

A close-up, profile view of a man's head and shoulders. He is wearing a white, short-sleeved tank top. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a backdrop. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his face and the texture of the fabric.

HAYES BROTHERS SERIES
BOOK ONE

TOO much

I. A. DICE



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The artwork for the Hayes Brothers series, has been sketched by an amazing artist - Danny O'Connor DOC Art. He captured every FMC in the series perfectly and I absolutely love every piece he kindly created to bring the girls to live.

You can follow his work here:

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Art by @artbydoc



ONE

Thalia

“HERE'S YOUR UNIFORM.” Cassidy, my overseer this fine morning, holds out a pleated white skirt and a beige polo shirt.

Although neither is made of enough material to class them as clothing. The skirt could pass for a fabric offcut used in crafting, not part of a work uniform. Unless your job is stripping, then sure. Why not.

“What’s your shoe size? Five?”

Funny... she didn’t ask what my dress size is. Either one-size-fits-all or she ventured a guess. Not a good one if she thinks I’ll fit in a size zero. Considering the skimpy polo shirt and lewdly short skirt she wears and an identical set I’m now holding, it might be—one *must* fit all, or you can’t work here.

“Six,” I say.

Cass grabs brand-new white canvas sneakers and a beige baseball cap off the shelf. “Go get changed. The changing room is over there.” She gestures at the door across the employee common area, pulling a small key out of her polo shirt’s breast pocket. “Locker fourteen is yours. We should be out on the course in fifteen minutes, so hurry up.”

My shoes sink into the plush, brown carpet as I cross the stuffy room. Pushing the door open, I peek inside, frowning. I expected something more discreet—little booths with drapes like those in boutiques, but no. The changing room is an open space with lockers scattered around the perimeter and wooden benches bunched in the middle.

An older lady, scrubbing dusty-pink tiles in an adjacent shower area, peers up when I enter. She dabs at the beads of sweat glistening along her hairline with a handkerchief, sending me a small smile as she tucks gray hair behind her ears.

I offer her a smile in return, stopping at my locker. I’m not shy, but stripping to my underwear while any other female employee can walk in here

is a touch nerve-wracking. I squeeze into the short-short skirt that ends half an inch below my ass, then tug on the polo shirt, groaning at my reflection in a long mirror hanging on the wall. The button-less V-neck ends low on my sternum, exposing my boobs, firmly pressed together courtesy of the skin-tight fit. Pole dancers at the club I worked a few years ago wore more clothes writhing around the poles than I'm wearing now, getting ready to sell beer, water, and sodas at the poshest place in Newport Beach.

I leave the baseball cap behind, turn the key, and head back to the common room. The temperature outside is in the eighty degrees range, but clouds gathered over Newport Beach early morning, obscuring the sunshine.

Bummer.

I chose California mainly for the weather, and what do you know? Two days of living the American Dream and zero sunshine so far. Figures. I'd have more chance at a pretty, golden tan in Greece.

"You look cute." Cassidy beams while I tame my long, dark curls into a high ponytail. "You'll be the center of attention for the next few days before everyone gets to know you." She readjusts her platinum-blond ponytail, sliding a cap over it, and leads me outside through the French doors. "This one will be yours." She points at one of five identical beverage carts parked in a neat line. "I'll get you started today, but tomorrow you'll be unsupervised, girl, so pay attention. We're busiest Friday through Sunday..."

My mouth curves into a blissful smile as my head spins from left to right. The golf course is picture-perfect—eighteen holes stretched over one hundred acres of lush greenery, a throw-of-a-hat away from the beach. The pictures featured on the website hardly do this place justice.

Several A-list actors and celebrities are among the club's members. Considering the luxury cars parked outside, it's safe to assume everyone who golfs here rolls around in cash.

Back home, I've only seen a Ferrari once, on a school trip to Athens. Here, not one but two Ferraris are parked out front, both red. Richie-rich golfers fill me with hope. Maybe they tip as well as the "*Confessions of a Cart Girl*" blog I read implied.

Newport Beach should not be the destination for anyone trying to start a new life. The living cost here is triple the national average, but the pay is higher than in most places, so I chose to write a new chapter of my life right here.

I need every penny to survive in America. After I won the Green Card

Lottery last year, I spent endless hours researching different locations. California was my first choice from the start, but Orange County or Newport Beach, to be precise, won me over because wherever I called asking about possible job openings, everyone said they always needed staff.

If I can earn money, I can stay afloat.

Hospitality flourishes in California all year round, but it's extra busy during summer when tourists visit the breath-taking resorts, and trust fund kids return home from Ivy League colleges eager to unwind, party, and spend their parents' money.

Four days ago, I packed my life into three large suitcases and boarded a long-haul flight from Thessaloniki in Greece to Los Angeles, with layovers in Zurich and Munich. Choosing a twenty-nine-hour trip over seventeen saved me four hundred dollars. It would've been cheaper if I traveled off-season, but I wouldn't find work this fast.

Once I was officially admitted to the United States at Los Angeles International Airport, I was on my last legs, not looking forward to a three-hour bus ride to Newport Beach, but I made it. Yay.

With no friends or family who could help me by offering a space on their couch for a few weeks, I checked into the cheapest motel, with no more than eight hundred dollars to my name.

So far, so good.

I have a job and a roof over my head. A stinky, filthy roof, but I'm nothing if not adaptable. I've slept in worse places than a wet dog-smelling motel room.

A prison cell, for example.

"Can you work weekends?" Jared, the general manager, joins us outside. The aviators pushed up to the bridge of his long nose, hide a set of striking dusty-blue eyes that scrutinized me yesterday during my interview. His ash-blond hair is swept to one side, completing the preppy look dictated by his clothes—beige chinos, a white top, and a thin gray sweater draped over his neck. Surely, it's a fashion statement because the temperature does not warrant a sweater.

"I'll work every shift you'll give me," I assure. How on earth did a man in his mid-twenties land a job managing the poshest Golf Club in the OC? "Sixteen hours a day, seven days a week if that's an option."

He pushes the shades to his head, messing up his perfect hairstyle. "Nine hours a day, five days a week, Friday through Tuesday. We might

occasionally consider you for bar work when we were understaffed. Though, if you're really interested, you could cover Cassidy's shifts when she's *incapacitated*," he stresses the last word with a smirk.

It doesn't take a genius to decipher the code. By the sound of that, Cassidy suffers from chronic hangovers. She's twenty-three, a year younger than me, and does seem like the party type with her electric personality. During our short meet and greet, she relayed a condensed life story—she majored in photography, moved to Newport Beach at eighteen, and dreams of owning a photography studio. She also mentioned she goes by Cass, not Cassidy, most of the time.

I look back at Jared. "Whenever you need me, I'll be here."

"Good. That's what I like to hear." His eyes are fixed on the screen of his iPad. "I need a few more details from you. We'll sort it out after your shift." He sizes me up, but it hardly looks sexual. More like he's appraising a product, wondering if it'll sell. "Keep your hair up, smile, and if you want to make good tips, don't let them know you're smart."

"Why can't they know I'm smart?"

"Most golfers expect the cart girls to be pretty, dumb and to laugh at their crude, sexist jokes. You'll get tipped well if they like you, and whatever they give you is yours to keep."

The blog I read about the ABCs of working as a cart girl mentioned obnoxious golfers, but until now, I thought the scandalous posts were poor attempts at driving more traffic to the website.

Apparently not.

Whatever. If cute, broad smiles equal higher tips, then so be it. After two days in Newport Beach, my wallet's contents officially shrunk to four hundred and ninety dollars. The cheapest place I found advertised in Newport Gazette is fourteen hundred dollars for a tiny, claustrophobic studio eight miles from the golf course.

To move out of the motel, I'll need to save at least double the monthly rent, so I better practice a convincing smile.

"Any questions?" Jared asks, glancing at a silver watch adorning his wrist.

"None so far."

"Good. Come find me once you're done today. We'll finish the paperwork." He strolls back inside, his steps rushed as if he's running late for a meeting.

“Right, let’s start. We don’t have much time.” Cassidy rounds the cart, running her fingers along the display shelves and fridges where different beverages are stored, and starts her monologue, filling my head with information. “On a typical weekend, you’ll go through six cases of Bud Light, four cases of Coors Light, and two cases of Corona.” She uses her fingers to show the numbers as if she’s worried my English is lacking and I won’t understand if she foregoes visual aids.

The monologue continues while she points out important details, explains how the cart works and describes which golfers I should not flirt with if I don’t want to be groped. I soak in every detail like a dry sponge, making mental notes until seven o’clock sharp when Cassidy fires up the cart. We head toward the first hole, where four middle-aged men have already teed off.

“Morning, Cass,” one says. He’s not looking at her, though. His eyes are on me, roving my frame, one eyebrow raised. “Who’s the new girl?”

I inhale a deep breath, smile wide and jump out of the cart, smoothing the narrow fabric surrounding my hips—a skirt by definition but it wouldn’t pass for a belt in my granny’s eyes.

“Hey, Jerry,” Cassidy chirps, batting her long eyelashes as she pinches a lock of blonde hair between her fingers, her voice artificially sweet. “This is Thalia. She’s a trainee.”

She’s got the innocent flirtatious look right on the money. Maybe she’d be willing to take on an apprentice? I could do with a few tricks up my sleeve.

“Thalia,” Jerry repeats, testing the word, eyes focused on my boobs playing peek-a-boo out of my V-neck. “What do you do, beautiful? College?”

I arch a questioning eyebrow. It’s one thing to expect flirting and a different thing entirely being ogled by a man who could easily pass for my father. Or for the first sentence spoken toward me to contain an endearment.

“Not anymore,” I say, practicing a convincing American accent. Not that it works. Anyone with a half-decent hearing can tell I’m not from around here. “I’m new in town.”

A row of snow-white, immaculate teeth peer between Jerry’s chapped lips. “That’s an interesting accent you’ve got there. Let me guess...” He sizes me up again with narrowed-eye scrutiny, stopping at my boobs as if their size will betray my nationality. “Spain?”

“No, Greece.”

Cassidy serves one of the men, popping a cap off a bottle of Corona with undeniable ease. Jerry's friends stop by his side, their hungry eyes looking me over from the ground up as if I'm a mail-order bride awaiting her groom.

As shameful as it sounds, I had, for a split second, considered registering on one of those websites. Thankfully, I chose the Green Card Lottery instead. And good thing I won or I probably would've married a man like Jerry, desperate to escape my homeland. Greece is a lovely country, full of spirited people... the same people who wish I'd rot in jail or die a slow, painful death, burned at the stake.

"How old are you?" Jerry's friend, a balding man in his forties, asks, scratching his long beard.

"Twenty-four. What can I get you? Soda? Beer? Water?"

"A bottle of Coors Light, dear."

At seven in the morning? I bite my tongue before the question escapes my lips. His drinking habits are none of my business, so I fetch the beer, mimicking Cassidy's cap popping with less ease. Another golfer approaches, equally curious to know who I am and where I came from. By the time Cassidy and I head to the common room for a break at ten, I've been asked about my accent by every person I served.

Mediterranean features, coupled with my sudden arrival, are the main reasons why men swarmed to me all morning. At first glance, it's obvious I'm not American, but not one person asked directly. They all waited until I betrayed my roots with a thick accent, and then their mouths curled into knowing smiles.

"You'll make a killing in tips," Cass says when we restock the cart after the break. "We haven't had a foreigner here in two years. Men sure love you, European girls. Two years ago, a Polish chick made enough cash in tips after three months that she paid off her entire college tuition."

"In *three* months?" I echo. No way she earned a few hundred dollars a day... I reach into my pocket, pulling out my tips. My hands grow clammy because what I initially considered a ten-dollar bill from Jerry is a hundred.

One-hundred-dollar tip from *one* man.

I'd need to work nine hours straight to earn that, but he casually slipped it in my breast pocket as if it wasn't more than a few dollars change. I didn't even flirt with him! How much money could I make if I put more effort into my smile?

My initial nervousness vanishes when the break is over. I'm here to

make a living. If innocent flirting is the way to go, then so be it. I've spent three nights at the motel, but I'm desperate to rent a place now, regardless of how tiny it'll be. Paper-thin walls of my temporary room and a bed that's probably ridden with STDs drive me crazy. I'm more than willing to use my European good looks to flee the motel faster.

By four o'clock, I'm exhausted, but my spirits are lifted when I count the tips. The stack of money spread out on the table makes my eyes water. Three hundred and sixty-five dollars. Three day's worth of work earned within nine hours.

I swallow the sour disgust burning my throat and lock my conscience in a puzzle box somewhere inside my head. This is not the time to act dignified and self-sufficient. This is the time to use all means available to survive and build a new life, safe from my sketchy past.

"Good, huh?" Cass taps her long, red nails on the tabletop. "Listen, I'm going out with my girls tomorrow evening. Come with us. I'm sure you could use a few friends."

I can't fault the girl. We spent nine hours together, chatting and laughing. She's cheerful, charming, and surprisingly helpful. She's also right; I could use new friends. Accepting the invitation isn't a practical move, considering I should save every penny, but she might not invite me again if I say no, and nobody wants to be a loner. I've always been a social person, surrounded by a group of friends. When they were brutally taken away from me, courtesy of my cuffed hands and my face on the cover of every newspaper in the country, I struggled with my mental health.

"Sure, that sounds great. Thank you. What time and where should we meet?"

"We haven't decided which bar we want to hit. Give me your phone number. I'll text you later with the details. I booked tomorrow off, so I won't see you here."

We exchange numbers, and I shimmy out of my uniform, changing back into jean shorts and a loose t-shirt before I head outside, ready for the five-mile trek back to the motel.

TWO

Thalia

THE MOTEL'S RECEPTIONIST LENT ME AN IRON after I found my best clothes crumpled at the bottom of a suitcase. The room is equipped with a moth-ball-smelling closet, but I keep my clothes in my bags. I'm already self-conscious about the moldy odor trailing behind me like a putrid shadow.

I ironed the creases out of the outfit I chose for tonight—a simple spaghetti-strapped crop top matched with a high-waist mini skirt—both black. The mass of my outrageously curly hair could not be styled into anything other than a standard, boring, over-done ponytail. I've considered chopping my hair short, but while they're long, they're heavy, and the curls drag out instead of bouncing close to my head.

Cassidy and her friends chose a bar by the harbor, three miles from the motel. I wouldn't make the distance wearing black stiletto heels without earning a few nasty blisters. Bleeding feet is not the look I was going for tonight, so I downloaded the Uber app and booked a ride to *Tortugo*—a Brazilian-themed cocktail bar by the main street.

I overestimated the time it'll take the driver to get me there, so now I stand on the sidewalk, clutching my purse in both hands and eyeing the door with twenty minutes to kill before Cassidy arrives. Loitering outside sounds less appealing than waiting at the bar with a drink, even if I'll stand there alone.

With a deep breath, I push the door open, eyeing the decor as I walk across the room toward the bar at the back. Latin music filters through the air, an energetic soundtrack to the excited conversations buzzing over most tables. A satisfying, heady scent of soil, passion flowers, and candy fans my face as the air moves with me. Warm, earthy tones dominate the space, and hundreds of matching clay pots holding natural plants stand on the floor, hang from the ceiling, and fill rusty metal shelves screwed into the bare red-brick walls.

My heels click happily against the worn, concrete floor as I approach a long bar. My foreign features draw attention again, and heads snap toward me when I pass a few tables, feeling the burning gaze of men inspecting my every move.

Definition of Greek beauty—my grandmother said through the years. I don't see the beauty. *Pretty*, sure, but not beautiful.

“Good evening.” The bartender asks, rolling the sleeves of his white shirt partly hidden under a matching vest. He rests his hands on the bar, leaning closer so he won't have to raise his voice over the excited hum filling the air. “What can I get you?”

Five screens above the bar display a long cocktail list with sixty-eight options. Kudos to the bartender if he knows how to prepare each one. Back home, I kept things simple—bottled beer, wine, or Ouzo. Sometimes champagne. During my bartending days, I tried many different cocktails while mastering the skill of preparing colorful drinks, but only three of those are served here—all too sweet for my liking.

“I'm not sure,” I say, ignoring how his mouth curls slightly at my flaring accent. “I'd like a cocktail, not too strong and not too sweet. What can you suggest?”

“Make her a caipirinha,” a man says, stopping beside me. “You'll like it,” he adds when I angle my head, treating myself to a cursory look.

Ah, *shit*...

I've crossed paths with many handsome men in my life. As I settle into my new life here, the number constantly grows—Americans are hot, but this guy? He's handsome in a hair-raising, nail-biting kind of way. Not a cover model type. I doubt any magazine would feature him with the long scar running from his jaw to his eyebrow. His nose, slightly crooked at the bridge, must've been broken at least once in his life, and he's got a small scar over his top lip. As far as scars go, this one might be the sexiest one I've seen.

An artistic muddle to his dark-brown hair adds ten points to his undeniable, boyish charm even though he isn't a boy. He's a red-blooded, broad-chested, testosterone-oozing man. He looks like he knew what his hair should be styled into tonight but discarded the idea halfway through the task and raked his fingers through the thick strands, making a mess. A sexy mess.

I'm held captive by his deep brown eyes, the shade of fine cognac peppered with black flecks. A barely-there stubble frames his full lips that he's touching with the pad of his thumb, ghosting it left and right, waiting for

me to speak. My body reacts with a throbbing pulse between my legs.

What sorcery is this?!

Sweet Lord... theory confirmed. Instant lust is *valid*.

After eighteen months of celibacy, not being touched, kissed, or fucked, my libido is through the roof, peaking at its all-time high, but despite interacting with dozens of men on the golf course during the past two days, I remained unaffected.

Until... now.

My cheeks burn hotter, and I hope he can't smell my arousal as if I'm an animal in heat, desperate for a mate. My ovaries play tug-of-war, my mouth turns dry, and my mind fills with stark, erotic redness. I can already picture him kneeling before me, his mouth on my clit, big, calloused hands holding my hips.

He's intriguing, and unfortunately, that's a red flag if I ever saw one. Men like him approach women at bars with one goal in mind—sex. Granted, my body is starved for a real man, not the silicone substitute hidden in my suitcase, but I need more than a drink, a handsome face, and the undeniable craving rushing through my body to give up the goodies. I need a basic-level connection. First name. An hour to check if he's not dull, married, or a psychopath.

"Thank you." I cheer internally, pleased that my voice doesn't betray the amorous agony prickling my center. "I'll try it," I tell the bartender, leaning my hip against the bar.

Instead of my drink, he slides two Budweiser's and a Corona toward the man standing beside me, even though he hadn't ordered yet. He must be a regular, which means he's not a tourist... he's a local.

"I haven't seen you here before," he says, tugging a hefty sip of his Budweiser. "I'm Theo, and you are...?"

"I'm new around here."

Yeah, I'm not the most approachable person.

A suggestion of a smile pulls at his mouth. "That's an interesting accent. Spanish? Italian?"

The bartender sets a tall glass on a napkin, tucks in two swirly straws, and slides it across the counter as I hold out a twenty-dollar bill, ignoring Theo's question. Let's see how persistent he is.

"My treat." Theo moves my hand away; the touch of his skin as electrifying as a live wire. "Put it on my tab, Gary."

A certain sharpness in his posture tells me I've lost the battle over who'll pay before it began.

"Thank you." I tuck the twenty back into my purse.

His designer clothes and the general smell of money he exudes mean he can probably afford to waste a few bucks on a drink for a girl who won't put out.

At least, I hope I won't.

"Thalia! Damn, you look hot, girl!" Cassidy booms behind me. A second later, she stops on my right, pecks my cheek, and moves her attention to Theo, a cunning, fake smile twisting her rosebud lips. "Run along, Hayes," she spouts, every word tinged with venom.

"Ah, *Greek*," Theo says, ignoring Cassidy's obvious irritation. "Thalia. One of the nine Muses. *Kalós orísate*^[1]."

"*Den písteva poté óti tha ákouga elliniká stin Kalifórnia*^[2]."

Theo's smile widens, highlighting the scar on his cheek, but I don't think he understood what I said. "Yeah, don't get too excited, *omorfiá*^[3]. I only know a few words."

Omorfiá coming from his lips has my senses igniting like sparklers. It means *beauty* in a very whole, all-encompassing way.

"Come on, the girls will be here soon." Cass clutches my arm, leaving half-moon marks of her pink nails behind. "Choke on your beer, Hayes," she adds sweetly, eyelashes fluttering, white teeth peeking between her lips as she hauls me away toward a table across the room.

She hops on the barstool, readjusting her baby-blue dress. She's dressed to impress with blonde locks tucked into a sleek, low bun and a perfectly winged eyeliner. She's pretty in a modern, flawless, toned, size-zero kind of way. I bet she spends her mornings on a treadmill, wearing skin-tight leggings, a workout bra, and earphones. She probably sips a protein cocktail, and her ponytail swings, brushing her shoulders... I'm jealous if that's true.

I envy people who take care of their bodies and health by exercising and watching their food intake. I make big plans ten times a year, promising myself I'll cut back on junk food, count the calories, and work out, but it always ends the same—I wash down pizza with beer.

"I guess there's a story there?" I ask, taking the first sip of my drink. My eyes roll back, and I almost moan out loud. It's delicious. Zesty, not too sweet, and the alcohol is untraceable. Which, come to think of it, might be lethal. "Ex-boyfriend?"

“Absolutely not!” She purses her lips, pinning me with a glare as if I insulted her. “He’s a Hayes, babe. Hayes brothers don’t do girlfriends. You’ll be better off staying away from all seven of them, Thalia. You’ll know a Hayes when you see one. They’re not hard to spot in a crowd—dark hair, tall, toned lookalikes. The three youngest ones are identical triplets.” She casts a forceful glance behind my back, her head twitching as she urges me to peek over my shoulder.

Theo sits at a table across the room with two other men, one of which I know—Jared, Country Club’s general manager. The other must be Theo’s brother. Cass is right. Their kinship is unmistakable.

“That’s Nico,” she says in a hushed tone as if she’s afraid they’ll hear us from thirty yards away. There’s also Shawn and Lo—” she clears her throat, features pinched as if she’s struggling to get the word out. “Logan.”

Ah... so Logan is the one she holds a grudge against.

“You’ll meet them tomorrow,” she continues. “They golf every Sunday. Triplets are seventeen, so don’t worry about them much.”

Why would I?

They’re kids.

Freaking *illegal*.

“Okay, and why are they bad?”

Cass rolls her eyes in an overdrawn, theatrical manner. “I didn’t say *bad*. They just think they own this goddamn town. They’re players, Thalia. The lot of them. The worst kind, too, because they act like you mean the whole freaking world, and once they fuck you, they won’t call or answer your messages and—” She halts her rant, running out of breath. She sucks in a harsh breath and morphs her scowl into a smile. “I just don’t want you to get hurt, okay? I’m trying to look out for you.”

“Thank you.” I grab her hand, pumping my fingers around hers. She might be sporting a cute smile, but I can tell she’s hurting. “Message received.”

Loud and clear, but I’m not naïve. The way she talks about them, Logan, in particular, the change in her tone and body language hints at the details. She must’ve slept with him, hoping for a happily ever after, and he didn’t deliver.

I’ve no idea why she hates all seven over something one did. I also don’t understand why she expected a happy ending if I’m reading between the lines correctly. Theo reeks of non-commitment from a mile away. Nico gives off

the same, albeit much stronger vibe, which tells me Logan and Shawn might be the same. They want sex with no strings attached. None whatsoever. I doubt they get further than a first-name basis.

Cassidy's friends, Amy and Mary-Jane, arrive moments later. They both wear beautiful, short dresses, perfectly styled hair, and makeup more suited for a catwalk than a girls' night. After brief introductions, they leave me alone, moving over to the bar to order drinks.

Newport Beach is filled with flawless people, which isn't surprising. Money has the power to turn anyone into a fashion model. Despite most people here living different, more luxurious lives than the rest of the country, ninety percent of people I've met since arriving seem polite and friendly. Friendlier than I'd expect rich people to be.

Theo catches my attention as I glance over my shoulder, checking on the girls. He taps his finger against the neck of his Budweiser, pointing at the bar, silently asking me to meet him there. Too bad I only had one sip from my drink. I push the caipirinha slightly to my left, tapping the glass too, so he'll see I'm nowhere near done.

The slight smile lifting his lips convinces me to pick up the tempo a little bit. Theo's intriguing. A walking contradiction. He looks, smells, and acts appropriately to the *player* tag Cassidy labeled him with, but he knows who Thalia was in Greek mythology, so he might be smart. As far as my life experience goes, that doesn't happen often.

I'm curious where he learned the few words he speaks in Greek. I won't get a chance to ask if I finish my drink in sync with Cass and her friends. After Cassidy's venomous *choke on your beer, Hayes*, he probably won't come anywhere near me if I approach the bar with the girls by my side.

They return a minute later, dismissing my silly worries—each holds a bottle of prosecco and a flute. No way I'd crawl out of bed tomorrow if I drank a bottle of bubbly tonight. For some reason, it hits me harder than any other alcohol.

The girls chat about shopping, work, and Amy's upcoming senior year of college, involving me in the conversation wherever possible while deftly poking for information, asking about my life choices. Like everyone I've crossed paths with so far, they're curious why I moved halfway across the world by myself. Why I abandoned my friends and family.

We just met, so gruesome truths might not be the best way to start our friendship. I could tell them that everyone I ever loved turned their backs on

me, but if I say A, I'll have to say B and explain why. That's not happening. It's not a topic I'll discuss with anyone unless I have no choice.

