but here, now, alive in every sense of the word.

Thierry's mouth moved to Daniel's throat, his teeth grazing the tendon there before soothing the sting with his tongue. Daniel gasped, his head falling back, the sky a blur of fire above them.

"Look at me," Thierry murmured.

Daniel did.

Their eyes locked as Thierry pushed inside him, the stretch burnished sweet by the ocean's buoyancy, by the way Thierry's hands trembled just slightly as they gripped his waist. Daniel wrapped his legs around him, pulling him deeper, the water rocking them together in a rhythm as old as the reef beneath them.

No guilt. No ghosts. Just this—the salt, the sweat, the way Thierry's breath hitched when Daniel clenched around him. Pleasure built like a storm surge, inevitable, overwhelming.

Daniel came with a soundless cry, his body bowing against Thierry's as the waves swallowed his gasp. Thierry followed, his groan muffled against Daniel's shoulder, his fingers leaving crescent moons in the skin of the latter's hips.

After, they floated together. Their limbs were loose in the water as the current nudged them toward the shore.

The last of the sun finally dipped below the horizon, painting the water in shades of rose and indigo.

Daniel turned his face into the crook of Thierry's neck, breathing him in—salt, sweat, something indefinably warm.

Thierry carded a hand through his hair. "Stay this time."

Daniel closed his eyes.

For once, he didn't want to run.

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The realization should have terrified him.

Instead, it settled between Daniel's ribs like something warm and living, curling there as he stared at the boat ticket on his dresser.

The departure date glared back at him, circled in red ink—a relic from another life, another version of himself who still believed in clean exits and surgical goodbyes.

He picked it up. The paper felt stiff between his fingers. For a long moment, he simply held it, contemplating, suspended between the life he'd planned and the one that had somehow, impossibly, begun without his permission.

Packing was a mechanical act. Shirts folded with military precision. Toiletries zipped into neat compartments. His hands moved without conscious thought, as if his body had already decided what his mind still continued to wrestle with.

Outside, the dawn painted the sky in watery pastels, the air thick with the scent of sea salt and impending rain.

Daniel paused as he was about to tuck a pair of socks into his bag, and looked out the window.

Somewhere beyond the palm trees, the ocean breathed against the shore, steady as a heartbeat.

He zipped the bag shut.

The dock was quiet at this hour, the fishermen already gone, the tourists still asleep.

Daniel's duffel hung heavy from his shoulder, and the weight of it pressed into his flesh like an accusation.

The boat loomed ahead, its engine rumbling low in the still air, a beast stirring to life.

A few passengers milled about—backpackers with sunburned noses, locals hauling crates of fruit, all of them blurring at the edges in Daniel's vision.

Then he saw him.

Thierry stood at the edge of the sand, a surfboard tucked under one arm, his hair still damp from the sea. He wasn't looking at Daniel. His gaze was fixed on the horizon, where the waves rolled in, smooth and unbroken.

He didn't call out. Didn't wave. Just stood there, solid as the cliffs behind him, waiting.

Daniel's feet stopped moving.

The boat's horn sounded, sharp and final. A crewmember shouted something about last boarding. The world narrowed to two points—the ticket in Daniel's pocket, and Thierry's silent silhouette against the dawn.

His bag hit the sand with a soft thud.

The boat pulled away in a churn of foam and diesel, its wake fanning out across the turquoise water. Daniel watched it go, his chest curiously light, as if some invisible tether had snapped. He'd expected panic. Regret.

Instead, there was only a quiet certainty, the kind that came with stepping off a ledge

and finding out that the air could hold you after all.

He bent to pick up his duffel, then stopped. After a moment, he toed off his shoes instead, leaving them beside the bag as he walked back up the beach, the sand warm and yielding underfoot. The wind tugged at his shirt, the salt stinging his lips. He didn't look back.

Thierry hadn't moved.

Daniel approached slowly, the surfboard still resting against Thierry's hip like an extension of his body. Up close, he could see the faint sunburn across Thierry's shoulders, the way his pupils dilated when Daniel stepped into his shadow.

"You missed your boat," Thierry said.

Daniel huffed a laugh. "Yeah."

Thierry studied him for a long moment, his eyes dark with something unreadable. Then, without a word, he turned and started walking down the beach, the surfboard balanced effortlessly under his arm. Daniel followed.

They didn't speak. The only sounds were the crunch of sand and shells underfoot and the distant cry of gulls. After a while, Thierry stopped near a half-buried log and set the board down, brushing sand from his hands.

Daniel watched as he crouched, gathering driftwood with practiced ease, stacking it into a loose pyramid.

"You're building a fire," Daniel observed.

Thierry struck a match, the flame flaring to life between his fingers. "You're staying."

It wasn't a question.

Daniel swallowed, the truth of it settling into his bones. He crouched beside Thierry, close enough that their shoulders brushed. The fire caught, the smoke curling upward in lazy spirals, carrying the scent of salt and burning cedar.

Thierry reached over, his fingers threading through Daniel's, their palms pressed together. No promises. No grand declarations. Just this —warm skin, the crackle of flames, the endless murmur of the sea.

Daniel exhaled, slow and steady. "I'll need to call my job."

Thierry squeezed his hand. The fire burned brighter.

Somewhere down the shore, the waves broke against the sand, again and again, relentless as time.

Shattered

Outside, Amsterdam was waking up. People were having breakfast, reading newspapers, complaining about traffic. Normal lives continuing their normal rhythms, blissfully unaware that somewhere in the city, a woman had died and left a hole in the world that could never be filled.