So, I lie. I keep the answers light, feeding my new friends the believable, boring story about searching for a better life. All the while, I sip the caipirinha, fighting my stupid curiosity and trying not to glance over my shoulder. Easier said than done. A few times, when I shift positions, I catch a glimpse of Theo in my peripheral vision.

The scar marking his cheek doesn't belittle how striking he looks dressed in plain jeans and a gray t-shirt, the fabric on the verge of coming apart at the seams as his biceps bulge, shifting beautifully when he pats Nico's back,

"I'll get another drink," I say, downing the last third of my drink as if it's a hundred degrees and I'm dehydrated. "I'll be right back."

"Get a bottle of prosecco," MJ says, flipping her hair over one shoulder. "Save your legs, girl."

"You do not want to party with me when I'm drinking bubbly. Trust me." I spin on my heel, finding Theo on his feet, looking at me over a sea of heads, and my smile tightens.

He says something to Nico, whose eyes snap to meet mine. His face remains impassive, not an ounce of emotion other than meticulously maintained disinterest. The crushing confidence surrounding him makes my skin crawl, and not in a good way. He's not a man I'd like to spend one minute alone with.

I set the empty glass on the bar, summoning the bartender. "One more, please."

A spicy, masculine scent consumes my senses when Theo stops beside me, a step closer than earlier. "I see you liked the drink. Did Cassidy tell you to *run for your life* yet?"

"She used different words, but I guess you could say that."

He rests one elbow on the counter, his body facing my way like an unconscious invitation. "Why aren't you?"

I glance at my feet, prompting him to do the same. "Have you seen a woman run in five-inch heels?"

"No, but I won't mind a demonstration."

"Are you subtly saying I should run or wondering if I'll fall on my face before I reach the door?" I swat a few unruly locks away from my face. "Jokes aside, I don't know Cassidy well enough to trust her judgment."

“Which means you don’t trust me, either.” He mindlessly spins an empty beer bottle on the counter.

“Not one bit.”

I’m not sure why he finds it amusing, but the smile blooming on his lips reaches his striking eyes.

“How long are you staying in Newport?”

I’ve not had time to sightsee or explore the town yet, but I spent a year researching different locations in California. Newport Beach is definitely where I’d like to sprout my roots. “Depending on luck, work, and health, fifty, maybe sixty years. Seventy at a stretch, but that’s wishful thinking with my lifestyle.”

He cocks an eyebrow, straightening his back as he inches closer again. “Green Card holder?”

“I might be very soon.” I tilt my head to the side, treating myself to a cursory once-over of his perfectly toned body. A shadow of a self-indulgent smirk twists his lips when we lock eyes. “You think I’m pretty, Theo? Funny? Interesting?” I bite back a smile when his eyebrows bunch in the middle. “I believe Vegas is just five hours away. How drunk do I need to get you before you say *I do*?”

A single snort flies past his mouth. Not amused—horrified. He jerks back like a person walking off an unexpected step.

“Relax,” I chuckle, touching his shoulder, curious if the electric current jabs at me again. It does, traveling from the tips of my fingers straight to my clit. Resisting this man will be one hell of a challenge. “I have a strange sense of humor. I won the Green Card Lottery last year.”

He shakes his head, and mortification gives way to amusement. “Unless you’re ready to land a husband fast, don’t crack that joke around too often. You’d be surprised how many middle-aged men would gladly go down on one knee for you.”

The bartender slides my drink over first, this time before he opens a large fridge to fetch Theo’s order.

“Don’t,” Theo clips when I reach inside my bag to retrieve my wallet. “It’s on me.”

“That’s sweet, but—”

“But nothing, Thalia. Smile for me, say *thank you* in Greek, and join your friends. Cassidy’s so red she might spontaneously combust.” His eyes don’t leave my face, so I’m not sure how he knows this.

“*Efcharisto*^[4].” I grab the drink, place my hand over the glass to stop the liquid from spilling, and then give Theo a quick show of what running in high heels looks like. His soft laughter forces my heart’s rhythm into higher gear.

“Oh. My. *God!*” Amy squeals when I hop on my stool, draping my bag over the back. “Do I need glasses, or was that really Theo Hayes hitting on you?”

“He didn’t hit me!” I exclaim a touch too loud.

They gawk at me for a second, then burst out laughing. MJ’s cackling so hard she’s tearful. The more prominent the confusion on my face, the harder they laugh, drawing the attention of everyone within earshot.

“I guess I misunderstood that...” I say. “Can you explain?”

“I said he was hitting on you, not *hitting* you, girl.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, I mix up words sometimes, and I don’t understand all the slang phrases. Does that mean the same as making a pass at someone?”

Cass drapes her arm over my shoulders, pulling me to her side. “Yeah, babe, it does. Theo was definitely making a pass at you. He’d eat you out right here, right now, if you’d give him the green light.”

Not the best image to feed my vivid imagination. My brain grabs hold of the idea, develops an enticing plot, complete with multi-dimensional characters, and transforms it into a full-blown, detailed fantasy.

I pause the inappropriate, erotic video clip so I can enjoy it another time—when I’m alone with my silicone friend, ready to use the fantasy to my advantage.

THREE

Thalia

“I THINK IT'S TIME WE CHANGE VENUES. I feel like dancing the night away,” Mary-Jane suggests at half-past ten when her bottle of prosecco runs dry.

The alarm on my cell will blare in six hours to wake me up for work. I should be back at the motel by now, getting some sleep. I should, but I'm not and won't be any time soon. A long time had passed since I let myself have fun. I'm not ready to call it a night just yet.

Cass and Amy love the idea, already up on their feet and gathering their things, so I follow, hoping to fit in and hold onto my new friends.

As I hop off the stool, grabbing my bag, I can't help but steal a glance at Theo's table. He cocks one eyebrow in a nonverbal question, but a smile is the only response I can give him from across the room.

Cass hooks her elbow with mine, leading me outside and down the main street toward the nightclub. A large, neon green letter Q hangs above the entrance, where more than twenty people wait in line. Cassidy doesn't join the back of the queue, charging at the bouncer. She stamps a kiss on his cheek, smiling the same smile she uses on the golfers.

We're inside a minute later, drinks in hand after five more, and we settle into a booth by the dancefloor. The illuminated, white floor strobes in rhythm with the techno beat blasting from huge speakers strategically placed around the vast space. People grind against one another, each to their own in terms of pace, foreheads glistening with sweat.

A tight-lipped smile blooms on Cassidy's face, and her blue eyes widen as she shows me her cell phone screen, where *Theo Hayes* flashes in the middle. “How can I help you?” Cass answers, sporting an even bigger, this time fake, smile. “You think I'll put her in front of a gun, *boy*? No way, Theo. Beat it.” She snickers, the sound laced with annoyance, but her shoulders sag a second later. “Okay, okay, *fine*. Were in Q.” She cuts the call,

shoving the phone in her bag. “Remember what I said, Thalia. Don’t ever tell me I didn’t warn you.”

“Thanks, Cass, but don’t worry about me. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

Mary-Jane leans over, whispering in my ear, “Don’t listen to her. She’s just bitter because she’s been crushing on Logan for a while, and neither of the Hayes take her seriously.”

We chat until we finish our drinks, then hit the dance floor once an upbeat techno changes to “Clandestine” by FILV & Edmofo. A stranger jumps in my path, nodding his approval as his eyes skim over my body, and extends his hand.

Why not? I might as well enjoy myself.

He twirls me into his arms, my back flush against his hot chest. “Is there a boyfriend here somewhere who’ll kick my ass when he sees me with you?” he asks in my ear.

“You’re in the clear. No boyfriend.”

“I didn’t think so. You’re too hot for any man here. Way out of their league, sweetheart.”

I’d consider his words a compliment if not for the stench of whiskey on his breath. He’s probably seeing double by now and has no clear idea what I actually look like, but his dick is hard in his pants, grinding against my lower back, so maybe I’m wrong. He sways to the rhythm, spreading his long fingers on my stomach. The music changes twice before he speaks again.

“How about I buy you a drink?”

I glance over his shoulder toward the bar. My insides heat for the second time this evening. Theo’s casually leaning against the counter, a glass of caipirinha next to his beer. Quick, intelligent eyes look straight at me, grazing his thumb along the seam of his mouth again, and the sight of him staring at me with such volatile intensity makes my knees weak.

I avert my gaze, or else *I* might end up the one spontaneously combusting... I sure as shit won’t say no if he’ll try to take me home tonight.

So much for not putting out.

The girls are no longer around, probably back in the booth with more bubbly, or worse shots.

“Not tonight,” I tell the dancer.

I’ve got my eyes on a different prize.

A red-light flickers inside my head when his hold on me tightens.

“Don’t be like that, *señorita*. It’s just one drink. You’re so fucking hot... is it a sin I want to get to know you?”

Why everyone’s first guess is that I’m Spanish? I step back and spin around. “Get to know me or get inside me?”

His mouth hangs open, both eyebrows raised. Initial surprise changes quickly into a cunning, cocky smirk. “One doesn’t rule out the other, baby girl. I’m Asher, an—”

“And I’m not interested.” I don’t attempt to hide my cringe. *Baby girl...* ugh! That’s a very unwanted blast from the past. My first boyfriend, an exchange student from London and a cheating bastard, called me *baby girl*. “Thank you for the gravely compelling offer, but as I said, not tonight.”

He shoots me a sour look, dropping his hands down his sides. Not many men enjoy rejection. A bruised ego hurts more than a knee in the balls, but I don’t let them off easily if my first attempt at politeness goes ignored.

Instead of entertaining Asher with a pointless chat, I walk away, navigating through the crowd to join the girls and their new companions—Theo, Nico, and Jared have joined the party, making themselves comfortable in our booth. Girls’ night out might end up being an orgy, or at least a threesome, given how Mary-Jane and Amy ogle Nico.

I’m a few feet from the table when Asher blocks my path, looking down at me as I grip my sides with both hands, utterly pissed off with him now.

“Let’s agree we won’t fuck tonight.” He cuffs my wrist, yanking me close enough that my nose brushes the crook of his neck. “Can I buy you a drink now?”

“You do know there are plenty of willing girls out here tonight, right? Look around! You’ll find one who’ll want your dick, just be patient.”

“I want *you*.” He attempts a seductive, gravelly purr, but it comes out strained. “I hear you Spanish girls are fiery.”

That’s it. I’m tired of him. Even more when my eyes wander to the booth. My insides jangle like wind chimes when I make eye contact with Theo. Nico’s telling him something, but he’s not listening, pointing his finger at Asher as he lifts his chin, the gesture designed to check if I need help.

No, I don’t. I never do.

With a smile, I grip Asher’s shirt, pulling him closer. “Baby, you couldn’t handle me if you tried, but I’ll make you a deal. You can have me any way you want tonight *if* I can ride those sweet lips.” I graze the pad of my index finger along his thin lips. His eyes hood over, pupils dilate, and

arousal takes the stage. “Before we leave, you should know just one thing, stud.” I rise on my toes, speaking in his ear. “I’m on my period.”

I inch away in time to catch a glimpse of his mouth falling open, then close and open again—a fish out of the water.

I’m not on my period, obviously. I wouldn’t sit on his face if I were, but it’s all a means to an end.

Asher stumbles over his words; his scowl deepens, and judging by the doll-like shock etched into his eyes, he must have a vivid, disgusting image flashing before his eyes.

I think he’ll throw up.

“Bye, bye.” I wiggle my fingers in a childish wave, leaving him stunned and searching for his tongue.

Or maybe a trash can.

Theo scoots over when I approach, patting the seat beside him, then slides the caipirinha my way. “What did you tell him? He looks horrified.”

“I played nice, mostly. He didn’t understand *no*, so I used my weird sense of humor.”

“He’s not looking for a wife, huh?”

“I didn’t ask. I told him he can have me tonight since he asked oh so nicely. I also said I’ll ride his face. “I take a sip of the drink, “I might’ve added I’m on my period.”

Nico chokes on his whiskey, breaking into a coughing fit that prompts MJ, who sits nearest, to pat his back, her cheeks deliciously pink and heating every time she touches him.

I offer Theo a smile when he eyes me with a look of utter disbelief. “What? I’m not really on my period. He should’ve listened when I said *no* three times in a row.”

“You’re cruel, you know that? You ruined the best fucking thing in this world for that guy. He won’t tell a woman to sit on his face for a long time, if ever.”

An excruciatingly pleasant shudder zaps my thighs.

He said *tell*.

Not ask... *tell*. My imagination fires up again, the fantasy more detailed now that I think Theo enjoys dictating the rules in bed.

“He will,” Nico says, bringing me back to reality. “No man in his right mind will forfeit eating pussy. He’ll check she’s not on her period first, though.”

“I’m so not sorry.”

They jokingly chastise me until Jared goes to order another round of drinks. MJ entertains Nico, smiling, chatting and biting her lips. She’s toying with the silky tendrils of her hair, squirming in place, her eyes dark, swimming with intense desire that Nico overlooks or ignores. Either way, MJ won’t leave the club by his side, I can tell.

Meanwhile, Cassidy scowls at me from the other side of the booth when Theo moves closer, his lips against my ear.

“Dance with me, *omorfiá*.”

FOUR

Theo

DANCE WITH ME, OMORFIÁ.

What a stupid fucking thing to say. I should've known better. I've felt the unexplainable pull toward Thalia all evening, so I should've known asking her to dance would be the equivalent of poking an ant hill with a stick.

The way her body fits pressed against mine, the intoxicating, disorienting, fucking exhilarating smell of plums, peaches, and some sweet flower in her perfume... it's too intense. This entire evening is too fucking intense.

Thalia monopolized my attention since she set foot in *Tortugo*. Neither her big rack nor curvy body caught my eye first... her thick curls did. I never saw curls tighter than hers. She has so much hair I'd struggle to grasp it in one hand. Her body is a sight to behold and as if that's not enough, she's confident, sensible, and funny in her own special way: weird, sarcastic, and a little inappropriate, but I'm here for it.

Thalia sways her wide hips as we dance, twirling around to flash me a dazzling smile, her moves every fucking bit seductive. The music has changed five times since we stepped onto the illuminated dance floor, but I can't bring myself to take her back to the booth.

I hold her hand, watching her twirl around my finger. Every man within eyesight stares, with unrestrained lust burning in their eyes. They seek her out. Some even stop moving, unable to rip their gaze away from her perfect face. No wonder. She's beautiful—a powerful magnet drawing attention, commanding the room. My arms circle her waist, my hold almost possessive, sculpted with one goal in mind, to convey a message: she's with me, so back the fuck off.

Thalia weaves her fingers through my hair, grasping onto a thick tangle. She caresses the nape of my neck with her other hand, electrifying every nerve ending in my body.

“You need a break,” I say, my chest tight. “I need a break.”

I’m far off reaching the out-of-breath mark, but holding her this close, wrapped protectively in my arms, makes me want to rip her clothes off. In a convoluted, senseless way, I also *don’t* want to do that. She’s too much fun to fuck and forget.

She spins on her stiletto heel, taking my hand in hers, and laces our fingers as if she’s done it a thousand times before. The shiver, that gesture introduces doesn’t just glide down my spine; it sinks deep into my fucking bones. We push through the crowd, me as her overgrown shadow, glaring at anyone sporting big-enough pair of balls to steal a glance at her.

Her golden skin glistens under the halogen lights testing my resolve when she rests her elbows on the counter. The smooth curve of her neck glints with a mist of sweat, begging for attention. Add the sweet scent of her perfume to the equation, and I’m barely stopping myself from dipping my head and tracing a line of open-mouthed kisses up to her ear. I wouldn’t stop there. More kisses would come, higher, lower... *everywhere*.

“Caipirinha?” I frame her with my arms, clutching the bar, my fingers digging into the hardwood. “And a glass of lemonade, so you don’t dehydrate.”

She nods, brushing her cheek over her shoulder. She breathes fast, in short bursts, her chest rising and falling, accentuating her big breasts and elevating my struggle. What I wouldn’t give to bury my face in the valley between those juicy boobs.

Twenty minutes with her body pressed against mine, her smiles, dark eyes, and small hands tracing the muscles on my chest, and I already know she’ll be the hardest obsession to shake. Especially since I don’t plan on making a move.

A night with her would be quite the experience, but the cock-blocker in my head tells me it would also be such a fucking waste of a perfectly fun friend.

We’re back in the booth ten minutes later, drinks in hand. No lemonade, though. Thalia drank half, then made me drink the rest. Sharing a glass, pressing my lips against the rim in the same spot her lips were seconds earlier... that was intimate.

We’re intimate.

This whole fucking evening is way too intimate, period.

Nico and MJ are the only two at the table, but not much talking is going

on. She's tipsy now, openly swooning at my younger brother like ninety-nine percent of women, but regardless of how attractive or fuckable she is, Nico won't touch her. He's picky, to put it mildly. He has a very specific type of woman he looks at twice, and MJ doesn't quite hit the mark.

Thalia and I don't exist outside our small bubble for the next hour. It's just us in the middle of a crowded room. We dance, taking short breaks until shortly after one in the morning when she calls it a night to recharge her batteries before starting work at seven.

Too damn bad. I've not had this much fun in a long time...



When I crawl into bed later, it's with a smile. Never have I enjoyed just talking to a girl, but talking to Thalia is effortless. No awkward silences, no uncomfortable- *what the hell do I say now?*

My initial hard-on 'hasn't subsided, but I'm glad I held myself off, reined in my desire and didn't try to fuck her tonight.

It wasn't easy, though.

Some women possess a rare, peculiar ability to bring a man to his knees within seconds, without using any seductive techniques. Thalia is one of those mysterious creatures.

I've considered the phenomenon for years, watching my friends lose their shit for women after one evening. Sometimes sooner. My theory is simple: chemistry. Women emit pheromones at different strengths and levels. Those who effortlessly melt our brains emit more potent pheromones.

That must be it.

How else will you explain the instant attraction? The world is filled with beautiful girls, but a nice face is not enough to arouse a man to the point of a fucking fever. Especially without physical contact.

I was rock hard when I approached Thalia at the bar. It really must be chemistry at work. She hadn't even looked at me at that point, but I got a whiff of her perfume, saw her smooth skin bathed in LED lights and hocus-pocus, presto chango, fucking alakazam... the switch in my head responsible for sexual fantasies flipped, filling my mind with erotic images.

I did well shutting them off. Getting my cock wet is not an issue, but friends don't stumble into my life every day.

FIVE

Theo

INSTEAD OF HAULING HIS LAZY ASS OUT OF THE CAR, Nico beeps the horn outside my condo at eleven in the morning, pissing off my neighbors and me too. Especially when I exit the building, finding him behind the wheel of his brand-new toy.

“Show-off,” I scoff, aware his window is down, so he hears me loud and clear. “Whatever happened to the Porsche?”

“Sold it.” He shrugs, slipping a pair of aviator shades over his eyes. “I didn’t like how it handled.”

Of course, he didn’t. Five years ago, the smug son-of-a... well, I can’t say that considering his mother is also my mother, drove an old Ford, but now, a 718 Cayman GT4 doesn’t handle well enough. Thankfully, besides moaning about his expensive cars, Nico hasn’t changed since he made bank.

Let him try. He’d have his common sense knocked back into his big head by all six of his brothers.

And I’d throw the first fucking punch. With pleasure.

I round the snow-white, matte Mercedes G-Wagon, admiring the twenty-two-inch alloys and black trim, then yank the driver’s side door open. “Get out. I’m driving.”

He smirks, unbuckling the seat belt, and takes my clubs, locking them in the back. I get comfortable behind the wheel, revving the living shit out of the V8 engine.

That might piss off my neighbors a touch more.

“If you’re wondering what to buy me for my birthday, this,” I pat the steering wheel, “would make a cool gift.”

One can dream, right?

It’s honestly enough that he handles my money free of charge. Every penny I save is wired to Nico, who doubles, triples, and fucking quintuples my savings in a heartbeat. He’s always had a knack for numbers. Mix that

with his analytical mind, and you've got yourself one of the best stockbrokers on the West Coast. I'm more of an artist, if designing video games is considered art. Even if not, who cares? The money is excellent, and in a way, I'll stay young until I die.

"You've got enough money in your portfolio to afford this," he says, fiddling with the radio, looking for his indie alternative Spotify playlist or whatever it's called.

"Call me once that portfolio hits seven digits. Once I'm there, I'll think about a G-Wagon."

"Won't be long."

The cool part? He's *not* exaggerating. He grew my portfolio from fifty to three hundred grand within a year. In another year or two, I'll join the fast-growing list of people my baby bro turned into millionaires. Nico himself sits on an *eight*-digit portfolio. I'd lose my goddamn mind if I had that much money, but Nico's almost unaffected. He's still the same guy, drinking the same beer, golfing with us every Sunday, and fucking tall, slim, sassy brunettes.

The second-best part about having a ridiculously rich brother who also happens to be your best friend? He lets me drive his cars. And fuck, if the G-Wagon isn't the best one yet. The engine roars under the bonnet, the sound deep like the murmur of Vesuvius when I burn through the city, disregarding all speed limits. As I pull away from the traffic lights, the wheels spin angrily, making me groan in pure delight.

Ten minutes later, I park next to Shawn's Dodge RAM outside the Country Club. I grab my clubs from the back, keeping the keys for now in case Nico decides he wants a beer, and I'll keep the beast until tomorrow morning.

We're not booked to tee off until noon, but our two older brothers, Shawn and Logan, wait by the bar, beers in hand.

"What do you want, guys?" the bartender asks, looking between Nico and me.

"Get him a Corona, man. I'll drive," I say, acting cool even though inside I'm a kid locked overnight in the Chocolate Factory, free to eat all the candy. We're all motorheads, but I may be the biggest one.

"I've got some news," Shawn says with a heavy sigh, a cryptic expression clouding his face. "But, you've got to promise not to breathe a word to Mom, Dad, or the triplets for now."

It's unlike Shawn to keep secrets from Mom, which might be why all three of us nod in unison, heading toward a table by the window without hesitation.

"Hit us," Logan says, taking off his baseball cap, which he always wears backwards like he's still in college. He rakes his hand back and forth through his short, dark hair, willing the unruly strands into submission, then pops the cap back on. What the fuck was the point of that endeavor in the first place? "You and Jack good?"

The same question is perched on the tip of my tongue and probably Nico's, too. Shawn and Jack's road was a bumpy one. They've been on and off since college, but over the past few years, they settled into a steady relationship. It's only natural the three of us wait with bated breath to hear an affirmative answer to Logan's question.

"Yeah, we're good, relax," he barks out a laugh as we breathe a sigh of relief.

We're a touch theatrical, but it's not without reason. If Shawn can't make his adult relationship last, neither one of us has a chance to settle down. Not that we're ready for wives or kids, but one day we might be. At least some of us. Nico will probably end up fucking models until the day he dies, and I can easily picture Logan getting married and divorced at least five times before he's fifty.

Triplets are too young to even venture a guess.

A shit-eating grin curves Shawn's lips a second later, relieving the tension further. He raises his left hand, showing off a black and gold band embossed with a single row of diamonds on his ring finger. "He proposed."

"No way!" I boom, drawing the attention of everyone sitting at nearby tables. "What?" I clip at the two elderly women. "My big bro's getting married!"

Their expressions morph into polite smiles as they mumble *Congratulations*. Nico's on his feet, patting Shawn on the back, and Logan grabs him in a bear hug, not far off tackling him to the ground.

"Finally!" I say, yanking Shawn in for a hug. "One down... six to go. He took his time."

I remember the day Shawn came out of the closet. He invited me, Logan, and Nico and sat us down in his dorm room, chewing his fingernails the whole time we chatted about classes, sports and chicks until he suddenly blurted out, *I'm gay*.

No shit was my reaction.

Even Mom knew Shawn was gay before he realized it.

The news came as no surprise to the family. I still don't understand why he was so nervous to tell us. We're brothers—always there for each other no matter what happens. No matter how crazy life gets. Sure, we have different dynamics with one another, but regardless of our day-to-day relationships, we're there when it matters.

I could call the six of them in the middle of the night to say I killed someone, and they'd raid my house within minutes, ready to dispose of the evidence and fabricate an alibi. Shawn would dig a makeshift grave blindfolded because he's a cop, but he'd dig, no questions asked.

We met Jack that very evening and immediately took a liking to him. Whenever they broke up over the years, we hated every other guy in Shawn's life on principle because Jack is the guy for Shawn, and that's the end of fucking story.

"Now, explain why no one can know," Nico says, throwing himself back against the leather chair, drumming whatever melody currently plays in his left ear from the AirPods he's got there.

"Because I had to tell someone, or I'd explode!" Shawn booms, still grinning. "Jack's away on business in New York all week. I want to take him over to Mom and Dad's next weekend so we can tell them together. That means you three need to keep quiet until next weekend."

We spend the next half an hour coming up with the bachelor party plan. I'm willing to bet my ass it'll be a night we won't remember if the ideas tossed around pan out. At some point, it's basically a rendition of "The Hangover" when Logan googles where to hire a tiger. Too bad Tyson no longer has any.

"There you are." Jared interrupts us halfway through the conversation. Wearing a sleazy grin, he stops by the table, not much more than a half-assed nod our way before he zeroes in on Nico. "Come on, man, we need to talk." He squeezes his shoulder, veering him away toward the bar.

"What's that about?" Shawn clips, burning a hole in the back of Jared's head with a hard edge to his narrowed eyes. "You know he's supposed to be taking over the Country Club at the end of summer? His father's retiring and the son-of-a-bitch will own this fucking place now."

"In that case, I bet he wants Nico to be a silent partner." Logan slams an empty bottle of Bud on the table, starting his usual ritual of peeling the label.

The triplets always take the piss when he does, saying he's sexually frustrated and should get laid. "All he ever does is ask Nico for cash," he continues. "What's going on with that restaurant they were opening? *The Olive Tree*, wasn't it?"

"Last time I checked, that's still happening," I say. "They're almost done with the remodeling. I've no idea why Nico wants a restaurant. He knows nothing about running a restaurant."

"He doesn't have to. He'll hire a professional and count the cash," Shawn chuckles. "It's capital investment."

"Like he needs to invest any more fucking capital. I bet he just wants to have a world-class chef at his disposal, cooking for him whatever the fuck he wants."

"I could just get a live-in maid for that." Nico comes back with three beers and another bottle of water for me. "You're both wrong. I'm diversifying my income in case the market crashes, or I stop seeing what others miss. And while we're on the subject, I could also use a fucking holiday, so I'm looking for a decent stock broker if you know anyone."

"Yeah, you," Logan smirks, patting his back. "And you really don't need to diversify your income. If you ever lose your mojo, you own a house worth north of twenty million. I think you'll be just fucking fine, bro." He gets up, leaving a pile of label scraps behind. "Let's go, boys. It's almost noon."

We head out to the fairway, and the topic immediately changes to our youngest brothers—Cody, Colt, and Conor. They took to bugging Nico to let them move in with him now that they're turning eighteen and starting college in September.

"You've got six bedrooms," Shawn points out. "That's more than enough room for the triplets. They want to party, Nico. You know Mom treats them like they're still ten."

"Maybe because they act like they're ten," Nico clips, grabbing his driver. "I told them I'll think about it, and I am, but they've got some serious growing up to do if they want me to agree."

"How about a bet?" Logan asks, leaning against his golf bag. "If I win today, you let them move in with you for a one-month probation period while they're off school."

"What's in it for me?"

"I doubt there's anything you actually need, but how about a watch?"

“Nah. If I win, *you* take the triplets in for a month.”

Logan laughs, shaking his head a firm *no*. “Yeah... forget I said anything.”

They bicker for a while, and three holes later, as always, I’m already losing big time. I never pegged myself for a golfer and never got the hang or appeal of it, but I enjoy spending a few hours with my brothers away from their friends, my friends, and our usual settings. We started golfing when Nico finished college. He’s the youngest out of the four of us—twenty-six. The youngest and the richest.

He’s also the one I get along with best. I’m a year older, while Logan and Shawn are twenty-eight and twenty-nine, respectively. And, obviously, our mom is Wonder Woman incarnated... four boys year after year. Boys like us—a hell-raising bunch, fighting, arguing and then blaming everything on the triplets when they started walking.

To this day, Mom thinks they were the ones who poured a bucket of red paint in the pool when it was actually me... and it wasn’t paint but fake blood. I wanted to prank Logan, pretending I was dead. I floated on the surface of the pool for an hour, eyes closed, but when he finally found me, he didn’t jump in to save my ass. He threw a sun-lounger at me. The bastard.

The sound of the approaching cart fills the warm afternoon air, and it’s an instant *pause* on our game. The cart stops, prompting Logan and Shawn to exchange curious glances. Nico and I already expected Thalia out here today. Jared’s filthy mouth sang her praises when she entered *Tortugo* last night.

I knew her name, heritage, and a brief life story before I approached her at the bar, but I was curious how much she’d let on about herself. Not much, unfortunately.

“Good afternoon,” she chirps, over pronouncing the *r*. “I’m Thalia. Can I get you anything to drink?” She whirls her dark curls over one shoulder, eyeing my brothers before she turns to me with a tight-lipped smile that reaches her happy eyes. They’re darker than mine, like roasted hazelnuts.

“You’re new here, babe,” Shawn drawls, moving toward her slowly. “I’ll give you a quick rundown before the vultures surround you. I’m Shawn. These are my brothers: Logan, Theo, and Nico. We play eighteen holes every Sunday at noon and go through beer fast, so try to find us every half an hour.”

My gaze drops from her face to her luscious rack bunched up in a tight, beige polo shirt and lower to those alluring round hips, thick thighs, and long,

smooth legs. The crop top she wore last night, flaunting her olive skin, flickers on the edge of my mind. I couldn't stop staring at her all night.

Looks like I'm not doing any better today.

Eye candy is what Jared calls the cart girls. He only hires young, pretty babes as those keep the members happy. He sure scored big time with Thalia. She's exotic. Her unconventional beauty shines like the goddamn lighthouse of Alexandria.

"I'll keep you well hydrated," she says, rounding the cart to open a cooler at the back. "What can I get you?"

"Water, two Bud Lights, and a Corona."

She turns around, giving me the perfect opportunity to admire her ass. Round, bouncy... I bet she'd squeal if I'd bite her. It's not like I unnoticed the perfect, upside-down heart after I saw it jiggle when she showed me what running in heels looks like. I'm a guy, and the brain-melting curve of her hips draws my eyes. My whole fucking body is drawn to her.

"You're awfully fresh for someone who drank four caipirinhas last night," I say, ever so casual.

"Have you ever tried Ouzo?" she asks, huffing out a shallow, soft burst of laughter, a hint of delight in her voice as she continues, "Greeks usually drink that neat, and we drink a lot. Four caipirinhas won't make me tipsy, let alone unwell."

"How are you finding Newport so far?" Nico asks, taking the Corona she holds out to him, her arm arrow-straight as if she doesn't want him invading her personal space. "I bet you enjoy working here. European chicks always make a killing in tips."

"I love Newport, and the tips are great," she admits, her tone reserved, hinting she's uncomfortable around Nico.

Most people are.

Shawn picks up on her hesitation too. "I guess Cassidy fed you a few horror stories about us."

Thalia shakes her head, cheeks blushing a faint shade of pink. "No. She hasn't said much. Only that you four will be the best-behaved ones today."

Bullshit. But I got to give it to her; she lies like a pro—maintains eye contact, keeps a steady tone to her voice and her body language intact. If I didn't know better, I'd believe her.

Cassidy's stories are gore. They're mostly made up, but it doesn't matter. She hates our guts. She jumped in my bed an hour after we met at one

of the many bars in the city, then tried her luck with Logan a week later.

Wrong order...

She would've gotten much more out of Logan than she did out of me. He was really into her, and not in a hit-it and quit-it kind of way. They went out a few times, and he took her to dinner, which had never happened before. Too bad he only admitted he was interested in Cass outside the bedroom *after* I told him I'd already fucked her. If he told me sooner, I would've kept my mouth shut so they could work shit out themselves.

Knowing your brother fucked the girl you like puts a damper on the *like*.

Needless to say, it didn't work out between them.

"Aww, babe, don't do that," Shawn tsks. "I know Cass too well to believe that, however truthful it rang. Strike one. Make sure you don't reach three. It'd be a shame if you were demoted, babe. Tips ain't that good during the week."

Thalia draws her thick eyebrows together, lips falling apart a bit. She looks ready to bite Shawn's head off, but she changes her mind at the last second, rolling her shoulders and standing taller. The annoyed grimace softens, transforming into what looks like a well-practiced, neutral expression, and she flashes us a cute smile that makes me want to fucking sing.

Great acting skills.

The fire burning in her eyes betrays she has a snarky remark up her sleeve, but she knows mouthing off to a member is not a wise idea. "I'll do my best." She hops behind the wheel, tugging the short skirt down. "I'll be back in thirty minutes."

"Make it twenty," Nico says, already halfway through his Corona. "It's way too hot today."

He's usually the first one to hit on tall, dark-haired beauties. Lucky for me, he told me last night that Thalia doesn't strike the right chord, and he doesn't fuck them unless they pique his interest.

We resume the game and *new topic*.

"Dibs," Logan says in an urgent, clipped tone. "I call dibs."

Derisive laughter bubbles in my throat. Cheeky fucker. He loves blondes, so I've no idea what he's playing at right now. Besides, too little too late. I was here first. "She's not your type, Logan. And house rules—no dibs on chicks."

"*No dibs on chicks*," he mocks, flipping me off. "You want her? Try and

beat me to the fucking punch, bro.”

He’s an animal, I swear.

“I wish you’d grow up.” Shawn makes a disgusted sound at the back of his throat. “Aren’t you bored of meaningless sex? Empty house, empty bed, no one to fucking talk to?”

“Says the guy who broke it off with Jack five times so you could,” Logan air quotes, pulling a face, “*explore other options.*”

“That was a long time ago. We’ve been great together for four years now. I wouldn’t change what we have for any number of dicks. You three had enough pussy to last you a few lifetimes. Don’t you think it’s time to grow up? Find a wife, start a fucking family? You’re all turning thirty soon.”

Nico cocks an eyebrow. “Four years isn’t *soon*, Shawn. You want to pimp us out?” He points to Logan. “Start with the oldest and work your way down.”

I’ve got to admit, Shawn’s got a point. I’m growing exceptionally tired of spending my evenings alone. Not that I’d dare spew that truth while Logan and Nico are within earshot. I’d never live it down, so... new topic.

“I’m getting a dog.”

“Unless it’s a Rottweiler and a boy Rottweiler at that, I’m not babysitting,” Logan says, practicing his swing.

“I’d never ask you. I don’t think that highly of you.”

He flips me off again, grinning. “The feeling is mutual.”

We chat about the pros and cons of owning a pet until Thalia arrives one minute before Nico’s deadline.

It’s Logan’s turn to buy the next round. Quick as lightning, he draws out the big guns as if we’re two gunslingers in an old Western, and he’s beating me to the prize this way. Doesn’t he know the one who draws first always dies?

“What time do you get off, honey?” he asks, unleashing the charm he firmly believes he’s been blessed with.

I’m not so sure. I mean, *honey*? Yeah, because that doesn’t sound like he just wants to fuck her real quick. How he gets laid with those shitty lines is beyond me.

“Oh, depends when the mood takes me,” Thalia chirps. “Usually, right after I wake up. Gives me a nice boost for the day.” She opens his Bud Light. “Sometimes before bed, so I sleep better.”

Logan chews his lip, processing. I think he only grasps Thalia’s play on

words when Nico and I chuckle. She's got him there. Logan doesn't do well with overconfident women. On the flip side, the fire burning in her dark eyes ropes me into her more. She's quick-witted... a quality I apparently find attractive.

"Morning, huh?" He gives her a fifty-dollar bill wrapped around his business card—standard Logan move. He knows most chicks lose their inhibitions once they see *Architectural Director* written in bold, gold ink. Architects make a bomb, and Logan sure is the best one within at least a hundred-mile radius. "Call me if you need a helping hand, honey. Keep the change."

"You should think that through, Logan. Your number will officially be the second one in my contact list. When the time comes to carry a couch inside my apartment, I *will* call."

Logan's face falls again. Thalia's ability to turn his lines against him throws him off his game every time, and that's too much for him to handle. He peers over his shoulder at Nico and me with a deer-in-the-headlights look tainting his features.

Dibs, my ass.

I pull out my card, handing it over to Thalia. "If you need help lifting, you call me. Logan will throw his back out just thinking about manual labor."

"Thank you. Once I find a place, I'll call. Should I come back again in half an hour?"

"Sounds good." Shawn waves her off, setting the ball to practice his swing until we no longer hear the cart.

For the next three hours, Logan humiliates himself with cringe-worthy attempts at wooing Thalia. He achieves nothing save for digging his grave deeper each time he opens his mouth.

It makes for an entertaining show.

I half expected him to wave a white flag already, but he's determined to prove he can get the girl. He can't. Especially now that he's changed tactics. Instead of flirting, he tries his hardest to make her uncomfortable. He should've stuck with flirting. Thalia dodges the bullets, hitting back with witty quips, all the while polite and professional. Her feistiness takes Logan aback every time.

I'm pretty damn impressed.

And intrigued.

She's not just pretty packaging.

SIX

Thalia

THE SINK DRIPS DAY AND NIGHT. The floorboards squeak, the toilet lid won't stay upright, and the shower splutters ice cold or boiling hot water.

Oh, and let's not forget the smell—a stale, moldy odor soaks the air, impervious to every air freshener I found in the corner shop two streets over.

Refusing to crawl into the most-likely STD-infested bed, I spent my first day's tips on a mattress protector, a blanket, and a pillow. Until then, I slept curled in a plastic chair, fully clothed.

Today and tomorrow are my days off. I can't shake the feeling I'm wasting time sitting around, twiddling my thumbs instead of earning more money on the side so I can get out of the motel sooner than planned. With that in mind, I visit the corner shop, then sit on the floor in my room, skimming over this morning's newspaper, searching the classified section for a waitressing or a cleaning job. The Greek Gods must be watching over me because my eyes stop on an ad for a private event catering company.

Waitresses needed. Twenty-five dollars an hour. Immediate start available.

Bingo.

“Good morning, I found your job ad for event waitressing.” I sit cross-legged on the floor, my back against the wall, a half-eaten bowl of cereal beside my leg.

“Yes, we're always on the lookout for staff. Can you come by the office today to fill out the paperwork?”

“Of course. Can I have the address?”

“I'll text you. Come by whenever.”

I expect a few questions before she invites me over, but she sounds desperate. I guess she's short-staffed and that only works in my favor. The office is in the city center, four miles away. The sun is shining, the temperature outside around eighty degrees, so a walk it is.

After a quick shower, I tame my wet curls into a more manageable mess, slip into jean shorts, and yank a t-shirt over my head, leaving the room inside of five minutes. I'm pretty positive the motel stench will rub off on me if I linger too long, forcing me to shower again.

An hour and twenty minutes later, I step inside a tall, glass building in the heart of Newport Beach, where I'm greeted by an elderly man who sits behind a reception desk in the middle of an airy, modern lobby.

He wears a burgundy jacket that goes well with a head of white hair but brings to mind a bellhop. "Who are you here to see?" he asks, raising his gaze from a copy of some book.

"The event catering company."

He grabs the phone, dialing a short number. "Someone's here to see you." He drums his fingers on the desk as I rock back and forth on the heels of my trainers. "Yes, no problem. I'll send her in. He gestures toward the door to my left, setting the phone down. "Through there, then the third door on your right. Just knock and enter."

"Thank you."

I push the door open with both hands, my step bouncy as I emerge into a long, narrow hallway. One, two... *knock, knock, knock*, I go in as instructed.

"Hello, I'm—" The back end of that sentence hangs over the edge of a cliff and falls to its death when my eyes stop on a familiar face. "Oh..." I lean back, checking the company name on a silver plaque glued to the door. "Sorry, wrong door."

Rows upon rows of shelves surround the office, housing what I think are hundreds of DVDs. Theo sits at a long desk equipped with five monitors—three in line and two above. A smile tugs at his lips, sending my heart fluttering all over the place. He makes me idiotically giddy. High on hormones whenever our eyes lock.

He crosses his muscular arms, slightly tilting his head up and to the side, exposing the porcelain column of his throat. I can't look away from his Adam's apple shifting as he swallows, curious eyes roving down my body in a slow, unblinking once-over. I'm instantly back in the hot seat, ruled by him and his presence.

My knees turn to jello, and the undeniable magnetism returns full force. I envision it as a lasso wrapped tightly around my waist, the spoke in Theo's grasp. He pulls slowly, wrapping the rope around his wrist, drawing me closer.

He's like a fine drizzle—the worst kind of rain. It patters everywhere at once, wets your hair, clothes, and face, prickling at the eyes and settling over eyelashes.

Theo pushes away from the desk, rolling out with his chair before standing tall. I take in the view, all six-foot-one of his broad-chested, muscle-packed frame dressed in black slacks and a preppy polo shirt, which struggles to contain said muscular chest. The same chest I was pressed flush against on Saturday evening when we danced in Q.

“Hey, stranger.” The timbre of his voice resonates deep and reverberates through my body. “Who are you here to see?”

“The event catering company. The receptionist said third door on the right.” I arch back again, counting the doors down the hall, taking the opportunity of no eye contact to get a hold of myself. “This is it, but—”

“Technically, it is the third door, but the first door you passed opens to a staircase. You want the next door.”

I readjust my bag as he steps closer, leaving just two feet of space between us. The scent of him, a rich, manly mixture of wood, smoke, and citrusy delight, is so complex I almost moan. Lime or bergamot, I think. And a hint of mint.

“You smell so good...” My eyes are fixed on his neck, where he must've sprayed the cologne earlier this morning.

I have the sudden urge to bury my nose there and inhale him. Maybe there's more to that scent? An undertone I missed.

My panties dampen as if on cue. There's nothing as stimulating as a good-smelling man. I glance up, catching his almost cruel smile that makes it painfully obvious I spoke my mind aloud. I'm eye level with his neck, and he's so big and broad, built like a predator, that I feel tiny, even though at five feet seven, I'm not short. I am, however, defenseless against the masculine energy buzzing around him. But controlling my urges is easier today than it was on Saturday when four drinks coursed through my system, and his good-smelling body moved against mine on the dance floor, our fingers threaded together on my stomach most of the time.

His warm breath on my neck.

The thumping of his heartbeat beneath his ribs.

Long fingers digging into my hips.

I was feverish. Vulnerable and safe at the same time.

“Good, huh?” Theo's smile widens, snapping me out of the vivid

memories.

I stumble back a step. “Sorry. Thank you, and sorry for barging in I-I should go.” As if my comment wasn’t shameful enough, stumbling over my words sure is.

“You got fired from the Country Club?” he asks.

I pause, one hand firmly on the handle, holding tightly as if it’ll keep me in place, grounded, freaking anchored, so I don’t nuzzle my face in the crook of his neck. God, I really need to stop ogling him as if he’s a lollipop I’d like to lick and suck.

“No, why?”

He hikes up one skeptical eyebrow, folding his arms over his chest again. “So why are you here?”

“I’m interviewing for a job.”

“You have a job, Thalia. You won’t make half of what you make at the golf course waitressing for Sandra. What happened? Are the golfers too much to handle?”

Oh, he thinks I’m trying to replace one job with another. Of course. Working *two* jobs must be a foreign concept to Theo Hayes. I’ve only been around here a week, but a week is more than enough to learn about the ins and outs of this town if you pay attention to what people say.

In Newport Beach, gossip is the bread and butter of the elite. The *Hayes* surname is mentioned a lot. Robert Hayes is the city’s beloved mayor, while his wife—a former Miss California title winner—is heavily involved with charity work, organizing various balls, auctions, and galas to raise money for causes close to her heart.

The power couple of Newport Beach.

They brought to the world *seven* sons—elite troublemakers.

Entitled.

Spoiled.

Arrogant.

Hot.

Fuckable.

At least that’s the consensus among the cart girls. The bar staff has a different take on the Hayes brothers. And so do the Country Club’s members. They’re highly respected by most. Envied, too. From what I learned, every description of them is valid to an extent, but not all brothers fit in one bag labeled with the same tags.

Theo's hot, fuckable, and a little spoiled. Not arrogant. At least I've not seen that side of him yet.

"Nothing happened. I don't want to quit working as a cart girl. I want a second job. My evenings are free, and I don't work Wednesdays or Thursdays. I've got time." I glance at my wristwatch, tugging my bottom lip through my teeth. "Just not right now. Sorry, but I need to get going. I'll see you on Sunday. Water, isn't it?"

He smirks, holding the door open when I step away until my back finds the wall on the other side of the narrow corridor.

So, so graceful.

"Unless Nico buys another toy I want to test-drive, it'll be a Bud Light. Barge in here again when you're done with Sandra. I'll take you out for coffee."

"Coffee?" I cuckoo, pulling my eyebrows together.

"Yeah," he huffs a half-hearted chuckle. "Brown, bitter, delicious. You do have that in Greece, right?"

"Yes. Much better than what I've had here so far." I ponder the invitation for a total of three seconds. Who in their right mind would say *no* to him? "Coffee sounds nice."

A rational part of me, the one not ruled by hormones and pushed to action by the long celibacy, plays this down. I have no friends, and closing myself off isn't in my nature. Until recently, I've been surrounded by crowds of people, and I miss that. The hormone-ruled side of me knows it's bullshit.

Theo and I won't be friends. We'll fuck and move on. I have no strength to resist that man, and there is one tag that all Hayes brothers share: player.

The interview with Sandra takes ten minutes. It's not really an interview. Apart from asking if I'm legally allowed to serve alcohol and capable of balancing a tray full of drinks on the palm of my hand, she focuses on measuring me up and fetching a uniform. This one, at least, is less revealing than the one at the Country Club—white shirt, black waistcoat, and a below-the-knee black pencil skirt.

"We cater to the upper class. Any reason is good for the Newport Beach elite to throw a party. We are absolutely swamped during summer." She speaks faster than she moves, opening and closing drawers and cabinets, rushing around the office searching for a pen, checking her phone, and then cutting off calls. "When can you start? We're catering to a sixtieth birthday party tomorrow. Are you good for that? Three hundred guests, six hours."

“Yes, sure. Where and what time?”

“You must be at the residence at five-thirty. The party starts at six. Arrive in your uniform and ask for George. He’ll give you further instructions.” She hands me a wad of papers. “Fill this in at home. It’s a standard contract and some details we need. Give it to George tomorrow.” She scribbles an address on the back of a gold business card. “This is where you need to be. Five thirty tomorrow.”

I take the card out of her hand, and a second later, she’s by the door, which is my cue to leave. “Thank you. I won’t disappoint, I promise.”

“I know, I—” The phone starts ringing on her desk for the seventh time. She flashes me a glowing smile before closing the door in my face.

“Crazy, isn’t she?” Theo says, resting against the door to his office, a phone in hand. “Got the job?”

“Yes. I start tomorrow.” I tuck the uniform into my bag, zipping it up. A thrilling burst detonates in my chest as I step closer to him. “So? Coffee?”

He holds out his hand toward the door leading back to the lobby. We fall into step, passing the bellhop, who spares us a curious glance before we leave the building.

“How’s the apartment hunt going?” Theo asks, heading down the street. “Have you found a place?”

“No, I’m not looking yet. I won’t have enough saved to rent a place for at least another month. Newport Beach is expensive, but the pay is good, and there’s work everywhere.”

Theo pushes the door to the café open, letting me in first. The bittersweet aroma of coffee overpowers the smell of his earthy cologne. I welcome the sensory distraction with open arms, inhaling deeply to clear my mind off this idiotic, lustful fog. Maybe I’ll stop acting so out-of-character if I can’t smell the arousing scent.

We stop by the counter where a young barista pours milk into a tall glass and then covers the froth with two espresso shots before moving to the till to take our order.

“A large, iced, white coffee and...” Theo pauses, bringing his eyes to me.

“I’ll have the same.” I reach for my wallet, but he pushes my hand away, smirking under his breath.

“Will you please stop doing that around me? It’s very emasculating, Thalia.”

“Emasculating?” My pronunciation isn’t quite perfect on the first try, the word foreign to my ears. “Emasculating...”

“It means I feel like less of a man when you think I expect you to pay for your coffee. I invited you here. My treat.”

This isn’t the first time someone has helped me with a definition of a word I’ve never heard, but it is the first time I’m not embarrassed by not knowing. There’s not a trace of mockery or surprise in Theo’s tone. I relax, knowing my lacking vocabulary won’t be met with laughter. I’m self-conscious as it is because of my thick accent and the trilling *r* I can’t soften, no matter how hard I try.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your ego.”

Once the barista slides our coffees across the counter, we settle into a booth by the window overlooking the main street. Shiny, expensive cars line the curbs, and people rush about in dark shades, designer bags in hand. The shopfronts of well-known luxury brands reflect the sunlight, enhancing the items on display and enticing the Newport Elite to tap out their pin and press the green button.

Theo sits opposite me, forearms on the table. His long fingers mindlessly slide the glass across the tabletop between his hands. His dark eyes roam over my face for the hundredth time since we met. I’ve never been looked at the way he does—as if he’s trying to memorize me. As if he’s searching for something he lost. His gaze slides from my eyes to my lips, cheeks, nose, and back to my eyes, forcing a shot of adrenaline to throb in my veins like the first taste of alcohol.

The polo shirt he wears stretches across his chest, the fabric on the verge of bursting at its seams. Black lines of a tattoo in the crook of his neck steal my attention. I haven’t noticed it before, but now that he angles his head, the collar of his shirt naturally tilted, revealing the ink, my curiosity takes the lead.

“What have you got there?” I point at his neck.

He hooks his finger in the collar, pulling it aside to uncover the design. Feathers. Very detailed, arranged into wings. I imagine they run lower, across his shoulder, ending somewhere under the sleeve. Or maybe they’re tattooed down his back.

“That’s beautiful.” I pump my fists, fidgeting in the seat, itching to graze my fingers over the black lines. “I’ve been thinking about a tattoo for years, but I’ve got a very low pain threshold, and I’m afraid I’ll pass out.”

“You can ask for an anesthetic these days, but it’s really not that bad. When you’re ready for ink, let me know. I’ll take you to Toby’s studio. He’s the best around here.”

The design I’ve been sitting on for at least five years flashes before my eyes—a floral dream catcher on my thigh. For now, I don’t have enough money to waste on ink, but one day, when I can afford it, I’ll pluck the courage and tick *tattoo* off my bucket list.

“So, what do you do in that office? Why do you need five monitors?”

“I design games. Mostly web-based, but I’ve been working on a large-scale project for a while now.”

He tells me about the idea and how he spent the last four years developing the multi-universe game. He uses many technical terms, and I often stop him, asking for a synonym or an explanation, but he’s patient and doesn’t seem to mind explaining the words.

“If you want, I could help you with that,” I say after he tells me the game is centered around Greek Gods. “My father was fascinated with mythology. He taught myths at a college in Athens when I was younger.”

“That’d be great. I’ve done the research, but it’d be nice if you could check it over before I finalize the project.”

“Sure. Whenever you’re ready.”

Theo wipes condensation from the glass with his thumb, then lifts it to his raspberry lips. My ovaries start the tug-of-war again, the primitive thrill of arousal in the highest gear, tingling at the backs of my thighs.

He might not realize what he’s doing, but I’m burning up as he grazes his thumb across his lower lip.

He’s lost in thought for a moment before he drops his hand back to the glass, blissfully unaware of my wild thoughts.

We spend an hour talking and take our time with the coffee. The ice has long melted in mine, but I savor small sips like the nectar of the gods, asking every question that comes to mind.

It’s nice to talk to someone. It’s nice not to be locked in the stinky motel room.

I’m still getting used to functioning in society again and not voicing my thoughts after spending eighteen months talking aloud to myself just to hear a voice. It’s a miracle I’ve not gone mad, isolated in the tiny cabin in the woods my grandfather built before my mother was born.

I inherited it when he passed away six years ago, and I always loved the

tranquility of the vast lake and the secluded, deserted area. I grew to despise the four walls while I hid there, only leaving once a week for supplies.

“Hold that thought,” Theo says when I’m about to ask another question. He strides to the cashier and comes back a moment later with two more coffees in takeout cups, gesturing for me to follow him outside. “I bet you’ve not been to the beach yet.” He hands me one cup, pointing ahead. “There’s a nice restaurant around the corner with an ocean view. You’re Greek, so I assume you like seafood. Their lobster is great.”

“Coffee’s enough, but the beach sounds fun. Have you lived here your whole life?”

“Born and raised. I can’t imagine living anywhere else. I guess that’s why I find you fascinating. You’ve got some balls packing up your life and starting afresh here.”

“Sometimes, all you can do is change the scenery.”

And sometimes, you have no other choice than run and hope your past doesn’t decide to follow.

We reach the beach, and I kick my shoes off and wiggle my toes, enjoying the softness and warmth of the sand under my bare feet as we walk closer to the water. People sunbathe on towels and sun loungers, and kids run around kicking balls or making sandcastles. Surfers sit on their boards, shaking their heads, unhappy with the low, lazy waves.

I plop down close to the water’s edge, letting the waves crash against my feet. Theo stays back, pushing his shades further up his nose while I shield my eyes with my hand, tilting my head to the side.

“Teach me Greek,” he says, breaking the comfortable silence. “How do you say *hello*?”

“You said that you know a few words. I would’ve expected *hello* to be on the list.”

“I know words I had to translate for the game. *Welcome* instead of *hello*.”

“*Chaírete*.”

“*Chaírete*.” He catches onto the accent perfectly. My native language in his mouth, coupled with the raspy note of his voice, sounds too appealing and too sexy.

“Yes, good. Now say, *antío*.”

“*Antío*,” he echoes. “I guess that means *bye*?”

I bob my head. “You’re really good with accents. Do you speak any

other languages?”

“Italian and a bit of Spanish. Enough to find my way around there if I’ll ever need to but not enough to hold a decent conversation.”

“Impressive. Maybe one day you can teach me Italian.”

Although, French would be better.

French kissing.

The dimples in his cheeks pop when he smiles, eyes sparkling like the sky on the Fourth of July. God, I’m getting freaking *poetic* in my own head, all while I imagine climbing his lap like a tree and thrusting my tongue into his mouth.

“Where did you learn English? I bet it wasn’t at school. You’ve got a richer vocabulary than a lot of people who were born here, believe me.”

“I did take English lessons at school, but the curriculum was very basic, and after eight years of studying, I couldn’t even hold a decent conversation. I learned mostly from music, movies, and fiction books.”

“Why did you move to America all alone?” He casually sips his coffee, seemingly relaxed, but I can see he’s wound up tight, waiting for the answer as if he’s desperate to learn more about me but doesn’t want to let it show.

I squeeze the cup so hard that the lid pops out of place. I’ve got a rehearsed answer to this question ready. It’s simple, believable, and completely innocent. The same answer I fed everyone who’s asked so far. The truth is too disturbing and painful, but meeting Theo’s curious gaze, I’m hesitant to lie.

The truth will set you free.

Not in this case.

I wish I could tell him. Or anyone for that matter, but that kind of confession requires trust on an unbreakable level, and I can’t let myself trust that much.

New life.

New friends.

New beginning.

The past stays where it belongs.

“The American Dream,” I say with a sigh, swallowing the shame burning my throat. “Greece is a beautiful country, but it’s not somewhere you’d choose to live and work. Most people live mediocre lives, trying to make ends meet, worrying if they’ll have enough money to last until the next paycheck. I wanted a more stable life than that.”

“What about your family? Didn’t they want to move over here with you? Your parents? Siblings?”

I lean back, stretching on the sand, while the waves crash against my feet, reaching higher, lower, and higher again. “I’m an only child, and my parents are very traditional. They’d never leave Greece.”

I hope he won’t ask another question. I’m stepping on thin ice around him as it is.

By the look of him, the reserve and doubtful edge to his eyes, he knows that’s not the whole story. He turns away, staring at the calm ocean, and the flat look on his face feels like a slap across my cheek. I never want to see him so... *detached* again.

“Tell me about your family,” I say, hoping to God it’ll get him talking again because right now, he looks like he’s about to get up and leave. “It must’ve been fun growing up with six brothers.”

Taking his sweet time, he brings his eyes back to mine, and the smile he’s trying to keep at bay has my heart skipping a series of flickering beats. “Fun?” He touches the scar on his cheek. “That’s Logan’s doing. He shoved a stick into the wheel of my bike when I was eight. I landed face-first on a tree stump in the woods while we were away for a weekend with my grandparents.” He points at the bridge of his nose. “That’s Shawn and Nico. Shawn threw an iron at me when I was eleven. Nico broke it with his fist five years ago.”

“He *hit* you? Why?”

Theo shrugs. “I was drunk, said some shit... I deserved it. He did that, too.” He points at the tiny scar on his lip, the one I want to run my tongue along to see if I’ll feel any difference. “Same evening. It took him one blast to break my nose and split my lip.” A peal of soft laughter wheezes past his lips. “Growing up with them had its ups and downs, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. We’re close, and now that the triplets are starting to man up, they spend more time with us too.”

I never wanted siblings, but hearing the fondness in Theo’s voice makes me a little jealous that I’m an only child. Maybe if I had siblings, I wouldn’t be alone now. Maybe my brother or sister would be as close to me as Theo is to his brothers. I bet they always have each other’s back no matter what happens. I bet their parents are the same—caring and loving.

Not like my parents.

The sun dips closer toward the horizon, painting the sea a kaleidoscope

of oranges, yellows, and purples, while we sit on the beach talking and laughing, the world passing us by. I could spend a few more hours like this, listening to his stories, but Theo has different plans.

“I’m starving, Thalia. I’m sure you are, too,” he says a while later, prompting me to glance at my watch.

I sit up, startled by the deserted beach. It’s six in the evening, our coffees long gone, cups discarded by Theo when he told me he hates coming back from work to an empty condo and is pondering the idea of buying a dog.

Since then, we’ve touched on so many subjects I feel like I’ve known him for a long time. And I feel like no more than two hours have passed since I stumbled into his office.

“Thank you, but I should head back to the motel.” I rise to my feet, brushing sand off my clothes. “I’m sorry I stole your afternoon. Actually... no, I’m not sorry. This was nice.”

“I’ll sling you over my shoulder and carry you inside the restaurant if I have to. I’m not kidding.” He gestures toward the street, urging me to start walking. “I’ll drive you back to the motel after dinner.”

He shouldn’t have said that.

My mind is a vivid and colorful space. The scene he described isn’t hard to imagine or spice up. I picture him doing just as he said—slinging me over his shoulder, carrying me to bed where I can scream his name. There’s no doubt in my mind Theo Hayes knows exactly how to make a woman scream.

Not for the first time in his presence, I clench my thighs together to get some semblance of friction and inhale an inconspicuous breath. A ride sounds better than a four-mile trek to the motel, and now that we’re almost at the restaurant door, the aromatic scent of garlic bread and freshly cooked seafood sifting through the air reminds me just how hungry I am.

“Fine, but this time, *my* treat,” I push the door open, not letting him get a word in, but he catches up with me inside. He grips my upper arm, yanking me to his chest. My cheek brushes against his shirt, and I see stars.

This is laughable! *Get a grip, girl!*

“Emasculating,” he says quietly. Amusement laces with a heavy, loaded note in his tone. “Remember the definition, *omorfiá*? It’s not your treat. It’ll never be your treat.”

“*O Theé mou* ^[5].”

“I like it when you speak Greek.” His hand connects with my back, guiding me toward a table in the middle of the restaurant. “What did you

say?”

“You’ll have to learn Greek if you want to know what I mumble to myself. I do that a lot.”

“I’m in luck,” he breathes into the shell of my ear. “I know just the girl who’ll give me a few lessons.”

SEVEN

Theo

TO AN EYE OF A PASSIVE OBSERVER, Thalia and I might be mistaken for a couple on a date. We're not, but even if, I wouldn't regret almost forcing her to eat with me.

We left my office a few minutes past one in the afternoon and spent *five* hours talking. Five fucking hours. Time flies when you're having fun. And boy, am I. She's easy to talk to, witty, intelligent, and curious.

And hot...

So hot. Curvy, with plenty of flesh to grab. Busty, with wide hips and a visible waist. The definition of hourglass, she can't be classed as fat nor skinny—*healthy*, is what my grandma would say. Fucking *perfect* is my definition.

We have more in common than I expected, but her positivity is the most impressive character trait I've uncovered so far. She radiates cheerfulness like a glow-in-the-dark stick. She hardly ever stops smiling. Her eyes sparkle with genuine glee, even though she's alone in a foreign country, took on a second job, and lives in a motel. She's grateful for the opportunity to start from scratch, from the very bottom, ready and willing to work her way up.

"What type of a dog do you want?" she asks in that colorful Greek accent I can't get over, her eyes dancing, alive, bright and fucking beautiful.

Honestly, I can't get over how beautiful she is. It tears me a new one every time I glimpse her face, and looking away takes more effort than anything ever should. My poker face, though, is unrivaled, intact at all times.

She studies the menu in deep concentration, toying with a lock of hair. The gesture has annoyed the hell out of me since I can remember, but Thalia doesn't pair it with seductive stares and smiles. She pairs it with a frown...

Instead of irritating, it's sexy as hell.

I'm pretty sure if I let her choose, she'll pick the smallest, cheapest dish on the menu, so when the waiter comes back, I order shrimp for starters, two

lobsters for mains, and a bottle of wine, shushing Thalia when she tries to cut in.

“I was thinking about a German Shepherd, but I won’t brush his coat, and he’ll probably end up looking homeless within a month.”

“No, a German Shepherd won’t suit you. You need a manlier dog... a pit bull or a Doberman.”

“A pit bull? Seriously? I’d get a Yorkie before a pit bull, Thalia. I’d probably dress it in a pink coat and walk it down the pier long before I’d look at a pit bull.”

The waiter brings a bottle of red wine, filling our glasses while Thalia laughs, the sound melodic and light, her whole face glowing. She must imagine me with a pocket-sized Yorkie puppy strolling down the main street.

I’d do it. A tiny, adorable dog dressed in pink wouldn’t put a dent in my masculinity.

“I know!” she exclaims, quickly clapping a hand over her mouth, glancing around with big, amused eyes. “You should get a boxer,” she adds, the words almost a whisper.

The longer I watch her, the more details I notice. Her lashes are long and dark, her nose bears a faint line of freckles, and she has a beauty mark above the left corner of her upper lip, in the same spot as Marilyn Monroe’s. I want to touch it. Kiss it, and kiss that bitable, alluring swell of her lips.

I shift in my chair, inconspicuously adjusting my hardening dick. *I know I won’t fuck Thalia, but my dick apparently didn’t get the memo.*

This is so fucked-up...

I don’t entirely understand *why* I’m not making a move. I’m pretty sure Thalia wouldn’t say no, but as much as I want to see her writhing beneath me, using my usual stupid tricks on her makes my skin break out in fucking hives. I imagine her getting dressed afterwards, leaving my house and *nope...* won’t happen. She’s better than that. Better than me.

“A boxer, huh?” I ask, focusing on the topic before my brain melts and pours out of my ears. “That’s actually not a bad idea. They’re good with kids, right?”

Her smile fades, and I get a real kick seeing the confirmation painted over her face—she’s into me. “I didn’t know you have kids.” Charming amusement hisses out from her voice, and she holds her chin higher, suddenly closed off. “But yes, boxers are great with kids.”

“I don’t have kids. Neither a wife nor a girlfriend, so no kids for me in

the near future, but Shawn's engaged," I say, watching her relax, and cheeks heat to a rose color. "They'll want to adopt as soon as they elope. I'd rather not buy a dog that'll scare my niece or nephew."

"They can't have kids, or do they prefer to adopt?"

"I'm sure they wouldn't mind a biological kid, but two guys can't make that happen. Shawn's gay, Thalia. How did you not pick up on that?"

I tell her about Shawn and Jack's long road to engagement before the food arrives. Time flies and stands still all at once. She teaches me more words in Greek over dinner, but only after she checks if I remember *hello* and *bye*. Once I finish my glass of wine, I settle for refilling hers, enjoying how her cheeks glow pinker with every sip.

It's my turn to ask questions, but Thalia paints a vague picture of her childhood and teenage years. She avoids the topic of her parents and friends, mentions no names, and evades when I ask what part of Greece she's from.

The reluctance to share, the fading smile, and the short, ambiguous answers confirm my suspicion. She's hiding something. Either that or she still doesn't trust me enough to share any details.

I change the strategy, asking about *her* instead. Typical questions I never bothered with before—likes and dislikes, hopes and aspirations. The usual first date bullshit.

It's not a date, though. Remember?

I don't notice people leaving the restaurant, blind to the staff clearing the tables, too engaged and focused on the witty brunette. She's the center of my attention until a waiter approaches, his face apologetic, check in hand.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir, but we closed an hour ago."

Two lines crease my forehead when I glance at my watch. It's eleven o'clock. Surely, it stopped working...

The moving arms prove me wrong.

How did we spend all day together?

How am I not bored with her yet?

Usually, I don't entertain women this long. A tenth of that time is rare, and even when it happens, the agenda is clear: sex. Not today, because I selflessly declared Thalia off-limits to my dick last week.

She gasps, giggles, and polishes off the last of her wine while I settle the bill. Other than the gleam in her brown eyes, the cranked-up cheerfulness, and broader smiles, she seems sober, despite finishing the bottle almost by herself.

“Come on, I say, opening the door for her like a medieval fucking gentleman. “I’ll take you home.”

“Motel,” she corrects firmly, “Not home. Not yet.”

I won’t admit it aloud, but whenever she mentions the motel, a burning sensation, like the swift kick of Tabasco, starts in the pit of my stomach. The cheap, sleazy place is the heart of Newport Beach’s shady business deals. A place for hookers to work their magic and dealers to move product.

Thalia’s young, pretty, and opinionated. One wrong word to the wrong person, and she could end up in a lot of trouble.

“That’s me.” She gestures to the old rattling building when I pull into the parking lot.

Sky-blue paint peels off the walls, and the broken, faded, trellises pinned to the railing of the second-floor walkway give off a horror-movie vibe. The climbing plant that must’ve thrived on the trellis at some point overhangs loosely, forgotten, dry, and dead like the dreams of many drug addicts frequenting the establishment.

Thalia and I spent ten hours together, but now that she’s about to exit my Camaro, I wish for ten more. “I want your number, *omorfiá*.”

Without hesitation, she draws her phone out, tapping on the screen. A moment later, my cell vibrates.

Unknow number: Sas efcharistó gia ton kafé kai to deípno. Elpízo na niótheis arketá arrenopós, allá an den to káneis, boreís na ftiáxeis ton nerochýti pou échei diarroi sto domátio mou. Kalinýchta, Theo.

I’m rendered momentarily speechless when she leans across the middle console, pressing a delicate kiss to my cheek, her lips soft and warm, the kiss light, barely a fucking suggestion, but intense enough to set my mind ablaze.

She yanks the door open and walks off before I come to my senses. It might be for the best... I have the urge to chase her, tear the loose t-shirt and jean shorts off her olive skin, throw her on the bed and cover her naked body with mine.

As soon as she disappears behind door number thirteen, I save her number, copy her text and let Google Translate do the hard work.

Thalia: Thank you for the coffee and dinner. I hope you feel quite masculine, but if you don’t, you can fix the leaking tap in my room. Good

night, Theo.

“Good night, *omorfiá.*”

EIGHT

Theo

WHOSE BRIGHT IDEA WAS IT for me to buy a dog?

I come back to my condo after stepping out for just two hours to grab a beer with friends. It's Saturday. What else was I supposed to do? Stay home all evening?

Yes. That would've been the correct choice.

The currently nameless four-legged little shit used one of the couch cushions as a chew toy. Balls of wool litter the place, and the culprit lays on the carpet, partially hidden under the coffee table, munching my brand-new shoe.

He's been here less than twenty-four hours, and I'm already two pairs of shoes, a cushion, and a doormat down. Let's not forget I stepped in a puddle of his pee bright and early. That sure kick-started my morning.

During his unsupervised rampage, he knocked over a plant my mother brought to spruce up the place. I have no clue what to do with the green weed, so like the clueless man I am, I leave it on the floor. Next time Mom visits, she'll have to replant, or repot, or redo something with it. From where I stand, it looks like the little shit might've peed on it too.

Destruction.

All around *destruction*.

I snap a picture of the mayhem, sending it to the Hayes brothers' group chat.

Me: Who wants a dog?

Shawn: OMG, he's fucking adorable! Gimme!

Nico: Told you to get a trained German Shepherd.

Logan: I've got some shoes he can chew. It is a boy, right? Does he have a name yet?

Me: Not yet, but 'little shit' has a nice ring to it.

It's funny, but it's not.

I send the picture to Thalia too, because... yeah, I've got nothing. I've not seen or spoken to her since Wednesday, and my thoughts swirl around the beauty twenty times a day. What's more, I don't just imagine her naked anymore. Last night, I stepped into a restaurant in town to grab a quick bite before heading home, and my immediate thought was, *this is cool. I should bring Thalia here sometime.*

I was so fucking stunned that I almost left the place without paying. I'm even looking forward to golfing with my brothers more than usual because I know she'll be there tomorrow.

In fact, golfing never sounded more appealing.

Me: "Get a boxer," you said. So, I did. You want a dog?

With no maid to tend to the mess, I drop to my knees on the plush carpet, wondering why the hell I didn't buy a turtle.

The nameless little shit steals the wool balls straight out of my hands, thinking I'm here to play.

"Stop that. Sit!" I might as well be speaking gibberish. His tail wags as he bends on his front legs and sprints to the other side of the room, barking and jumping. "It's late. We're not playing, boy. Sit. Let me tidy up." I gently tap his nose with the half-eaten shoe. "Don't eat that. That's not food."

He doesn't listen, busy chasing his own fucking tail. I should've done more research before buying a puppy.

My phone chimes on the coffee table.

Thalia: He's cute. Don't leave him alone, free to wander the house. Contain him to one room. What's his name?

Me: at the moment, it's 'little shit.' It'll stick unless he starts behaving himself.

She sends back a laughing emoji, but the three dots keep flashing on the

screen.

Thalia: Please let me be there when you're chasing him down the beach screaming, "come here, little shit!"

I chuckle, the situation easy to imagine: Thalia and me enjoying a casual evening stroll down the beach with ice cream in hand when the dog runs off, and I chase after the idiot, yelling *little shit* at the top of my lungs.

Me: Point well made. How about "Dog"?

I open a bottle of Bud Light and throw myself on the couch, stretching to get comfortable. Little shit hops onto my stomach, knocking me out of breath. He's a puppy, alright, eight weeks old, but he's pretty heavy already. He curls himself into a ball, and I end up scratching his head, texting with Thalia. She makes a list of possible names, and before I know it, it's almost fucking midnight.



Logan tees off at the first hole, sending the ball flying like he's Happy Gilmore. We pause the round before the ball touches the ground when the sound of the fast-approaching cart breaks the peaceful Sunday three-past-noon afternoon.

Thalia leaps out from behind the wheel, hair in a massive bun on top of her head, loose strands spilling out and bouncing around her flushed face. "Hello, boys." She rounds the cart and pops the caps on two Bud Lights when the four of us choir *hi, hello* and *hey* back. "I'd ask how the game is going, but you've just started, so I'll ask this instead." She glances at me, biting the inside of her lip to rein a smile. "Who's driving?"

"No one," I say, strolling closer to her, pushing my shades up on top of my head. "Jack dropped us off."

"Oh, okay, in that case..." she takes a bottle of Corona from the cooler, handing it to Nico, but leaves my Bud Light beside her, inviting me to come and get it myself. "What did you do with Ares?"

Yeah... she named my dog after the Greek god of war. God of mischief would suit the little shit better, but the Greek god of mischief is a goddess,

and even I'm not so cruel as to give my dog a girly name.

"Still wild," I stop beside her, grab my beer and roll the cool glass bottle along my forehead. It must be a hundred degrees out here today. "I woke up to a toilet paper roll ripped to pieces in my bedroom. I think he does that shit on purpose. I locked him in the bathroom for now."

"Ares?" Nico hands Thalia a hundred to cover the round and her tip. "Grab us four bottles of water. Coldest you have," he nudges me with his elbow when Thalia opens the cooler. "You named your dog *Ares*? What happened to *little shit*?"

"It was Thalia's idea, but the jury, namely the triplets and I, is still out. If he pees somewhere again, it will be *little shit*."

Thalia throws a bottle around for everyone to catch, then retrieves a gift bag from the passenger seat of the cart. "This should keep Ares occupied when you're not home." She pulls out an orange rubber ball and two bags of dog treats. "It's a chew toy and a treat dispenser in one." She rips one of the packets, showing me where to insert the treats. "It's not easy to take them out, so he'll have to work for it."

My brothers' scorching gazes burn holes at the back of my skull, but I ignore the three of them when Thalia tries to hand over the toy. "Thanks, but you'll have to give him that yourself or he'll think I'm nice. Can't have that. He'll walk all over me if he senses weakness."

I don't add that he already walks all over me.

The little shit.

Yep, *Ares* probably won't stick.

"You're right. I wouldn't want to *emasculate* you."

"See? You're catching on. You got time to meet him tonight? Maybe I could pick your brain about the game while you spoil my dog."

"No, sorry." She drops the toy back into the bag. "I'm waitressing tonight. Tomorrow?"

"Sounds good. I'll call you."

One smile, one *beep* of the cart, and she's gone, on her way to the next group of golfers.

I act cool, ignoring the ostentatious howling, and elbow-under-the-ribs goading from Shawn.

"I think we're missing a bit of info here, bro. How did you get so chummy?" He wags his eyebrows.

It's damn near impossible to keep a shit-eating grin in check. "We ran

into each other on Wednesday. Well, she kind of barged into my office by mistake.”

I give them a rundown of the events, but no matter how many times I say Thalia’s fun and just a friend, they don’t believe me. Whatever.

I don’t have to prove anything to them.

NINE

Thalia

CLUTCHING THE BIG, HEAVY SHOULDER BAG close to my side, I knock on the door to Theo's condo at five to seven in the evening. The neighborhood is one of the fancier ones—upper-middle class, at least. Maybe lower-higher. The snow-white building looks clean and well-kept as if it hadn't been here long. I cross the spacious hallway, knocking on the door on the ground floor.

Heavy, rushed steps reverberate inside and Theo yanks the door open, his broad chest dressed in a black t-shirt in my face. "Hey." He steps aside, letting me in. "Did you find it okay?"

I nod, entering an airy entryway with a light brown wooden floor and white walls. It flows effortlessly into the open plan living area, beyond which there's a sliding window wall overlooking a private, secluded terrace.

What strikes me as odd is that the condo is sterile-clean.

No dirty laundry, empty pizza boxes, or beer bottles in sight. High ceilings, contemporary, minimalistic design, and high-end furniture—casual sophistication.

Theo's shoes are neatly organized in the hallway, a large flat-screen TV hangs on a marble feature wall in the living room, and an off-white fluffy rug lays under the glass coffee table. There's even a potted plant by the floor-to-ceiling south-facing windows, all thriving, green and healthy.

"I have hope," I say, kicking my white sneakers off. "You haven't killed the plant, so Ares should survive too. At least he'll let you know when he's hungry."

"Thank you for thinking so highly of me. Don't give me any credit for the plant. Ares knocked it over on Friday, and it stayed on the floor until Mom stopped by to repot it last night."

He leads me to the kitchen equipped with a breakfast bar, dusty-blue cabinets, and high-end appliances that look brand-new, as if no one has used

them yet.

That's hardly surprising. He's a man in his twenties and obviously can't complain about lack of money. I'm sure he doesn't need to cook his own meals. I'd be willing to bet his diet is comprised of takeout food and cereal, or maybe he lives off, boxed-meals prepared by some new-age nutritionist. It'd explain why there's not an ounce of fat on Theo's body.

Navigating life in America may not be tricky, but the culture differs from what I'm used to. I probably got the wrong end of the stick tonight, missing the mark by a mile, but it's too late to change my mind now.

Americans aren't as casual as Greeks. We're loud, proud, family orientated, and we love great food, good company, and cooking. I helped my mother in the kitchen since I could hold a spoon, mastering the art of cooking early in life. Years later, I polished my skills in culinary school and have dreamt of owning a little restaurant ever since.

From what I gathered so far, Americans are a tinge more reserved, making my brilliant idea strikes me as not too brilliant now that I stand in Theo's kitchen.

Ares runs out of a room further down the hall, wagging his tail and planting sloppy kisses all over my face when I crouch to pet him. "Hello there, I've got a little gift for you." I scratch his ears, then unzip my bag enough to fit my hand inside and retrieve the rubber ball loaded with treats, but not enough to let Theo see the contents. "There. Have fun with that, and don't chew on Daddy's shoes."

He picks the ball and immediately spits it out, sniffing and nudging it with his nose before taking it in his mouth again. Wagging his tail left and right, he runs away to a big, comfy dog bed in the living room.

"*Daddy?*" Theo echoes, amusement lacing his tone. "I don't know how I feel about that. You want a beer?"

"Sure." I drop my bag on the breakfast bar. "This seems like a bad idea now, but here goes..." I slide the zipper, wiggling my fingers. "Have you ever tried Greek food?"

Theo's eyes jump between me and the ingredients for a meal I planned piling on the counter, his eyebrow curved into a question mark. "You want to cook?"

I can't tell if he's surprised, annoyed, curious or if he thinks I've lost the plot. "You said we'll talk about your game. I'm sure it'll take a while, and I don't want you to order food because you won't let me pay," I huff, dumping

the empty bag on the floor once vegetables, meat, and condiments are out. “I hoped cooking for you wouldn’t be emasculating.”

He hands me a bottle of Budweiser, bracing himself against the marble countertop, arms straight, shoulders rolled back. “You want to cook for *me*. Greek food.”

“Yes. Is that okay?”

“Hell yeah!” Those steady, penetrating eyes of his blaze with excitement and a pleasant shudder of relief rattles through me. It’s a lottery trying to fit in here. “Can I help?”

“Not tonight. Maybe some other time. Tonight, I cook; you ask questions and take notes.”

“Fine, I doubt you’re brave enough to eat anything I’d cook. We’d both end up at the hospital for sure.” He gestures to the cupboards. “Make yourself at home, but if you’re cooking, I’m doing the dishes.”

“That, I can agree to. Where are your knives?”

He points to the left, and after three more questions about bowls, pans, and cutting boards, I wash the vegetables and start dicing while Theo sits at the breakfast bar, bombarding me with question after question. During the hour it takes to prepare food, he fills five pages with neat handwriting, listening to every word I say about Greek mythology.

He opens two more beers when I start serving, heat flaring my cheeks when I glance around. I’m not what you’d call a tidy cook. Some women clean as they go along, but not me. I’m too impatient and focused on cooking to do the dishes. Bowls, forks, spatulas, and pans litter the countertop. Theo’s kitchen never was this messy before, I’m sure.

“It smells amazing,” Theo says, dipping his head to inhale some more when I set a plate of souvlakis with a side of Greek salad, chips, and tzatziki dip before him. “If it tastes as good as it smells and looks...” He takes a bite of the chicken skewer, chewing sluggishly, and his eyes roll back into his head. His chest rises abruptly as he lets out a lavish groan.

“Good?” I ask, burning up as that low, satisfied groan loops inside my head and I... I can’t... God, I can’t think straight. I stuff my mouth with salad, coming down from the high, absolutely mystified that he can turn me one with one sound.

“Good?” he mumbles. “Where the hell did you learn to cook like this? It’s delicious.”

“Greeks love food, Theo. You’d struggle to find a Greek woman who

can't cook, and I went to a culinary school, so that helped."

I've cooked for many people but watching Theo polish the food with a blissful, boyish smile that looks sexy but out of place on a man of his stature is so satisfying. Sitting with him at the table, talking, smiling, and laughing while Ares scratches my legs, begging for scraps, is very close to happiness.

A feeling that eluded me for almost two years.

"That was so damn good." He pushes the empty plate aside, wiping his lips with a napkin. "Thank you."

Once I finish, he starts cleaning up the mess I've made. I wrap the leftovers in plastic on a clean plate, so he'll have lunch ready for tomorrow, then dry the dishes and stash them away while Theo wipes the counters and grabs two more beers.

Ares sleeps in his bed, but his ears perk up when we move to the living room. He leaps on the sofa, making himself comfortable in my lap, and Theo opens his laptop, showing me the graphics for his game.

"What do you think?" He gets comfortable beside me, the intoxicating scent of his cologne tickling my nose again.

"Persephone looks amazing, and so does Hades, *but*, and I don't mean to offend you, Zeus with that lightning bolt looks ancient. He's the god of thunder, so why not take inspiration from the pop culture's equivalent?"

"You mean Thor?"

I snatch a notepad and pen from the coffee table, roughly sketching the image in my head—a tall, broad man with white hair and beard. He radiates lightning out of his hands, and his eyes sparkle with the same stark whiteness.

Theo's silent as if not to disturb me. He's scratching Ares behind the ears, his forearm resting against my thigh. My entire body is swamped with intense heat at the touch. It's been too long since anyone touched me like this.

"You never said you're an artist," he complains when I hand him the notepad. "Quite the talent you've got there."

"There are many things you don't know about me." I readjust the puppy, cuddling him to my chest. As soon as I rent my own place, I'm getting a dog, too. "This is how I imagine Zeus. A modern incarnation."

He studies the drawing a while longer before he closes the notepad, setting it on the side table by the couch. "You cook like a pro, draw, and you're obviously great with dogs." He points at the rubber ball that's out of treats and kept Ares occupied for an hour while I cooked. "What else?"

“We should save this for another day,” I say, looking out the window where the sun has already set, dusk fast approaching. “It’s getting late.”

He checks the time on his cell. Several unanswered messages from what I think is a group chat wait on the screen, but he doesn’t bother reading them. “It’s only nine o’clock. Come on, one more beer, and I’ll order you a cab.”

“No, thank you, I’ll walk.”

“No way I’ll let you walk, Thalia. The motel’s like, what? Four miles away?”

“Five, actually.”

His face flashes with recognition, and he almost chokes on a sip of beer. “Don’t tell me you walk to the Country Club every fucking day.”

I bite my cheek, chuckling softly. “Okay, I won’t.”

“You walk?” he growls, and Ares lifts his head, watching him with bright, curious eyes. “Why?”

“It’s not that far and only takes an hour and a half. Fresh air never killed anyone.” I cuff his arm, squeezing lightly. “I can afford a cab, Theo. The tips are great, but I’d rather save money and get out of the motel as soon as possible.” The moldy, dusty odor lingers in my hair and clothes, even straight after a shower, as if I’m starting to decompose while living in room thirteen.

Theo’s eyes bore into mine in a tight-jawed silence. With an exasperated huff, he grabs his phone, dialing a number. “You got time?” He pauses, listening to whoever’s on the other side of the line. “I need a ride. Get your ass to my place ASAP.”

“It’s sweet of you to—”

“You’re not walking,” he clips, slamming the phone on the side table and startling the dog again. “Sorry, boy.” He pats the dog’s head, eyes on me. “On a scale of one to ten, how much do you trust me now that you know me a little?”

The condo is silent, and my heart picks up pace because I’m suddenly very aware we’re alone—a scene I imagined too many times already. We wore no clothes in those thoughts, and we were much, *much* closer.

Despite the contradicting gossip about the Hayes brothers that I’ve heard from too many people, not much of it has any reflection in real life. In fact, I’m disappointed Theo isn’t as described—a player who fucks every pretty girl he can get his hands on. I’ve never considered myself particularly pretty, but the consensus among my friends and family has always been just that.

Not to Theo, unfortunately. Either I’m not his type, or he’s not that big

of a man-whore.

Too bad. He makes me tick in a very special way. I'm drawn to both; his interior and exterior. Starting with his sharp, handsome face and confident stance, down to his charming character, cognac-colored irises, and low, husky voice. Even how he mindlessly toys with his lower lip whenever he's deep in thought renders me hot and breathless.

Do I trust him, though?

He's given me no reason not to. He's the first person I've felt truly comfortable around in a long time.

"Eight, I think," I say after a long beat.

"Eight is good. You need to know two things: I never do anything unless I want to, and I never lie."

The conversation took a turn from casual to spiked with hidden meaning. Meaning I can't decipher. Theo's not eager to explain, pivoting the chat back to my culinary school.

A loud knock sounds on the door ten minutes later. The door swings open after Theo yells *come in*. A young boy bursts inside the condo, keys in hand, longish hair tucked behind his ears, save for a few wayward locks bordering his handsome, youthful face. There's no need for introductions. A name would be beneficial, but one glance is enough to pinpoint a surname.

Here stands before me, one of the three youngest Hayes brothers. The resemblance to the older four is unmistakable. Same dark hair, brown eyes, strong jaw, and broad shoulders. I can't wait to meet their parents. They must be the most stunning people alive to produce seven ruthlessly handsome sons.

"That's Cody," Theo says, moving his attention to his brother. "This is Thalia. We need a ride."

Cody nods, lips curling into a wide grin. "Chauffer Cody at your disposal."

Theo smirks under his nose. "Nico bought them each a Mustang for their seventeenth birthday, so they're pretty keen to chauffeur us around wherever we need."

He bought them *cars*?

The cart girls swoon over Nico, although only from afar, as most are afraid to get within shouting distance of him. They never fail to casually slip into the conversation the widely known fact that he's filthy rich, but I'm still blown away. Nico doesn't come across as thoughtful, and buying cars for his youngest brothers sure is pretty high up there.

Theo scoops Ares into his arms. Looks like the pup is going for a ride too. I retrieve my bag from the kitchen, then follow both brothers out of the building. Theo opens the back door of the shiny, cherry-red Mustang, letting me in first, then urges me to scoot over and hops in with Ares.

“You’re the new girl at the Country Club, right?” Cody asks, revving the engine, eyes locked on mine in the rear-view mirror instead of the road as the car shoots forward.

I grab the seatbelt, yanking it over my chest before I dent the back of the driver’s leather seat with my face when Cody decides to brake. “Yes. I see the news travels fast around here.”

“It does if you’re a Hayes,” Cody admits, glancing in the rear-view mirror. “Where are we going?”

“The motel by Costa Mesa,” Theo supplies.

Cody will never be my go-to driver. He’s too careless. My stomach ties in knots when he speeds down the freeway at double the limit and parks outside the dreaded destination inside of ten minutes.

“Thank you.” I peck Theo’s cheek, my legs wobbly, heart slowly climbing back down my throat. “If you need help with the game, you know where to find me.”

He hands Cody the dog, urging me to exit the car. “Grab your stuff, Thalia. All of it.”

My eyebrows knot in the middle. “Sorry, what?”

“I said *pack your shit*. You need a place to stay, and I’ve got a spare bedroom sitting empty. My condo is only a mile from the Country Club.”

“N-no...” I shake my head, watching him with mute perplexity as I back away, both hands clasped around the straps of my bag. “I think you had one beer too many, Theo.”

He cuffs my wrist, stopping me in place. “I’m stone-cold sober. Pack. Your. Shit. *Omorfiá*. You just found a place to stay that doesn’t come with a dripping sink or drunk idiots knocking on the door at all hours. Rent-free. Well, kind of. You take care of groceries, cooking, and help me with the game.”

He can’t be serious. It’s a joke, for sure. Who in their right mind asks a stranger to move in with them? He’s joking, right? *Wrong*. He’s dead serious, staring at me with conviction, an edge in his eyes as he works his jaw in a tight circle, fingers cuffing my wrist. The touch titillates every nerve in my body.

“That... tha-that’s,” I stutter, stumbling over the words, experiencing a bad case of brain fade. What the hell is he on? “I can’t move in with you.”

“Yeah, you can. And you will. Pack your stuff before I do it for you.”

“Theo, I—”

He snatches my bag, forces his hand inside to retrieve the motel room key, and shoves past me, shoulders tense, the vein on his neck pulsing rapidly.

I’m rooted to the ground, still making sense of what the hell is happening when he barges inside room thirteen, but as soon as he starts throwing my clothes into a suitcase that lays open by the wall, I’m on the move.

“What do you think you’re doing?” For one long, confusing moment, I think I might knee his balls and shove him out of here. My head... shit, my mind is roaring. I’ve never been this jittery inside. “Stop!” I snap, clawing at his arm.

“Don’t even try to argue, Thalia,” he wiggles out of my grasp, shoving more of my clothes in the bag. “I’ve got a spare bedroom that no one ever uses. You said you trust me, so give me one reason why you shouldn’t move in with me instead of staying here.”

My mouth opens and closes, but I’m at a loss for arguments. At least reasonable arguments.

“We got a deal?” he urges, holding my makeup bag in hand.

My reason splits in two. One side tells me to stay put, the other screams to stuff my pride in my back pocket and take him up on the generous, albeit odd and careless offer.

This isn’t the time to hold your head up. Say thank you. Be grateful.

“Groceries, cooking, helping with the game,” I recite on an exhale. “But also, I clean and pay rent. At least a little, your condo is huge. It must cost—”

“It costs nothing. I own that place. No rent. We clean together, but you can take Ares for a walk every now and then if you want.”

“Okay, okay,” I mutter, staring at him, but more like right through him while trying to calm down my racing mind. “Okay,” I huff again, and by that third okay, my mind clears. Self-preservation instincts take the reins.

I can’t imagine ever regretting the decision as I watch the determination on Theo’s face. We’ve not known each other long, but we’re on the same wavelength, connecting like two raindrops falling into the same puddle.

“Thank you.” I step closer, fling my hands around his neck, then press

my lips to his cheek and cuddle into his chest, effortlessly calm when our bodies connect. “It’s... just *thank you.*”

He wraps his arms around me for a second, then pushes me away and grabs two zipped suitcases. He wheels them to the Mustang, where Cody waits by the open trunk. I throw the rest of my clothes into the last bag and grab the pillow and blanket from the bed, leaving the mattress protector behind.

I step out of the room, feeling ten times lighter and ten times heavier all at once.

TEN

Theo

“SHE LIVES WITH YOU?” Logan booms, arranging himself against a few decorative cushions on the monstrous U-shaped sofa in Nico’s living room.

We’re watching the practice session of the Italian Formula 1 Grand Prix. Not that either one of us knows or cares much about motorsports. We’re motorheads, but in a more hands-on sense—driving and fixing, not watching others drive. We’re only watching it because we met McLaren’s team principal at the Country Club last week and got curious.

So far, it’s pretty fucking boring. The triplets are buzzing, though, and the flat screen keeps them fairly occupied, so we don’t bother switching it off. If we do, they’ll start throwing their teenage wisdom around, and no one needs that shit.

My head smacks against the back of the couch, fingers tightening around the neck of the beer bottle.

Asking, or rather *ordering* Thalia to move in with me was a spur-of-the-moment idea. Not my brightest moment, I admit, but there’s shit all I can do about it now.

We all mess up sometimes.

The mistake became blatantly obvious just an hour after I stashed Thalia’s suitcases in the guest bedroom. She exited the bathroom after a hot shower, wrapped in a towel, skin glistening from lotion or whatever smelled so fucking edible, like summer berries and whipped cream. The scent filled the condo, hanging thickly in the air, driving me crazy for hours.

The following day, I realized my mistake again when Thalia’s alarm went off at five, tearing me out of a dreamless sleep. No, I didn’t mind the too-early-for-any-sane-person wake-up call. It’s what followed that had me pulling hair out of my scalp.

I found her in the kitchen, brewing coffee, still wearing her pj’s. That’s if the shortest shorts ever invented matched with a meager, spaghetti-strap

top can be called pj's.

My balls are blue now.

Permanently. Fucking. Blue.

And the worst part? I can't seem to convince my messed-up brain that fucking a random chick will help my case. I'm riding solo to relieve the pent-up frustration lodged deep at the base of my spine. Jacking off helps for a short while until another innocent encounter drives me up the wall.

Last night is a prime example.

I came home from work around seven. The silent condo had me convinced that Thalia was out, working at another fancy party. I barged into the bathroom to grab a shower, only to find her submerged in the bathtub...

Jesus wept.

It meant nothing that her smoking-hot body hid under a thick blanket of soap bubbles filling the tub. My imagination compensated tenfold.

Anyway... it's all good fun.

I only hate having her around because my dick has a mind of its own when she's near. Even knowing the torture awaiting on the other side of my request, I'd still ask her—correction, *tell her*—to take the guest bedroom.

When she implied that she walks five miles to the Country Club every day, there and back, I lost my shit. As if it's not enough that she's alone in America; no family or friends who could help her out, no one to offer emotional support.

Fucked up doesn't begin to cover it.

I've got six brothers, parents, grandparents, and an army of friends a phone call away, always available whenever I need help, emotional support or company. Thalia's on her own, but she's still the most positive person I know. I find myself reconsidering my life since she came along because I've been consumed by money the past few years.

More. Bigger. Better.

Idiotic, really.

I've got a comfortable life. A big condo, a brand-new car, enough cash to spend on necessities, luxuries, and then some—some that's promptly wired to Nico so he can make me richer. I won't feel happiness or fulfillment until I'm rich, right?

Bullshit.

Thalia's happy living in my guest bedroom, working two jobs, and working her ass off at my condo in-between.

She scrubbed the place spotless last week...

Well, half of it because she took time to deep-clean everything—windows, baseboards, and doors included.

I screamed my head off when I got back late in the evening after fourteen hours at the office. Cleaning isn't part of the deal, but Thalia took no notice of the *fucks* spewing from my mouth and cleaned the rest of the place the next day.

She makes me breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She takes Ares for a walk in the morning and brews a pot of coffee for me, so I don't have to when I get out of bed an hour after she leaves.

And the notes... or should I say riddles?

She sticks small post-it notes to the mug and the glass food storage containers she bought to pack my lunch—question at the front, answer on the back.

**Why did the banana go to the doctor?
It didn't peel so good.**

**What do you give to a sick lemon?
Lemon Aid.**

Corny.

Cheesy.

Absolutely hilarious.

"Yeah, she does," I say, flaking the label off the bottle. "You should come by one day. I'll ask her to cook, and you'll understand why I'm winning here."

It's almost eight in the evening, and Thalia's waitressing at an up-tight private event around the corner from Nico's house, but I shoot her a text anyway.

Me: Are you working tomorrow evening?

Thalia: No, why?

Me: I want to invite my brothers. Can we make those chicken skewers with salad?

Thalia: You're not worthy of the family recipe. I'll cook.

“Is tomorrow good for everyone?” I glance around the room. Nico’s sofa fits the seven of us without an issue, and there’s space for seven more.

The whole house is over-the-top large and ostentatious. Six bedrooms, a five-car garage, a driveway to fit twenty more, and a backyard the size of a football field. All wrapped in the most expensive materials: marble, gold, silk, velvet, and ebony hardwood. It was all here when he bought the house, but we still give him a hard time about his luxurious taste.

“We’ll have to skip the fun this time!” Conor exclaims, eyes fixed on the flat-screen where—surprise, surprise—the cars are still driving around the track. “Brandon’s throwing a party. We can’t miss it.”

Thank God. They’re a touch too young to hang out with the four of us yet. Too loud and annoying with their teenage attitudes, gibberish they call slang, and constant pussy talk.

Maybe in a couple of years...

Logan reaches for another beer and starts the ritual of peeling the label. Good job that the triplets are occupied, or they’d offer him one of their too-young high school friends to fuck, which would piss Nico off to no end.

“I hope you’re hitting that ass,” Logan chirps.

The sudden urge to nail his face washes over me out of nowhere. I’m not a saint, but at the same time, I’m not one to lose my cool at a snap of fingers like Nico or Logan. They have the shortest fuses, always ready for a fight at a moment’s notice.

I draw a deep breath, struggling to keep my temper at bay, but I do a convincing job of playing it down. “Nah. She’s a friend. She’s helping me with the game. I’ve pitched the idea to a few companies this week, so, fingers crossed, I should hear back within a month.”

“Took you long enough.” Colt laughs. “I want a free copy before it’s released. Sounds fun.”

Ah, to be seventeen again. No responsibilities, no worries, no big life questions. All they worry about is where the cash for fuel comes from. Most of the time, it comes from Nico. He’s so soft wherever the triplets are concerned it’s a miracle he’s still *considering* letting them move in here instead of moving their shit over already.

“So, if she’s just a friend, I can fuck her, right?” Logan continues, readjusting his baseball cap. “It’s only fair, bro.”

“No way.” Over my dead fucking body. “I impose a Hayes-wide hands-off on Thalia. She lives with me. It’ll be awkward if one of you gets your dick wet and flees like always.”

Bullshit. I impose the rule not because it’ll be awkward to live under the same roof with Thalia if one of my brothers fucks her, but because I *like* her.

I don’t know how to handle that knowledge or the sudden possessiveness whirling through my head. I’m riled up thinking about crowds of sleazy golfers hitting on her every day.

I’m constantly reminding myself that were friends.

Just friends.

In fact, we’re *great* friends.

We weren’t spending much time together last week, but I started cutting my workdays short this week, coming home around five instead of the usual seven or eight. I want to be there when she comes back from the Country Club. That way, we spend two or three hours together before she leaves for a waitressing gig.

She cooks, we eat, watch a show on Netflix, and take Ares for a walk. I’ve never smiled as much during my entire life as I do with Thalia. She grows more comfortable around me too. Just this morning, she dragged me out of bed at five-thirty, yelling at the top of her lungs from the shower so I’d fetch a new bottle of shampoo from her bedroom.

The gentleman that I am, I didn’t glance behind the shower curtain, but she peeked out with a smile, face wet, hair sticking to her neck and shoulder, and that was enough for my morning wood to grow harder than a steel baton.

And back to bed I went to jerk off again.

She’s so sexy and carefree, singing in Greek and dancing around the kitchen while she cooks. I’ve imagined fucking her ten different ways, but I keep the primitive need on a short leash. Sex would ruin the friendship we’ve been building. As much as I want to claim her body, to know what she tastes and feels like, I don’t want to lose her.

I got in too deep, and the idea of pulling my usual fuck-and-forget bullshit on Thalia makes my pulse soar like crazy. I’d probably hurt any other fucker who’d try to pull that shit with her, too.

ELEVEN

Theo

“HOLY SHIT,” Logan mumbles, devouring the skewers Thalia made. “This is so good.”

I forgot my tongue when he arrived with a hot babe on his arm. Tall, legs up to her armpits, blonde and gorgeous—standard Logan type. It’s not the first time, but it is a rarity for any one of us to bring a date. We’re not known for wooing women longer than an hour or two at the club. A few drinks, a few shallow compliments, and job done, but this girl might require more attention and adoration than Logan’s usual conquests.

Save for Cassidy, he’s never taken a woman out. At least not out-out. He’s brought a few to my place over the years, but nowhere public. I sure hope me fucking Cass first didn’t cost my brother a chance at something real.

“It is,” Jack agrees, dipping his skewer in tzatziki sauce. “You’re wasting your talent, babe. You should be a head chef somewhere.”

Everyone nods in agreement, making Thalia beam. I love it when she smiles like she’s achieved the impossible, eyes glowing, cheeks heating to the faintest shade of pink that’s almost untraceable on her olive skin. I’ve studied her perfect features so many times I know exactly what shade her skin usually is.

“Ares, come here,” she coos, luring the dog into the kitchen to feed him scraps. A mere second of my inattention and pans start clattering, water running from the tap.

“Don’t even think about it,” I say, glancing over my shoulder. “You know the drill, don’t get fucking smart with me, *omorfiá*. I do the dishes.”

“Just get a dishwasher already,” Logan huffs but moves his eyes to Thalia, leaning back in the chair. “Our mother taught us well, honey. Sit down. Grab a beer. We’ll tidy up.”

Logan’s date, Lucy, runs her long, white nails up and down Logan’s arm, leaving pale lines behind. He pushes the plate aside and drapes an arm

across her shoulders, yanking her closer, his lips pressing against hers for a short kiss.

There's nothing tender about that peck. It's a prequel. An introduction. A promise of more. They look like college sweethearts with his sporty, almost juvenile sense of style and her dainty features, but I know he won't keep her for longer than tonight.

"Jared's hosting an *Unexpected Truth* party in a few weeks," Nico says, gathering the plates. "The Country Club is booked for the whole summer, so we're hosting at my place this time. You all game?"

Ah, the famous *Unexpected Truth* party.

As stupid as it might sound, it's fucking awesome. An invitation-only event, too mainstream for the posher crowd. Rowdy music, middle-shelf alcohol, and an unusual dress code—all white. Not without reason, of course. To gain entrance, you must write an unexpected truth about yourself on your shirt or whatever you decide to wear. And, boy oh boy, does it get fun as the night progresses.

People use black sharpies throughout the evening, adding truths to their clothes while the alcohol keeps flowing, making them courageous. Drunk people are honest people.

"Hell yes," Shawn cheers, rubbing his hands together. "I don't like Jared, but he sure knows how to throw a good party."

My brothers help tidy up after dinner while Thalia wraps up the leftovers and gets more beers out of the fridge.

"Oh, I don't drink beer," Lucy wrinkles her nose, glancing at Logan. "Did you bring my wine, baby boy?"

Copper pennies dance on my tongue when I bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood in an attempt to hold my laughter at bay.

I have ten different lines at the ready, but unless he provokes me, I won't fuck up his chance at getting laid.

Logan winces at the endearment, careful not to make eye contact with me, Nico or Shawn. He knows shit will hit the fan if he dares to look at us right now. "Sure, honey," he grinds out through his teeth clenched so hard I think they might shatter. "It's in the trunk. I brought a game too." Keys in hand, he disappears outside to come back with a bottle in one hand and a small orange box in the other. "I got this off Amazon last night. It's a drinking game."

Thalia steals a cushion off the sofa, throws it on the floor, and plops

down, patting her thigh, silently encouraging Ares to crawl onto her lap. I'm starting to think he prefers her over me, even though he's my dog.

"Come here, boy," I say to test the theory. Sure enough, he doesn't budge. "You stole my dog."

"He'll warm up to you." She winks, taking a swig of her Corona. "You want to play a drinking game with beer?"

"No, babe," Jack says, lifting a bottle of vodka off the floor by the couch where he stashed it an hour ago. "Shots."

"In that case..." She runs to her room and returns with two big bottles of Ouzo. "Straight from Greece. I hoped to have someone I could drink this with when I bought them back in Thessaloniki."

Excitement skyrockets as my brothers grow keen to try it.

Thessaloniki. So that's where she's from. Her eyes fog over for a second as she glances my way, checking if I caught the tiny piece of information she clearly didn't mean to share.

I did, omorfiá. I pay attention to everything you say.

Logan takes a moment to convince Lucy, who pouts like a little diva, refusing to try Ouzo. He must really want in her pants to put up with that shit. "Are we good?" He unpacks the cards, shuffles, picks one, and smirks, turning it over for us to see. "Everyone drinks."

"Let me." Thalia crawls to the table, her perky ass on display as she lines the shot glasses on the table, filling them with one flick of her wrist. "Cheers."

"Oh-oh... looks like we're up against a pro," Jack says, full of awe. "Where did you learn that trick?"

"I used to work the bar for a few months."

The liquid burns its way down my throat, the sweet taste of anise both pleasant and odd.

Shawn takes the next card, eyes skimming the few lines printed across it. "And here I thought this would be PG-rated. Alright, demonstrate your favorite sexual position on a person of your choice. Fail, and you drink, succeed, and they drink." His eyes land on Thalia. "Come on, girl. Let's see what you're made of."

She shoos Ares off her lap, not a trace of hesitation or embarrassment on her face. Thalia's always game; keen to try something new. We're skydiving next week, and it didn't take an ounce of work to convince her. I didn't even need to explain I've successfully not died sixty-nine times. Too bad I didn't

join Nico when he trained to be an instructor. I could use a license now because it'd mean Thalia would tandem jump with me, but completing over five-hundred jumps to get qualified wasn't high on my list back then.

Shawn grips Thalia's hand, eyes focused, nostrils flaring. He spins her around and shoves her flush—as flush as her big boobs allow—against the patio door, holding her wrists behind her back in one of his hands.

She faces the terrace, thick, dark curls obscuring the profile of her face, but her body language speaks volumes. The way she swallows hard, her eyes hooding over slightly and the blooming shadow of a gasp on her lips betray she likes it rough.

Shawn clasps her hair in one hand and tugs until she exposes her throat. “How about that, babe?” he breathes in her ear, thrusting his hips once. “You're drinking.”

“Jack?” Thalia murmurs, still in the same position, her voice playfully breathless. “Can I borrow your fiancé for a little while? Half an hour at the most.”

“You'd tap out after two minutes, babe.” Shawn releases her wrists, backing away to fill her shot glass.

I try to erase the last minute from my mind as I would data off a hard drive, but the visual keeps fueling my imagination with images of my body pinning Thalia to the glass. I jerk off every day with her on my mind, but it's not enough.

I need to go clubbing with Logan and get laid before I do something stupid and run her off.

“Everyone removes all clothes in the color of my choice. Whoever refuses, drinks,” Nico reads, casting a sideways glance around the room. “Let's go with black.”

“Asshole,” Logan rumbles but strips out of the t-shirt and jeans, all American muscle, flawless like Ken. He heaves an irritated huff when his Barbie shakes her head a firm no, refusing to lose the skirt.

Nico yanks his t-shirt over his head, and so does Jack, but I don't give a damn about any of them. I'm wearing blue and white, so I stay put, my attention on Thalia. She's on her feet, hands behind her back, under the navy top, fiddling with the bra clasp.

“You want help with that?” Jack asks, shimmying out of his chinos.

She shakes her head, pulling the straps down her arms. Not even five seconds later, a black lacey bra lands on the armrest of the couch, an inch

from my elbow.

Fuck. Me. Dead.

It smells like her perfume and body lotion, the big cups right there in my peripheral vision.

“Panties to match?” Nico questions.

She flips the button on her high-waist jeans, sliding the right side down, pulling on a flimsy white strap of what must be a thong. “Not today.”

Nico checks who did and who didn’t take every black piece of clothing off, then pours the losers their shots.

“Everyone confess how long it’s been since you’ve had sex.” I read, my dick pulsing to remind me it’s been almost two months since it tasted pussy. “Whoever hasn’t seen any action the longest drinks and chooses another person to drink with them.”

“Ah shit.” Thalia snaps on a sigh. “Nineteen months is the one to beat. Anyone?” She crawls to the coffee table to grab the bottle. “No?”

“*Nineteen* months?” Jack exclaims, eyes wide, eyebrows hitting his hairline. “Jesus, you poor thing... I’ve changed my mind. You can have Shawn tonight.”

We laugh when Shawn cringes at the idea of sticking his dick in a woman.

“Why so long?” Lucy speaks my mind, her voice slurring.

“Long story...” Thalia deflects, pouring two shots and hands one to me before she picks a card. “Choose a person to strip down to their accessories. If they refuse, you drink. If they agree, everyone drinks.” She scans the room, wondering who’s most likely to lose their clothes.

We’re all suddenly very interested in one another, the floor, ceiling and the dog, avoiding Thalia’s scrutinizing gaze as she’s making her mind up who’ll flash his dick. She sure won’t pick Lucy, who’s almost see-through, hiding behind Logan’s back.

And then, without warning, Thalia yanks her top off with a quiet huff. Boobs the size of my fucking head spill out of their confinement, bouncing proudly. The pink areolas and candy-hard nipples drive me wild in an instant.

I’m hot.

Feverish.

Hard.

My head is fucking spinning.

It takes me a split second to understand what’s about to go down when she

hooks her thumbs into the waistband of her jeans. Next thing I know, she's in my arms.

How I jolted to my feet, took five steps, and pulled her flush against me will forever remain a mystery. I hold her pinned to my chest, shielding the hottest body I ever glimpsed with my own, making sure no one can take another peek, or I'll knock everyone the fuck out.

"You're crazy, Thalia," I rasp, my cock twitching when I let myself feel her bare breasts pressing against me.

A millimeter.

That's all.

One millimeter of my t-shirt's fabric separates my skin from hers, and the realization has my stomach twisting like a wrung-out rag. "You win. We all drink. You were supposed to pick someone, not strip."

"I picked me. None of you has the balls to do it, and this game is about getting everyone drunk."

Shawn stops beside us, holding Thalia's t-shirt in hand, then pulls it over her head. I take over, eyes focused on hers when she pushes her hands into the sleeves. For a reason I can't understand, sliding that scrap of material down her body, the tips of my fingers caressing her sides, is the most erotic thing I've ever done to a woman.

"You Americans are such prudes." She chuckles, setting the shot glasses in line to fill them.

Every time I blink, the clip of her boobs bouncing happily plays at the back of my eyelids like some porno movie screening, worsening the hard cock situation in my pants. I manage to get it under control during the next few rounds while we all get progressively drunker.

Lucy nears her cut-off time, giggling and slurring her words. She suddenly remembers about taking black clothes off and strips out of her skirt seven rounds too late.

"Pick two people," Jack begins. "Both need to say or do something they think will convince the other to agree to anything. No-holds-barred. Refuse, and you drink. Succeed, and everyone drinks." He glances around the room, trying to decide who to pick. "Nico and Thalia."

Muscles in my shoulders and neck tense when they rise to their feet in sync. Neither is prone to losing or giving up. They'll see through whatever shit they think will get the other one hot and bothered.

"You want to start?" Nico asks. My thoughts halt as all six-three of him

towers above her. “Or should I?”

“Let me.” Her face and posture turn helpless. Clueless. She’s a good actress but a shitty judge of character. Nico likes his women confident. Overly confident, even. Cocky. Catty.

The room falls silent, save for the quiet music seeping from the sound system. “Temptation” by WYR GEMI fills the room, uninterrupted for what feels like a week while Thalia lifts her hand to Nico’s bare stomach, feigning uncertainty.

She traces his muscles, the touch featherlight as she inches closer, craning her head to meet his eyes. Hers are big, doe-like. There’s too much intimacy in her touch for Nico’s liking. Too much caution. She ghosts her fingers higher, over his shoulder to the crook of his neck, and weaves them in the hair at the back of his head, gently caressing his scalp.

Nico’s tense shoulders sag. Eyes hood over.

That’s when she slowly rises on her toes as if second-guessing her moves. She brings her lips to hover over his, their kiss a breath away. “Please,” she whispers, grazing her nose across his cheek. “I... I need you.”

What the hell is happening?

Right about now, Nico would bow low enough for his forehead to brush her feet if she told him to.

How the hell did she get in his head like that?

I want to push him away, drag Thalia to my room, and bolt the door, but I’m curious how this will play out. I trust all my brothers, but if I were to point to the one I trust with my life, Nico’s it. He’s got more honor than the rest of us combined, and he’d never break the *hands-off rule*.

Besides... it’s just a game.

Just a fucking game.

The atmosphere shifts to the other end of the spectrum when Thalia moves away, and Nico gets in character.

From sublime delicacy to crude control.

He closes his fingers around the column of her throat, backing her against the wall, and cuffs her wrists, holding them far above her head. His other hand digs into her hip, knuckles white with the effort for a second before he traces the curve of her waist, and stops on her ribcage, thumb under her breast.

He dips his head, mouth below her ear, teeth grazing the soft skin. “On. Your. *Knees*.” He orders, each word quieter but more powerful than the last.

His hold on her wrists loosens as if he expects her to obey.

And when she sinks, I don't know if I want to kill Nico or *be* Nico. I want his confidence because I sure as shit wouldn't be able to pull this off.

He curls his fingers under her chin before her knees touch the floor. "Good girl," he says quietly, caressing the line of her jaw, then breaks the spell by cupping her shoulders to help her up. "You're not submissive. You like to control as much as you like being controlled, right?"

She nods, elbowing his ribs. "You're not a Dom, per se. At least not in the traditional sense. Nothing kinky, but you want to be in control in and out of bed."

He doesn't respond. I'm sure it's because he has no fucking idea. Thalia showed him a part of his character even he didn't know existed. Nico will need a long time to mull it over.

We down the shots. Then, we drink two more. First one because Logan's card says *You choose who drinks, and* he chooses everyone, and the second when Lucy's card reads *Everyone drinks if you flash them*, and she is so drunk that she doesn't hesitate.

She and Logan leave a moment later. Considering they didn't call a cab; they're probably fucking in his car. I wouldn't put it past him to use my bathroom for a quickie, but Thalia's presence must've tamed his obnoxiousness.

Good to know. I might use that to my advantage.

Within the next half an hour, the chauffeur for the night, Conor, arrives to take Shawn, Jack, and Nico home. Thalia clears the table of shot glasses and empty beer bottles when we're left alone.

"There are still a few shots in there." She points at the bottle of Ouzo. She's right. There are about four fingers left. "You want to play until we finish?"

According to my half-assed, tipsy calculations, she drank the most, but she's as chirpy and sober as a bluebird on a Sunday morning.

"Yeah, sounds good. You want another beer?"

"I'll grab it. Are you hungry?"

"No, I'm full." Now that Thalia's moving about, Ares hops on the couch, curling beside me, his head on my lap. "Look who remembered who he belongs to," I smirk, patting his head.

"He sees more of me than you." Thalia hands me a bottle of Budweiser and a shot glass, an identical set in her hands.

“He’s a dude, and he likes women. Simple as that.” I gesture to the cards. “You start.”

She grabs a card, reads it, then grabs another one, and then one more before she pushes them aside with a huff. “This won’t be much fun when it’s just the two of us. Most tasks are meant for group play. Let’s just go with the truth. Why did you stop me from stripping out of my jeans?”

Because I would’ve needed to knock out four guys, and I’m not that tough. “If I knew what you were about to do before you took your top off, I would’ve stopped you sooner.”

“That doesn’t answer the question, Theo.” She leans over to pour me a shot. “I hope I haven’t embarrassed you in front of your family.”

“Embarrassed? You’d be picking your jaw up off the floor if you heard what we’ve done over the years. There’s *nothing* embarrassing about your girls, trust me.” I sip from the bottle, a question about her past on the tip of my tongue. It stays there, unasked. She shuts me out whenever I start prodding, and I’m not ready for the evening to end. “How did you know Nico would fall for tenderness?”

“I had no idea. Don’t laugh, but he scares me a bit. I was worried about his reaction if I did something he didn’t like.” She pulls her eyebrows together. “I’m not even sure what happened. He comes off like a man who likes confident, sexy women, and I expected him to laugh.”

“So did I. You don’t have to be afraid of him, you know? He’s intense, careful, and arrogant half the time, but he’s a good guy once you get to know him. That mind-trick you pulled on him? Do that on me. I want to know how you see *me*.”

I drew a thin line in the sand where Thalia and I are concerned. I make sure to stay on the right side of it, the safe side, but this request... it sure is on the other side, out in the danger zone. I’m pushing my fucking luck here, but I’m defenseless against my own curiosity.

“Back to dares?” She chuckles, setting her beer aside. Amusement fades from her features when she draws her lower lip between her perfectly straight, white teeth. “Sex is an adventure for you.” She flips the mass of curly locks over one shoulder, the air around us laden with sexual tension as she crawls across to where I sit until our faces are level, mere inches apart. “You like your girls wild,” she utters, fisting my t-shirt.

In a slow, sensual move, she flings one leg over mine, knees digging into the couch on both sides of my hips, back arched, lips grazing my ear.

She moves my hands onto her hips, and I can't help but hold on tight.

I'm gone. Swaddled by a thick, heavy blanket of lust, wrapped around my skin so tight it's hard to breathe.

"You want them to ride you, moaning so loud they're basically screaming. You want them to push through the sting of their muscles burning with the effort. You want them to fight exhaustion until they make you come."

Her words come out breathless, almost strained. I think the images she summons into my head affect her as much as they do me. I'm sure she feels my rock-solid cock digging into her when she grinds her hips, pressing her clit to the zipper of my jeans, pupils blown, arousal in the highest gear.

Sweet Jesus...

Blue balls for-fucking-ever.

This was a bad, *bad* idea. I'm so hard my cock could break through fucking concrete like Thor's hammer.

I squeeze the beer harder and picture hurling the bottle across the room to free my hands so I can cup Thalia's face. I imagine weaving my hands into those thick, dark curls and thrusting my tongue inside her warm, silky mouth, but I don't.

I just keep squeezing my beer so hard my fingers ache as she stares me down for three heartbeats. And then, the silent dare-laced look morphs into a broad smile—teeth and all, as she slides off my lap.

"How was that?" she asks on an exhale, eyes glossy.

"Pretty close to heaven," I admit, my mouth dry, heart racing. "My turn."

Why? Why the fuck did I say that? I should finish my beer, get up and lock myself in my bedroom, but *no*... I'd rather play with fire.

And I won't just get burned.

I'll turn to fucking ashes.

Thalia scoots back to the corner of the couch, waiting for my move and fidgeting impatiently. For a moment, I sit still, reconsidering, even though I know I won't back out.

I treat myself to a long, detailed look, my eyes roving down her body, stripping her off the navy top with ease now that I know the heaven she's hiding underneath. I move quickly, twisting my fingers in the belt loops on her jeans and yank her closer, loving the sight of her sprawled on the couch, knees spread wide open.

She looks ready.

Willing.

This is *torture*...

My face hovers just above the zipper of her jeans as I hook her legs over my shoulders, inhaling the intoxicating, sweet scent of her. I push up the thin fabric of her top until it just about covers her nipples, my fingers stroking her ribs. She squirms when I scrape my lips along her abdomen.

“There’s a difference between *hard* and *fast*, little one.”

I slide my hands lower, back to her waist, grab a handful of the soft flesh and flip her over, my moves fast but precise, tearing a half-gasp, half-moan out of her lips.

She definitely likes it rough.

Once she’s flat on her stomach, I cover her body with mine, crawling over the beauty, lips on the nape of her neck, her hair tickling my face. I press one hand to her head, forcing her cheek against the cushion.

My thoughts don’t line up. Every time I align one, it tumbles, scattering the rest, and my brain melts into a buzzing mess of thick and sticky lust. The primal, animalistic need to take, claim, and bury my cock deep inside her wreaks havoc on my composure.

“Can you handle *hard*?” I whisper, digging my fingers into her pelvic bone, my chest tight.

It’s the most dangerous game I’ve ever played. We’re tipsy, hot, and bothered. A mistake hangs in the air, pressing onto us from all sides... and that’s the only reason I summon my rational thinking and retreat. No way I’ll fuck her when she can’t give me clear, sober consent.

“Close?” I ask, careful not to let my tone of voice show how unstable I feel.

“Pretty close to heaven...”

She’s not had sex in nineteen months, and it shows—her pretty face painted with a burning need. If not for the alcohol in our bloodstreams, we’d spend the most amazing night together. Were compatible on so many different levels that I’d bet my entire portfolio that sex would be off the charts. But in a way, I’m glad we’re not thinking straight right now.

Relieved. That’s what I am, and it’s the most bizarre feeling. I’m so hard it’s painful, and the idea of relieving the tension in her pussy sounds like a fantasy come true, but *no*. We’re not going there.

Not tonight, and hopefully not ever...

She's so much better than a one-night stand.

TWELVE

Thalia

THIS IS A BAD, BAD IDEA.

Why did I agree to go out with him? I'm not attracted to him on any level. I don't even particularly like him. There's no chemistry between us... so why am I doing it?

Because I'm petty, apparently.

I'm stooping to the lowest level. Sinking to the bottom, desperate to get Theo's attention. I'm childish, immature, and plain stupid.

I'm trying to make him jealous.

A drink with Dean, one of the young, wealthy, flirty golfers, seemed like a good idea when he asked me out this morning... not for the first time. The idea is no longer good. It's idiotic at best because Dean isn't the man I want.

Theo is, but he doesn't want to fuck me, let alone date me.

He's in the living room, working on the game when I leave my bedroom wearing a cute but sexy blue dress that falls to my mid-thighs, hugging my curves.

I'm not thin by any definition. I could lose a few pounds. Maybe more than just a few, but I'm lazy, and despite the extra weight, I'm comfortable in my own skin. Big boobs and a nice ass are an undeniable bonus of avoiding the gym. Wobbly tummy and thick thighs could do with a bit of work and toning, but again... *lazy*.

Theo peers up from the laptop screen, eyes slowly taking me in before he meets my gaze, his handsome face void of emotion. "Where are you going?"

"I have a date. Dean invited me out for a drink." I hate myself for seeing this through. "He's been very persistent since I started working at the Country Club."

Theo shoves the laptop aside, a sly, derogatory smirk curving his lips, the gesture laced with mockery. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but that drink is

not a date. It's a play to fuck you."

Rocking on my heels, I readjust my bag, taken aback by his clipped tone and how much the comment stings. "Thank you for that. Good to know that's all men could want from me."

Theo's expression changes to a pained one, as if he just realized what he implied. "I didn't mean it that way, but I know Dean. He doesn't want to date you. You or anyone else."

My cell pings in my bag, letting me know the Uber I ordered waits outside. Defeated and painfully aware of how idiotic the date with Dean is, I pivot on my heel. "Good night."

"Thalia, wait." He jogs up to me, blocking the door with his big, deliciously smelling body. "Call it off. Don't waste your time. Dean's an ass, *omorfiá*."

"It seems that everyone in this town is an ass, but I'll take the risk," I say through gritted teeth, adamant about seeing the date through, especially now that I have something to prove—Dean doesn't just want to sleep with me. There are easier ways to get a woman in bed than a date. "He wouldn't have asked me out if he's only interested in sex. He likes me."

"No, he doesn't."

"Wow..." I mouth, arms crossed over my chest. "Two for two. You're on a roll tonight." I shove him aside, grab the handle, and burst out the door before he tries to insult me again.



Newport Beach is dotted with small and large cocktail bars, restaurants, and clubs to accommodate the luxurious tastes of the elite. The bar Dean chose is one of the most expensive places on the main street.

Luxury slaps you across the face the second you step inside. It drips from high-end furniture and the sophisticated splendor of the interior design.

It's Monday, but the place is far from deserted.

A group of elegant women in their forties sits by a long table, dressed to impress, necks adorned with diamonds, hair styled for the red carpet. Two young couples enjoy drinks and light snacks near the window, men dressed in suits. A bunch of friends are tucked away in the corner by a wall, wallpapered with old newspapers.

Dean's in a suit too. A navy-fitted blazer hugs his shoulders, a white

shirt underneath, and his hair is sleeked to the side. The conversation runs smoothly for over an hour. We talk about my life in Greece, or the vague story I'm willing to tell, and his work. He's nice, for lack of a better word. Talking to him is as easy as talking to Shawn or Jack, but sparks aren't flying, and my heart isn't racing. If I'm being honest with myself, I'm bored. I hoped I'd find him attractive once I got to know him better, but he's not growing on me.

I'm forced to admit defeat.

To make things worse, Theo's words prove correct. Dean doesn't like me. He's not interested in getting to know me on a meaningful level. On any level, really. Every question out of his mouth sounds forced, and he pays no attention to my answers. He wants to sleep with me, but the scowl tainting his features hints frustration. He must've thought I'd play ball.

Sorry to disappoint.

More long minutes pass. The atmosphere turns awkward, and his patience slowly evaporates, evident by the nervous tapping of his long, slim fingers on the tabletop. He checks the time on his wristwatch as if he's gone into this with a set timeline of events and can't believe the plan is falling apart.

"You're not here, Thalia. What's going on?"

I'm not here? He ignored my last two questions, gawking around as if checking whether a more willing woman stands by the bar, awaiting his company.

"I'm here."

He huffs a frustrated puff of air. "Let me guess. This," he points between us, leaning back in the chair, "won't happen, right?"

I chew my cheek, fishing ice cubes out of the tall glass with a red straw. "Maybe it would if you weren't just hoping to stick your dick in one of my holes."

Instead of swallowing, he inhales a sip of the golden whiskey, breaking into a coughing fit.

Was I supposed to sugarcoat the subject? Come up with a plausible, politically correct excuse, or feign a headache?

Again, *sorry to disappoint*.

"I like that filthy mouth, babe." His eyes sparkle again. "Listen, you're beautiful and seem like a smart, fun girl, but I'm not looking for a girlfriend. We're adults. We have needs. All I want is one night."

“I appreciate the honesty. You would’ve saved yourself time and money if you laid your cards down sooner and asked me if I wanted to sleep with you.”

“You don’t?” The sparkles fizzle out like cheap fireworks. “Figures. I’m not a Hayes. I should’ve known you’re Theo’s shiny toy when I found out you live at his place.”

“I’m *not* sleeping with Theo,” I hiss, bracing against the edge of the table. “Were friends. As a matter of fact, he’s the only person I trust around here.”

Point invalidated by my unwillingness to listen when he said Dean only wants sex, but I won’t say that aloud to benefit my date.

God, this was a bad, *bad* idea. The plan failed miserably, and to top it off, I’m about to make an enemy out of a Country Club member, which might earn me an earful from Jared when Dean requests another cart girl.

He scoffs with a mocking grin, pulls out his wallet, and throws a fifty on the table. “If you think he’ll date you, you’re not half as smart as I pegged you for. He’ll throw you out of his house like a cheap slut once your holes stop meeting his high expectations.”

My mouth falls open. A hoard of insects crawls up and down my skin, but a sort of untamable violence hissing in my head scalds away humiliation.

I lurch forward, snatch a fistful of his shirt, and yank him closer, the tornado of my thoughts spluttering like a defective neon sign. “You don’t know me very well, so let me give you a quick rundown. I’m *not* a slut, and I *don’t* let people walk all over me as they please. Have some dignity. Learn to lose like the adult you claim to be.” I shove him back, slide off the stool, and flip my hair over my shoulder, walking away, chin high, back straight.

There was a time in my life when I had no courage, will, or strength to fight my battles, but life taught me well. The only person who’ll always have your back is *you*.

Cabs line the curb on both sides of the road, waiting for people to exit many bars and restaurants. I take the back seat of the one closest, give the driver Theo’s address, and press my forehead against the glass, staring out the window while unsure what annoys and hurts more: that Theo was right about Dean or that Dean might be right about Theo.

Not the *throwing me out of the house* part. The *he won’t date you* part spoken in a degrading tone, as if I’m not good enough for a man like Theo.

I swat the thought away before it sprouts roots and grows. It’s not me.

At least not *just* me.

The Hayes brothers refrain from commitment, enjoying their youth. That's perfectly understandable, but it also means I need to bury the growing affection before I end up hurt and crying. Theo hasn't brought any woman home since I moved in with him, but that's not to say it won't happen soon. It'll be safer for my heart to cap the feelings while it's not too late.

"Could you close the window, please?" I ask the driver, my skin dotted with goosebumps. "I'm a little chilly."

The driver glances into the rearview mirror, eyebrow raised, because who the hell is chilly in the middle of summer in freaking California?

Lack of quality sleep is starting to affect me.

Ten minutes later, the driver pulls up outside Theo's condo complex. As if the evening can't get any worse, I spot the man in question resting by the wall, a cigarette between his lips. Leaving a generous tip, I exit the car too quickly. Headrush hits, sprinkling my vision with black spots, while evening air introduces shivers and more goosebumps. I hold onto the trunk, swaying on my feet.

"How much have you had to drink?" Theo clips, clutching my forearm, creases lining his forehead.

"I'm not drunk." I straighten my back, wriggling out of his grasp. "I had one drink. It's just a headrush." Black spots fade to grey. "I didn't know you smoke."

"I don't. Call it a moment of weakness. I quit a while ago." He flicks the cigarette onto the street, motioning with his chin toward the building, urging me to follow him inside. "You're upset. What did Dean do?"

"I'm not upset."

He grabs me again, my wrist this time. The urgency of his touch awakens the ache deep inside my core—the one I've been plagued by every night for weeks while erotic fantasies intensify. He spins me around, pushing my back against the brick wall, his muscular body crowding my personal space.

I feel him. The heat radiating off him in palpable waves, the arousing scent of his cologne, the firm touch of his fingers on my waist.

"Don't lie. What happened?"

"I'm not upset."

To keep his raging temper at bay, he inhales a deep breath. I wait, hoping he'll close the distance and kiss me, but he doesn't. I can almost hear

the spine of my wish snapping, the sound accompanied by a cloud of disappointment when Theo steps back. I take it as a cue to leave, but he touches the back of his hand against my stomach, keeping me still, fire dancing in his dark eyes.

“Tell me what’s wrong. I don’t like seeing you upset.”

Why does he say all the right lines? It’s as if someone built him according to my instructions: handsome, caring, thoughtful. My throat clogs with frustration. I’d be much happier if he wasn’t so stubborn.

“You were right. Dean just wants to fuck me.”

A smile pulls at the corners of his full lips. “I told you not to waste your time.”

“That’s not funny. Seems like I only attract men who want nothing more than sex.”

“You’re a shitty judge of character. Check with me next time someone asks you out.”

A tickling sensation floods my chest, cranked up and almost unbearable when Theo hooks his finger under my chin, tilting my head so I look up to him.

“You look tired, Thalia.”

“Isn’t that a compliment every woman is dying to hear? Three for three. Would you like to hit again, or are you done insulting me tonight?”

He smiles wider. “I’ve seen you with and without makeup. I’ve seen you with mascara smeared under your eyes when you were too lazy to wash your face before falling asleep. I’ve seen you wearing a sexy dress, and I’ve seen you in a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt stained with tomato juice. You’re beautiful, little one. Always. But now, you’re *tired*.”

Stopping a smile from ripping my mouth open is impossible after hearing that. Hot and cold flushes slide down my spine as if my body can’t decide how to react. “Saved by sweet-talk,” I tease, pushing him away. “I’ve not been sleeping well lately.”

“Bad dreams?”

Good dreams. Very good, intense dreams of Theo’s face hanging over mine, his eyes hooded, hungry. His naked body hot to the touch as he drives into me in a rushed rhythm. Vibrant, erotic fantasies plague me every night, stopping seconds before orgasm blooms and I wake up frustrated.

“No, just late nights and early mornings.”

“You’re normally a good liar, you know? Tonight, you’re slacking. If

you don't want to tell me what's bothering you, don't, but don't lie."

"Okay," I huff, defeated. "I don't want to talk about it. Can we go in now? It's chilly."

He's silent for ten seconds, staring at me as if to read my mind. Finally, he steps aside and holds the door open, letting me in first.

"I'll get changed and fix us a light bite to eat," I say, heading to my bedroom.

"Another episode of 'Ozark?'"

We started watching the show last week, which is why I ditched the afternoon naps. Instead of recharging my batteries between working at the Country Club and waitressing, I'm on the couch with Theo, watching at least one episode a day.

"Do you have to ask? Set it up." I close the door behind me, shimmy out of the dress, slide a pair of jeans on, then wrap myself in a thick cardigan and pull my hair into a ponytail before invading the kitchen. "Play," I say ten minutes later, hurrying into the living room with two beers and a charcuterie board.

Theo loves it when I make tiny cracker sandwiches throughout the show. And I love that most of the time, I get to put those little bites straight into his mouth.

THIRTEEN

Theo

THALIA WRAPS HER CARDIGAN TIGHTER for the nth time, tiptoeing toward the bathroom and cringing when her toes touch the cool floor. My eyes follow her out, a frown on my face.

I'm sitting here in a t-shirt, boiling hot, but she's wrapped in a chunky, woolen cardigan, shuddering and chilly. She's a bit pale too, but I attributed that to tiredness.

Now I'm not so sure.

We've watched two episodes, about to start the third. I use the short break to clear the table and fetch two beers before Thalia comes back, skin ashen, eyes glassy.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just tired. I should probably get some sleep, but I need to know what happened, so one more episode. Pass me the blanket, please."

I touch the back of my hand to her forehead, not buying that answer. I lean closer to use my lips on her temple as a makeshift thermometer, checking again because my hands are cold, and I'm not sure if she's as hot as I think.

Mom always said lips are most accurate.

"Shit," I breathe, moving away. "You've got a fever. A pretty high one."

Instead of the flimsy blanket hanging over the back of the sofa, I fetch a big, fluffy one from my bedroom and wrap Thalia in a gray cocoon.

"I don't think it's that high. I'm fine."

"You're always fine." The cabinets bang in the kitchen while I search for pills. "You're burning up, so you can't tell."

With Tylenol and a thermometer, I sit beside her, curling my fingers under her chin so I can aim the blue light at her head. "One-oh-two point eight. That's you done for the night, *omorfiá*. Tylenol and bed."

"I'm just chilly. I'll be fine when the pills start working. Let's watch

another one.” She cuffs my wrist, pulling her lips into an exaggerated horseshoe, and raises the stakes with Puss in Boots big eyes. “Pretty please.”

Hell no. She should rest; sleep this off before it worsens, but she’s on her feet, hands clasped over her ears to drown out my unvoiced protests. She swallows two pills, boiling a kettle to make herself a cup of tea.

My leg bounces on the floor. I fucking hate that she’s unwell. I’m about as comfortable as a wet chicken right now. She should be in bed, asleep, nice and toasty under the comforter.

I stop short of convincing her to head to bed, recalling what happened last week when I came home after work and found her curled on the couch with a hot water bottle on her abdomen and a half-eaten bar of chocolate on the coffee table. She took Advil to ease period cramps. Not even twenty minutes later, she was flat out.

Maybe Tylenol has the same effect.

She comes back with tea and settles into the corner of the couch while I press play.

“Come here.” I reach behind her back, pulling her to my side. “You’re hotter than a radiator.”

“And yet, I’m cold.” She rests her head on my shoulder, eyes on the screen.

I hold her closer, my hand under the blanket and cardigan, around her middle. I caress her waistline, brushing my fingers up and down for half an hour before her head starts swaying and her body relaxes.

She’s out, but I continue stroking the curve of her waist until I’m sure she won’t wake up if I move her. With a bit of maneuvering, she ends up in my arms and then in bed.

She stirs, cuddling her cheek to the pillow. Even pale, almost fucking see-through, she’s beautiful. I’m not as rigid now that Tylenol has brought her fever down.

One-oh-two point eight is no joke.

I tuck her in, staring at the sleeping beauty like a A-grade creep, consumed by a strong undertow of affection. I leave the night lamp on and go back to the living room to tidy up and fetch Thalia’s pills and a glass of water.

Twenty minutes later, she’s still in the same position, the hair on her forehead damp. She’s overheating in the woolen cardigan. Careful not to wake her, I pull the covers back, take it off, unzip her jeans, and slide them

down her thighs. Instead of staring at the white lace of her panties, I stretch her top lower to cover her up, then push the sheets back to her chin.

A part of me wants to crawl in beside her, but I force myself to switch off the night lamp and retreat to my bedroom. I lose my clothes, and toss them in the hamper before getting in bed, but sleep is the last thing on my mind. I toss and turn for twenty minutes, searching for a comfortable position, tense like a drawn slingshot.

What if she spikes a fever in the middle of the night and doesn't wake up to take the pills? What if she needs more water but is too weak to get out of bed? Or worse... what if she gets out of bed and collapses halfway to the kitchen?

I won't hear that if I'm in here.

I fling my legs over the edge of the bed, cross the hall, and walk back into her room. The mattress dips under my weight as I sneak in beside Thalia, replacing the pillow she's cuddling with my body. She stirs again, still asleep when her fingers spread on my chest and her face buries in the crook of my neck.

Nothing has ever felt this fucking good.

She stays in the same position throughout the night. On the other hand, I wake up too often, pressing my lips to her temple every time to check her temperature. Around four in the morning, she's way too hot again.

"Thalia," I whisper, grazing my knuckles across her cheek. "Thalia, wake up." I brush the damp hair away from her face and flick the nightlamp.

She shudders, swallows hard as if her throat hurts, and opens her eyes slowly, squinting against the brightness of the room. "What's wrong? What are you doing here?"

"Obviously, I'm taking advantage of the situation." I help her to a seating position. "What do you think I'm doing? I'm looking after you. You're burning up again."

She rubs the sleep away, touching her forehead, brown eyes searching my face, frowning still as if her processing speed didn't wake up with her. "What time is it?"

"Just past four in the morning." I watch her wash two Tylenol pills down with water and set the glass aside. "Where the hell did you catch a cold in summer?"

She inches closer, draping one hand over my stomach as I pull her to me, already addicted to feeling her this close. "I don't know, maybe the storm

this morning. Some golfers don't mind playing in the rain," she whispers, nuzzling her nose into my neck. "You smell so nice," she breathes, half asleep already.

"You always say that."

"Because you do... so nice."

I stamp a kiss on her head. "Sleep, *omorfiá*."

FOURTEEN

Theo

THALIA'S NOT IN BED when I wake up in the morning. There's no clock in her bedroom, but judging by the sun's position in the sky, my alarm has been going off behind the wall for quite some time.

Although, I didn't plug the phone to charge last night, so it probably died long before seven.

I drag myself out of bed, expecting to find Thalia in the kitchen with a cup of coffee or maybe taking a shower, but as I step out of her bedroom, I'm hit by the silence of the condo. No sign of Thalia in the kitchen, bathroom, or the terrace.

Pissed off, I enter my bedroom, plug in the phone and wait for it to power on. It's eight thirty-two. I ignore the influx of notifications and dial Thalia's number. It rings once, twice, and a few more times before I let out a litany of swear words when a text comes through.

Thalia: Can't talk until break time.

Me: Why the fuck are you at work?!

Thalia: I'm better.

Four hours ago, she was hotter than hell, and now she's all good? No way.

Me: I'll pick you up in ten minutes. You're going to bed.

Thalia: I can't just leave. I promise I'm fine. I've got Tylenol in my locker just in case.

I'm swearing again. In my head, that is. I'm swearing, the words so

creative that if my thoughts were broadcast over the radio, you'd hear one long beep.

Me: Call me when you're on your break, and call me if you start feeling worse. I'll cuff you to bed when you come back.

Thalia: Promises, promises.

She's got me there.

Instead of running around the house like a headless chicken to get ready for work, I set up camp in the living room, taking care of the infuriating administrative side of owning a business—a task I tend to avoid at all cost. I'm willing to bite the bullet today in case Thalia needs me to pick her up at any point during the day.

And what a blessing that I stayed.

Less than two hours later, the door to the condo flings open, startling Ares, who's napping on the doormat.

"Hey, man!" Jared yells, his arm around Thalia.

She's almost ghost-like, swaying on her feet and bracing against the wall when Jared lets go of her, courtesy of my glaring at his hand snaked around her waist.

"What happened?" I cross the room, looking over her stained uniform, and scraped, bloody knee.

"She passed out on the course," Jared explains, hands in pockets. "I think she's got the flu. She's feverish."

"I shouldn't have gone in today," she utters, each word a strained murmur. "I don't feel so good."

"Yeah, no shit." I press my hand to her head, pulse throbbing in my neck. She's too hot. Hotter than before. She'll end up in the ER if we don't lower the fever. "When did you take Tylenol last?"

"Four in the morning."

"You're so fucking irresponsible, Thalia." I take her shoes off, scooping her into my arms. "You should've taken another dose at eight." I glance over my shoulder at Jared. "Thanks for bringing her over. Don't expect her to cover any shifts tomorrow or Thursday."

He nods, squeezing Thalia's arm. "Don't come back until you're better, alright? Cassidy can cover your shifts over the weekend if need be."

“I’m really sorry,” Thalia mutters, eyes heavy as if she’s about ready to fall asleep.

He waves her off without comment and turns on his heel, leaving us alone.

“You can’t be trusted with your own health.” I sit her on the couch, aiming the thermometer at her head. My hands turn cold when the results flash on the screen. “One-oh-three point six. Shit, either we get it down in the next fifteen minutes, or I’m taking you to the hospital.” I grab my phone, dial Mom’s number, and fetch another bottle of Tylenol.

“Good morning, my long-lost son,” Mom chirps, half elated, half bitter. “What could’ve possibly happened for you to remember my number?”

“Hey, Mom, sorry I’ve not been over lately. I’m working all the time.”

“Ah, work... of course. The go-to excuse of all my sons.”

There’s no denying I’ve neglected my mother for a few months, focused on perfecting the game. Since Thalia moved in, I haven’t even called to check in with her. Shame on me. Seriously. It’s disgraceful. My mom is a saint and deserves better than this. I make a mental note to visit her and Dad as soon as Thalia’s better. Which reminds me...

“How do I bring a very high fever down fast? Very high as in one-oh-three point six. Tylenol will take half an hour, and that’s too long.”

“You’re unwell?” she gasps, slipping back into full-blown Mom mode. “Oh, baby, I’ll be there soon, okay? Just take Tylenol and—”

“Mom, I’m fine. My...” Yeah, my what? *Roommate* doesn’t do my relationship with Thalia justice, and every day I realize *friend* isn’t a suitable description, either, but it’s the only one I have. “My friend’s not well. Her fever is climbing too fast. What can I do?”

Thalia’s wrapped in a blanket, eyes closed, cheek resting on the armrest of the couch when I come back with a glass of water and two pills.

“A friend?” Mom coos in a sing-song voice, and I can imagine how she’s wagging her eyebrows, pulling knowing faces.

“Not now, okay? We’ll talk when I come over this weekend. Just tell me what to do.”

“Alright, alright. Get her in a lukewarm bath for a few minutes. Not *cold*, Theo. Lukewarm. It should help. If not, she might need to see a doctor.”

“Thank you. I’ll come by on Sunday, I promise.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” she says, then cuts the call.

I bet my ass she’s dialing Shawn, Logan, or Nico’s number to ask a

thousand and one questions about my *friend*.

Thalia shivers under the blanket, eyes heavy, lips parched. Her ashen skin is the exact same shade as my off-white couch. Informing her that she has to soak in a cool bath while she trembles like it's arctic winter probably won't work out in my favor. I leave her for a moment to prepare the bath.

"You're not going to like this," I say, scooping her off the couch, bridal style. "You need to get in the bath."

"I like baths," she murmurs, too weak to properly wrap her limp arms around my neck and hold on.

"You won't like this one, but you have to get in there. I sit her on the edge of the tub and help her out of the skimpy polo shirt and skirt. I leave her panties and bra untouched, or else I might end up with a fucking aneurysm.

God, she's perfect. Olive skin, round hips, and big boobs, which are pushed out more because she's hugging herself to stay warm. "Hop in. Just for a few minutes."

She holds my hand to steady herself when her right foot brakes the water. A distressed whimper leaves her lips. "No, I can't. It's too cold. Tylenol will work. I'm fine, see?" She rubs her arm, flattening the goosebumps, but she can't hide the unnaturally pale face, glassy eyes, and how scorching hot she feels to the touch. "Please, I don't want to get in there."

"You have to. I aim the thermometer at her head and show her the screen. "Your fever's climbing too fast, Thalia. Hop in."

She's up to one-oh-three point eight, and if I can't get it down, at least a little, in the next ten minutes, I'm taking her to the hospital before she turns into a soft-boiled egg.

Instead of a step forward, Thalia takes a step back. The water is about ten degrees cooler than her body which can't be pleasant, but either she gets in the tub now, or she'll end up covered in cooling blankets at the hospital.

I'm not sure which is worse.

I tear my t-shirt off and lose my sweatpants, ignoring Thalia's opened mouth gaze sliding down my body and inspecting every muscle. Giving her no time to protest again, I cup her ass, lift her into my arms, and step in the water.

She hisses and shudders, clawing at my shoulders when I sit, gritting my teeth. My body temperature is much cooler than Thalia's, but the lukewarm bath raises the hairs on my neck.

“Turn around,” I say, helping her maneuver in the confined space until she sits between my legs, her back to my chest, teeth clattering. “Breathe, *omorfiá*. Think about something else.”

She tries, but instead of distracting herself, she’s counting down the seconds left until the end of this misery. A few minutes go by before I recheck her temperature, pushing a sigh of relief past my teeth. It’s slowly coming down.

“T-t-talk to m-me,” she stutters, wrapping my arms around her as if that’ll keep her warm. “Was I ki-ki-kicking about at night-t-t?”

I submerge a sponge between her legs and wring it over her neck and shoulders. “You didn’t move, but you snore, you know?”

“No. No, no, n-no, *no*. I do-don’t. I—” She inhales, shaking like a baby deer when I wring more water down her cleavage. “I’m s-s-so cold.”

My arms wrap tighter around her frame in an automatic reflex as if I’d done it countless times before. “You’re doing great. Five more minutes. Try to relax, okay? The more you tense, the worse it is. Once we’re out of here, we can binge-watch “*Ozark*”.”

She gasps, digging her nails into my forearms. “D-did you f-f...” she sucks in a harsh breath, then blurts the rest of the sentence fast, on an exhale. “...finish the episode without me? What happened?”

“I’m not telling you. We’ll rewatch it. I need to see your face when—” I grin, letting the end of the sentence hang unspoken. “Never mind. You’ll see.”

When her fever drops to a more manageable one-oh-two, I help Thalia out of the bath and wrap her in a thick, yellow towel. She’s a touch less pale now, and I let her get dressed without my help.

“Have you eaten today?” I ask when she curls into a ball on the couch, dressed in a gray hoodie and matching sweatpants.

“I don’t think I’ll stomach food,” she pulls herself up, resting on one elbow, “but I can make you a wrap or pasta if—”

“I’m seriously considering duct-taping you to that couch. You’re not moving your pretty ass all day, understood? I’ll order takeout later unless you’re hungry now.”

“No, I’m okay.” She scoots closer, kissing my cheek. “Thank you.”

Now that she’s within my reach, I pull her in like I did last night, flip us over so we’re both laying comfortably, and press play, my hand once again under the blanket, stroking the side of her body in a lulling, repetitive motion.

Half of the episode goes by before her eyes grow heavy.

She tilts her head up slightly, her lips brushing against my jaw. “I’m sleepy.”

“Sleep, *omorfiá*,” I whisper, pressing a kiss in her hair, my hold on her tightening before she can even think about getting out of here and heading to bed.

With a ghost-like, tired smile, she cuddles her face under my chin, one hand across my chest, fisting the t-shirt, one leg bent at the knee and resting over my thighs.

I change the show, so she won’t miss any action, brushing my fingers up and down her arm. Despite the fluffy blanket she pulled up to her chin, she shivers every now and then, clinging to me like second skin. She’s out within moments, but at least half an hour goes by before her fever drops to one-oh-one, and I think that’s as low as it’ll probably go.

Five episodes of “The Big Bang Theory” later, a knock sounds on the door, followed by someone—and I know who—barging in without waiting for an invitation. Only one person does that, and one day she’ll regret those sudden invasions of privacy when she catches her son fucking someone in his living room.

“I came as soon as possible,” Mom says, stopping mid-step with a large soup container. She eyes Thalia and me wrapped in a blanket, her head resting on my chest, hair tickling my chin. “How’s your *friend* feeling?”

“Hey to you too, Mom.” I readjust Thalia, careful not to wake her as I untangle myself from her limbs. “I got her fever down.” I kiss Mom’s cheek, joining her in the kitchen. “Not as low as I’d like it to be, though.”

“I made chicken soup.” She smiles, pulling a pot out of the cupboard.

It was the cure for all evil when I was growing up. Runny nose? *Chicken soup*. Fever? *Chicken soup*. Scraped knee? Band-Aids *and* chicken soup. She even made me chicken soup when Shawn broke my nose.

“Why do I have to call your brothers to find out who this mysterious friend of yours is?” she asks, pouring water into the kettle, probably to make Thalia a cup of tea with honey and lemon. “I hear she’s lovely.”

Lovely? I’m sure that was Shawn’s description. Logan would’ve said *she’s cool*, and Nico probably didn’t even answer his fucking phone.

Mom taps her foot on the tiles, eyes on me, two lines marking her forehead. “Will you *please* tell me a bit about her, or do I have to beat the confession out of you?”

As if she could take me on in five-inch heels and a light, silk pencil dress.

“What do you want me to say? She’s a friend.”

“A friend who lives with you.”

That’s Logan’s inability to keep shit to himself. It’s not like Thalia living here is a secret, but maybe I should’ve been the one to inform Mom about my roommate.

“Yeah, she needed a place to stay. I have a spare bedroom and a dog who can’t live without her.” I point to the couch where Ares is curled around Thalia’s feet.

Mom prods and pokes, firing question after question for solid ten minutes before Thalia sits up, saving the day.

“Good morning,” she says, blushing slightly, sleepy eyes on my mother. “I’m Thalia.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Mom crosses the room but keeps a safe distance not to catch whatever made Thalia ill. Too bad she didn’t think to stay away from me. I’m covered in germs too. “I’m Monica, Theo’s mom. He said you’re not well, so I made chicken soup. It always helped my boys when they were under the weather.”

I serve the soup and finish making the tea because Mom ditched the task halfway through. She’s always been easily distracted, and right now, her cheeks are pink, excitement in her hazel eyes as she discreetly—in her opinion—interrogates Thalia, asking about work, life, and...

“So, how did you two meet?”

Kill me.

Kill me now.

I send my brothers a message.

Me: What did you tell Mom?

Logan: Nada.

Shawn: Nothing.

Nico: To call and ask you.

Me: Yeah, right. She’s here. Brought soup for Thalia and acts like she’s about to book the church.

Shawn: Yeah... good luck, bro.

Nico: I'm out.

Logan: Ha-ha-ha.

So helpful, those three. So good with words. What the fuck would I do without them?

“You should feel better soon,” Mom assures when Thalia polishes off the last of the soup and thanks her for the eighth time. “You need to rest. My boys say you work all the time.”

Nothing and nada, my ass.

“She’s not going anywhere until she’s better,” I cut in. “You want a drink, Mom?”

I love her. Very, *very* much. More than anyone, but right now, I want to hand her a coffee-to-go and lock the door behind her. I’m shit out of luck, though. She stays for over an hour and swoons when I check Thalia’s fever, keeping a few choice words unspoken when the screen flashes red.

FIFTEEN

Thalia

THE SUMMER MONTHS ARE WILD in Newport Beach.

I work seven days a week, juggling Country Club and waitressing. I also cover for other cart girls whenever Jared asks. I'm weaselling my way back into his good graces after I spent four days recovering from the worst case of flu two weeks ago. Theo took time off work to take care of me, made sure I took the pills on time and spoiled me rotten with takeout food, sweets, and cuddles. He slept in my bed three nights in a row, arguing it was safer that way.

I didn't protest. I loved having him close.

Too bad I had to get better at some point. I'd stay sick for a bit longer if I had any control over my well-being.

Maybe longer than a little while.

We're both catching up on work now, so I only see him between jobs. He's asleep when I come home from waitressing gigs, usually too tired to undress, and he's still sleeping when I rise at five in the morning.

I'm tired, so I decided not to work at any parties on Fridays and Saturdays for now. Everyone needs to rest sometimes.

Theo's not home when I enter the condo on Friday afternoon, but Ares greets me in the hallway, begging for cuddles. I give him a handful of treats and fill his bowls with fresh water and food. The door opens again within minutes. Ares bolts out of the kitchen to greet Theo.

"Hey." He walks in with a case of beer in one hand and two boxes of pizza in the other.

"Hey." I lean out when he comes closer to kiss my cheek. "Are your brothers coming over?"

"No. You're not cooking tonight. You've not had a day off since you were ill. Ask how much you owe me for the pizza, and I'll cover your pretty face with a pillow while you sleep and watch you take your last breath."

I elbow his ribs. “That’s very descriptive. If you expect me to say, *oh, that’s so unnecessary, you know I don’t mind cooking*, don’t hold your breath.” I pop the caps on two beers before we sit down and dig in. “Thank you. I needed a night off. I thought I could do this, but I underestimated the amount of sleep my body needs.”

“I keep telling you to stop waitressing. I know you want to rent a place, but there’s no rush for you to move out of here.”

Oh, if he only knew that I’ve had enough money saved to rent a small studio flat for a while now. I’m not in a rush to move out of here, even though I probably should leave. My feelings for Theo are getting out of control, and he’s still keeping me at arm’s length.

“I want you to come with me to the *Unexpected Truth* party at Nico’s tomorrow.”

“We talked about this. I work on Sunday, and the party probably won’t end until early morning. I’m too tired to skip sleep again.”

“Actually, you’re not working on Sunday. I asked Jared to give you a day off. Don’t get mad, okay? I just think you could use a night to relax and unwind and—”

“He agreed to give me a day off?” I cut in, my eyebrows knotting in the middle. “I asked him about it last week, and he said there’s no way. How did you do it?”

Theo shrugs, visibly relieved that I’m not mad. The *Unexpected Truth* party sounds exciting, and since arriving in America, I’ve not had time for fun other than the night I met Theo.

“I’m very convincing.”

“Clearly. Thank you.”

The smile on his face turns my blood into soda water. Living with him is getting more complicated every day. He’s on my mind twenty-four-seven, and I catch myself imagining his hands and lips on me before I fall asleep, missing the warmth of his body.

“Oh crap!” I drop the pizza slice back in the box. “I don’t think I have a white dress or even a blouse to wear. Are any boutiques open at this time?”

“I’ve got you covered.” He disappears into his room and returns with a white, ruched mini dress. “I asked Shawn and Jack to pick an outfit for you.”

“Do they think I’ve shrunk in the last two weeks?” I check the label. “It says size six but looks like a two.” I tug on both sides to check if the fabric stretches. “Maybe it’ll fit.”

“It will. Do you like it?”

“I love it. Will you try to suffocate me with a pillow if I ask how much I owe you?”

He nods with a stern expression. “Definitely.”

“In that case,” I rise on my toes and press my lips to his cheek, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now go take a shower or a bath, and I’ll set up “Ozark.”



The room is dark when my bladder wakes me out of deep sleep. It takes a moment before my eyes adjust and another second before I assess my position.

I’m not in bed.

And I’m not alone.

I’m on the couch, wrapped in Theo’s arms under a soft blanket, my head pressed into the crook of his neck. The rhythm of my heart becomes irregular in an instant. Endorphins mix with a sense of fluffiness in my chest sprinkled with just a little feral lust.

Fine, a lot of lust.

Why does he always smell so sensual?

We must’ve fallen asleep watching “Ozark.” Although... if that was the case, wouldn’t the TV still be on?

Soft, all-consuming warmth fills my insides. He *chose* to stay on the couch with me after I nodded off. I need to pee, but untangling myself from the comfort of his arms without waking him up might be mission impossible. I’m too comfortable to cut the cuddles short. Too safe with his warm body pressed against mine.

I’ve missed this.

My knee is bent, my leg sprawled across his thighs, and I’m holding onto his t-shirt as if I unconsciously refused to let him move away. I’ll have to go to my room if he wakes up, and who knows when an opportunity like this will come by again? I try to fool my body that I don’t need to pee, and I’ll last another two hours. It’s three in the morning, and the alarm clock will sound at five to wake me up for work.

My bladder puts up a fight. My tummy is pressed against Theo’s hip

bone, which isn't helping the case, and I end up shifting my position.

He stirs, tightening his hold on me, burying his face in my hair. "Don't even think about getting out of here," he says, his voice gruff. "Get back to sleep."

"I'm trying, but I need to pee."

With a deep groan, he lifts his arm and kicks the blanket aside. "Make it quick."

The darkness in the room hides the massive grin on my face as I tiptoe to the bathroom. Theo's still in the same position when I crawl back beside him three minutes later, but I don't get to hide my face in his neck again. He flips me over, forcing my back to his chest, one hand under my head, the other around my middle.

"Sleep, *omorfiá*."

He's called me that since day one, but it never fails to make my insides quiver. I gather my courage and take his hand, lacing our fingers and stroking my thumb over his knuckles while drifting back to sleep. It can't be more than five minutes later when my alarm goes off, but the room is lighter this time, hinting that more time has passed.

"Five more minutes," Theo mutters. "Press snooze."

That's his best idea to date. I lean over to grab my phone from the coffee table, then press myself against Theo, closing my eyes again.

"I'll drop you off at work," he huffs when the alarm blares once more. He takes the phone out of my hand, tapping on the screen to set another alarm, then places the cell on the armrest, pulling me close.

I can't help but chuckle when he yanks me as close as possible. "Who would've thought Theo Hayes likes to cuddle?"

"No one's going to believe you."

I snatch the phone again to take a selfie of us entangled in each other. His eyes pop open at the sound of the camera clicking. He tries to take the phone back, but I'm not about to let him delete the only picture of us that exists.

We play fight for a moment while I try not to let him overpower me, but he is stronger, and I end up under him, shoving the phone into my bra.

"You think that'll stop me?" he murmurs, holding onto my waist. "Give me the phone." His fingers disappear under the hem of my top, his touch feather-light, making me squirm as he traces the curve of my waist. "Don't test me."

We're in the most compromising position imaginable. The pressure of his morning erection against my thigh has my body igniting with arousal. I'm instantly ready, panties wet, nipples hard. He's not trying to hide it, doesn't readjust his body to disguise how hard he is.

My insides knot in anticipation with every inch of my skin he touches. The atmosphere turns heavy, roaring with sexual innuendo intense enough to vaporize diamonds.

His heart thumps faster against his ribs that press into my chest, and my heart accepts the challenge, matching the rhythm. My every breath turns shallow, short, and strained.

God, I want him so much I can taste my own desire.

Awe in his eyes grows tenfold. He looks like he's under a spell, mesmerized by the feel of my skin under his fingertips. Dumbstruck, when his eyes meet mine, pupils blown.

Any moment now.

He'll kiss me.

And it'll be spectacular.

I've imagined this moment for weeks, but reality will be better. It's already better than the endless scenarios my imagination came up with. I'm ready. Waiting. *Hoping*.

"You're so beautiful, little one," he whispers, eyes feasting on my face.

My boobs vibrate.

Literally.

The alarm goes off, breaking the spell, pulling us out of the sexual, red haze just as his fingers are about to brush against my bra, and Theo moves away faster than I'd like.

That stings.

I pull the phone out and contemplate hurling it at the wall, but after a deep breath, I disable the alarm and open the photo gallery to show him the picture. He's peaceful in it, face relaxed and content. I've not seen him like that before.

The Hayes brothers are pros at maintaining an impassive, emotionless face. Still, I've known Theo long enough to read his mood by paying attention to the small gestures: narrowing of the eyes, flaring nostrils, the corners of his mouth ticking up when he's amused but doesn't want to show it.

"I need to get ready for work."

He takes the phone but doesn't delete the picture. Instead, he sends a copy to himself.

SIXTEEN

Thalia

MY HAIR IS A BLESSING IN DISGUISE.

It's my best feature.

Many women would kill for a head of hair like mine.

Ah, but if only they knew how frustrating and hard it is to tame tight, spiral curls.

I stand in front of the mirror on Saturday evening, huffing and puffing like an enraged Chihuahua when curls spill out of the clip, refusing to stay where I want them. I'm aiming for a classy updo, but with enough hair to produce two, maybe even three wigs, the updo looks as if there's a second, very hairy head on top of my existing one.

The hair clip flies across the room, and I revert to my standard, boring half-up, half-down hairdo to at least get the locks off my face and show off the not-too-flashy makeup. I settled for simplicity: eyeliner, mascara, and red lips. Modest and not too out there.

The dress is too out there, but I'm silently thankful to Shawn and Jack for choosing it. I want Theo to *see* me the way he saw me this morning when we almost kissed.

That man drives me crazy. Wild. Raging with need whenever we touch. I'm more than certain he wants me, but for some mysterious reason, he's holding back, and since I woke up in his arms, I've been pondering the idea of taking the first step.

Sometimes, you have to make it happen. Seize the opportunity or forever regret not trying. After all, when we're nearing the end of our time in this world, when we're old, lonely, and in pain, no longer ticking positions off our bucket list, we regret the things we didn't do, not the ones we did.

Theo's not a regret I want to have when my life flashes before my eyes in fifty years or so.

"Are you ready?" His voice travels through the closed bedroom door,

and a tap of his knuckles follows.

“I think so.” I readjust the straps of the backless dress with a modest cleavage at the front. “You can come in.”

The door opens inward. I watch in the mirror as Theo steps into the room. He’s dressed in chinos and a V-neck t-shirt, a silver cross around his neck hanging down his chest.

Air moves with him, and the scent of earthy cologne fans my face. Slowly, I spin on the silver heels, self-conscious and pleased at the same time, when Theo’s rapt attention focuses on my body.

“You look...” His chest rises and falls faster, and a muscle feathers his jaw when his eyes jerk to meet mine. “You want me to kill someone tonight?”

“Any complaints should be directed at your brother and his husband-to-be. I didn’t buy the dress. Also... I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Damn right it’s a compliment. You look hot.”

I take a small clutch bag off the bed, crossing the room to stop in front of him, so close our feet almost touch.

“You smell so nice,” I huff, inhaling the air around him.

“You always say that.”

“Because you always smell nice. And you look rather handsome too. Are we supposed to write the truth now or when we get to Nico’s? What kinds of truths are we talking about here?”

“Whatever springs to mind. An odd, funny, random, or dirty fact about you that you don’t normally shout from the rooftops.” He pulls out a black permanent marker from his pocket. “Do mine first.”

I take the cap off, ironing his shirt with my hand, dazzled by the hard, well-defined muscles under my palm. Why does he have to be so infuriatingly perfect? Even the deep, rough scar marking his cheek is beautiful.

“I know the difference,” he dictates casually, “Between hard and fast.”

My hand trembles and my cheeks burn hotter when memories of his body pinning me to the couch a few weeks ago invade my mind. Is he doing this on purpose? Does he know he makes my heart skip a few beats with one heated look?

“I think *hard* and *fast* should be in capitals,” I mutter, focused on the task.

“Sounds good.”

I don't see his face, but his voice is laced with amusement. He *is* doing this on purpose.

The bastard.

I inhale a deep breath, handing the marker back. My body is ruled by fits of shivers, the ache between my legs unbearable, but two can play this game. "Do you know the difference between *don't stop* and *keep going*?"

His darkening eyes, brimming with warmth, spell out mischief. God, it's good to know I'm getting to him. "*Keep going* is an encouragement for the guy who can't find the right spot. *Don't stop* is praise for the guy who knows exactly where that spot is." He runs his hand down my side, stopping on my hip. "Do you know the difference between *hold it* and *hold on*?"

"*Hold it* is an order." I moisten my lips with the tip of my tongue. "*Hold on* is a promise."

Theo swallows hard, placing his hand firmly on my waist, a marker in hand. "What am I writing on you?"

And *poof*, the moment passes.

Is there something fundamentally un-fuckable about me? Why is he so adamant about keeping at a distance? The electric current between us grows in strength every day and proportionally grows his resistance.

"I'm having second thoughts. I might've gone too far with honesty," I say, trying to come up with a less incriminating truth. "How about, *this dress is too tight for panties.*"

His eyes snap to me, popping wide as he grinds his teeth, his breaths sawing in and out. "Are you fucking kidding me?" He grips my hip, fingers digging into the thin fabric. He's probably feeling for the outline of my underwear that isn't there. "You're not lying."

"Why would I lie?"

"I'm not writing that. You'll be eye-fucked all evening, and I'll definitely kill someone. Many *someone's*. All two hundred of them. Pick a different truth and put on a pair of fucking panties."

"I can't... it's too tight."

"Stop teasing, Thalia. It's enough I have to deal with you dressed like this," he utters, tracing his index finger across my collarbones, then lower, following the edge of the white fabric on my chest. "Don't push me. There's a fine line I don't want to cross. Pick a different truth."

Don't push?

Does he know me?

If pushing, poking, nudging, and tearing apart uncrossable lines is the way to get him to drop the act, I'll push, poke, and set the world on fire.

"I'm missing a pearl necklace," I say, smiling when he moves away, glancing around the room as if searching for the said necklace. "Write it down."

"A pearl necklace?" His eyebrows draw in the middle for a second before it clicks. "Jesus! You have such a dirty mind. That's not going on you!" He tosses the marker aside.

"Don't be like that. It's supposed to be fun, right?" I shove the marker back in his hand. "You win. Nothing sexual." Which means I have to use the original idea. "Write *I spent a month in jail.*"

"What?" he mouths, frowning. "Why? When?"

"Almost two years ago. I couldn't afford bail."

"So... you were waiting for trial?" His eyes search my face. "What were you accused of?"

I wonder what his reaction would be if I told him the truth... *murder*. Would he run? Kick me out the door? Would he listen to my story? Doubtful. No one back home cared to listen. No one asked if I killed him. Everyone assumed I did, yet no one asked why.

Their mind was made up: guilty.

Vasilis Dimopoulos was a beloved Greek hero. Robin Hood incarnated. The man thousands idolized. Presidential candidate. Philanthropist.

Whether I actually killed him and under what circumstances wasn't important. The *truth* wasn't important to the crowds of people spitting in my face. Vasilis was dead, and someone had to rot in jail.

A witch hunt began. People stood outside the court, holding banners with *Burn her at the stake* written in crimson. Many petitioned for a public trial.

"That's not important," I say on a sigh. It's selfish to hide the truth while we're growing closer each day, but tonight isn't the time to drop a bomb that'll turn our relationship upside down. If I ever pluck the courage to share my story, Theo will be the one to hear it because what I never thought possible happened: I trust him unconditionally. "Just write it down, and let's go. We're going to be late."

He holds the marker harder, jaw muscle ticking. "Are you sure you want me to write that?"

"Yes. I'll tell you about it one day, but not tonight, okay?" The wounds

are fresh; I don't think they'll ever heal. "I'm not ready." *Not ready to lose you.*

He replaces the cap on the marker, shoves it in his back pocket, and then pulls me into a tight hug, lips on my temple. "When you're ready, I'll listen."

I cling to him, soaking up the closeness and peace he evokes. It's a simple gesture—a hug. Nothing extraordinary, but when you've been deprived of human contact for as long as I have, a hug means more, it hits differently.

Waking up in his arms this morning was the happiest, most peaceful, and wholesome moment of my life. I've woken up next to him before, but it was different today. He didn't do it out of pity or because he was worried. He *wanted* to hold me all night. Once I tell him the truth, he might not get close to me again.

SEVENTEEN

Thalia

NICO'S HOUSE IS ENORMOUS. Six bedrooms, a huge garden, and a living room that could fit Theo's entire condo.

The place is crowded with beautifully dressed people, each with a truth of their own written across their white clothes. Shawn and Jack, both in matching V-neck t-shirts, stand to the side of the room, beers in hand and smiling as they talk to a group of men. I can't see Logan, but I'm sure he's here somewhere. Nico's the one who approaches us the moment we step through the door. He and Theo are thick as thieves. So much so that I think they should've been twins.

I can't put my finger on it yet, but there's an unnerving aura surrounding Nico. Every one of his moves and gestures is loaded with a threat. He could probably intimidate an entire prison block of ruthless convicts with one look.

I think he could convince a house of supermodels to an orgy with a different look, but that's beside the point.

The way he speaks and carries himself makes me just about as warm, calm, and comfortable as being in an operating room.

Unlike Logan, who I instantly took a liking to. He's cheerful, a tad ostentatious, but welcoming and positive.

I'm glad Theo didn't let me settle for *This dress is too tight for panties* because a blonde goddess sports a similar line across her corset that barely covers her areolas, and surprise, surprise... Logan's on her like a greenfly on a new rose shoot.

I peruse the sea of people dressed in white, chuckling at some of the truths I see.

I've got a drinking problem.

40, rich and single.

I can restrain you with a hair tie.

My boobs are fake.

“Why am I not surprised?” Nico says, stopping beside us, reading my truth. “You sure are a handful.”

“*Allegedly.*” I wink and read his chest, my brows meeting in the middle. *I won’t call you.* “It was supposed to be *unexpected*, Nico. This,” I point at his truth, “Is obvious. You reek of non-commitment.”

“Most women don’t have your sense of smell,” he admits, but his attention is no longer on me. I follow his line of sight to a tall, slender brunette with a waterfall of straight hair in a high ponytail. “She sure does, though.” He smirks at her truth: *If you call, I won’t answer.*

A match made in heaven, so it seems.

Nico pats Theo on the back, tells him there’s a pop-up bar outside, and takes the bait, navigating the crowd toward the striking brunette. Really, she’s gorgeous; well-defined high cheekbones, blood-red lips, impeccable hair, makeup, and an hourglass figure wrapped in a slip dress.

Cassidy waves at me from across the room, where she stands with MJ next to a beautiful, gloss-black grand piano. She rushes over in a knee-length, tight dress with a slit running up to her hip. She hugs me, frowning when she reads my truth; my reaction is the same when I read hers.

You might need to use your safe word tonight.

“You look great, Thalia,” she says, moving to stand arm and arm with me, her eyes scanning the room. “I hear you’re not working tomorrow. How did you make that happen? I’ve begged Jared for a day off since he told me about this party.”

Theo snakes his arm around my waist, forcing me flush to his side, the gesture as expected as flowers in a junkyard. I thought he’d chase one of the many women here and prepared myself for an evening of holding my feelings in check, but here he is, touching me in public, in an intimate way.

“What do you want to drink?”

“I loved the last one you chose, so I’ll leave it up to you.”

Cassidy’s blue eyes move between Theo and me, her lips in a thin line. She does her best not to cringe or act shocked, but as soon as he’s out of earshot, she clutches my forearm. “You *fucked* him?” she mouths. “And he’s

still here?!”

“We didn’t fuck,” I hiss, glancing around to check if anyone heard her, but no one pays us any attention. “We’re friends. I live at his place, for God’s sake!”

Ah, crap.

It was so hard to keep that piece of information from her ears all these weeks... I just had to slip up now.

She digs her nails into my arm, cheeks pink, eyes wide. “Tell me eve—” She trips over the words, her smile slips, and lips part in an inaudible *oh*.

I scan the room, searching for whatever got her upset, but she tugs on my hand again to get my attention before I add two and two together. Too late, I already noticed why her eyes lost their glow.

Logan.

He stands by the piano now, holding a blonde goddess by her waist with one hand, the other caressing the curve of her hip. His eyes are fixed on her as he speaks, shoulders back, muscular chest on display.

Theo thinks Logan’s the least skilled in the game of seduction, but he’s got it wrong. I’d bet a lot of money that Logan’s bed saw more women than Theo’s and Nico’s combined. He’s not as subtle as Theo, but it only works in his favor. Out of the seven brothers, Logan’s the biggest player and most skilled in sweet-talking. Just like Nico’s gestures are loaded with threat, Logan’s are loaded with sexual innuendo whenever he zeroes in on a target.

Cassidy tugs on my hand again. “You need to tell me *everything* about you and Theo.” She fakes a smile and swallows hard as if to push back the hurt clogging her throat.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I ask. She obviously has feelings for Logan which go beyond sexual attraction, and I can imagine how painful it must be to watch him with other women. “We could go to *Tortugo* for a few drinks and then dance the night away in Q.”

“No, don’t be silly,” she says softly, flashing me a thankful smile. “And don’t try changing the subject.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind leaving.”

“I’m sure.” She pumps her fingers around my wrist, asking me to drop the subject or thanking me for offering her an out. I can’t tell. “Go on, talk! I want to know what the deal is with you and Mr. Hayes.”

Until Theo comes back with a tall glass of blue liquid, I’m forced to explain my living situation and answer mildly inappropriate questions, but as

soon as he comes closer, Cass's expression morphs into the same impassiveness she treats all Hayes with. Not even a minute later, she excuses herself, rushing after Mary-Jane.

I jot down a mental note to invite Cass for coffee and out shopping one day to try and help her through the Logan crush.

Theo takes me outside to the back garden, where close to a hundred people mingle, enjoying the music supplied by a professional DJ set up on a make-shift stage. I expected the party to take place inside, but the living room acts as a meet-and-greet slash staging area, and the main event is here.

It resembles a typical college party you see in American comedies, but people in their twenties are drinking whiskey and wine instead of college kids drinking beer out of red solo cups. There's plenty of nudity around, though. Many women stripped out of their dresses, parading in bikinis or lacey lingerie, taking advantage of inflatable flamingos in the pool. A few couples make out here and there; one is almost dry humping on one of the loungers.

Two bouncers hang around the perimeter, probably ensuring no one starts a fight and breaks Nico's expensive patio furniture by accident. A beer pong table stands to the left of the stage, and Theo pulls me over in that direction.

"Thalia!" Jack booms, approaching with Shawn. They both grace me with quick once-overs and approving smiles. "You look amazing! I'm glad it fits."

"I'm surprised it fits," I admit, "but thank you. You saved me a frenzied shopping trip today."

They kiss my cheek, and Jack twirls me around, admiring the dress. We somehow fall into the rhythm of the music, moving away from the table to dance among other people.

I'm at ease, lost in the music, and start to think maybe I can make it around here. Maybe my past hasn't ruined my future. Maybe I can live my best life among new friends. I'm incoherently happy, and I hope it'll last.

"You've got to tell me what's going on with you and Theo! I swear I won't tell Shawn or anyone else." Jack takes me to the bar a few songs later, eyes sparkling, excitement oozing out of his pores. "Please... pretty please! I can see the way you look at him, girl. You want him!"

I've spent enough time with Theo's family to know that Jack and I share a mutual spiritual connection. He will, most likely, recite my words back to Shawn in a heartbeat, despite his promises, but who knows? I might be

wrong. Building real relationships is all about letting go of my suspicious nature.

“Can you blame me? You’ve seen him. You *know* him.”

Jack’s mouth splits into a wide grin, and he elbows my ribs. “I knew it!” He claps, gesturing for the bartender to come over. “So, what’s the game plan? Theo’s a hard cookie to crack. They all are, but I think he’s into you too, you know? He watches you like a hawk.”

I lean closer, lowering my voice. “That’s because he knows this dress is too tight for panties.”

Jack’s eyes grow wider as he playfully pushes me away with a sly grin. “You little tease!”

I glance toward the beer pong table where we left Shawn and Theo. My smile slips, and stomach sinks like a bag of sand thrown in the river. He’s talking to a beautiful woman whose truth tells me I should book a motel room for the night, or I’ll have to listen to his sex life.

I like it hard.

My mind fills with growing tendrils of a headache that threatens to explode into a full-blown migraine when Theo laughs at whatever the woman says. They’re close, inches apart, and he’s not stopping her from tracing her fingers up his arm.

I avert my gaze, bile burning the back of my throat.

There goes my hope trotting away, followed closely by my good mood and confidence.

“Thalia.” As if summoned into action by the stench of disappointment and vulnerability that suddenly surrounds me, Dean approaches, flashing a slimy Hollywood smile to show off the white pearls that must’ve cost a small fortune. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hey, Dean,” I say on a sigh. “I didn’t expect you here, either.”

He didn’t request a new cart girl, which is a clear sign the game isn’t over. It’s halftime, and Dean’s preparing to strike again. He changed the tactic from a ruthless, obnoxious attack to more subtle flirting, but even that doesn’t sit well with me after the fiasco our drink outing was.

Jack pulls his eyebrows together, ready to interject, but his eyes wander to Shawn as if he’s scouting for backup, and he must catch a glimpse of Theo flirting with the blonde because his lips draw into a pout. “I’ll leave you to it,

babe,” he says in a theatrical tone that’s supposed to let Dean know he’s gay and not interested in me in any way.

Dean rests against the pop-up bar, a glass of neat whiskey in hand, hair swept to the side. “Jail, huh?” he asks, reading my truth. “I guess the charges were dropped.”

I check the writing across his crisp white smart shirt and cock an eyebrow, intrigued by the man for the first time.

I killed seventy-three men.

“Soldier?”

“Three years in Afghanistan.”

“I thought you guys don’t talk about deployment.”

He bobs his head. “Most soldiers, especially those affected by PTSD, don’t. It’s unconventional to share the number, but I was born to serve and grew up in a military family. I’m proud I served my country, and I don’t hide it.”

I’m unsure if I’m more intrigued or surprised by his boldness. My father served back in the day, and he never spoke about his time in the military.

Theo’s still busy with the blonde, and disappointment pushes me to accept a drink offer from Dean. Not the smartest idea, considering I had the urge to break his nose last time.

Apparently, I’m not too smart.

EIGHTEEN

Theo

THE UPTIGHT, SOPHISTICATED PARTY morphs into a wild banger. People dance on every flat surface, and most girls are no longer in their dresses. Half of the guys are shirtless, flexing their pecs like peacocks rattling their tails, and letting women scribble random lines across their chests.

I scan the crowd of faces, spotting a few cocky assholes who will be kept a safe distance from Thalia by her bodyguard, namely me. I look around again, hoping Jasmine will take a hint and leave me alone if I ignore her chatter long enough.

She's not that perceptive, though, which is odd since she's Nico's assistant. Attention to detail and spotting deviations in a pattern is in her job description. She's the administrator for all moves my brother makes with my money, and she has too much to say about said moves as if she knows better and should be the one to manage my portfolio.

It takes a while, but her girlfriend saves the day ten minutes later, hauling Jasmine to the bar.

A tall brunette in a skimpy bikini grabs my arm next. "Hey, handsome," she chirps, her eyes hooded, pupils blown as she presses herself to my side. "I think you need to relax."

"And I think you need a cup of coffee."

She giggles, running her fingers up and down my chest. "I'd rather have a mouthful of your dick."

A month ago, after hearing that line, I would've dragged her inside to give her exactly what she wanted and then some. Tonight, the idea of driving my cock inside a random chick turns my stomach.

I take her wrist and push her back to stop her boobs from rubbing against my arm. "Wrong guy, sweetheart. Find one who's interested."

A child-like pout turns her lips, and she flaunts the boobs in my face again as if to taunt me. "What? Am I not pretty enough for you, Mr. Hayes?"

Of course, she knows who I am. Being the mayor's son with six brothers, three of which are identical triplets, means everyone in this city knows who the Hayes are, what we do, and what we look like.

"You're not sober enough for me," I shoot back, scanning the crowd again, searching for Thalia.

My hands clench into fists when I spot her chatting to Dean. She glares straight at me, then moves her eyes to the brunette beside me, her features pinched.

Angry, are you? You and me both, omorfiá.

"Did you hear me?" The girl clinging to my arm reaches for my beer, purposely brushing her fingers along my chest. "I'll suck you off real good, and I won't try to call you."

"Beat it," I hiss and walk away, heading to the seating area under the terrace.

Dean looks at me, eyes focused. A smug smile slips for a moment when we exchange glances as if it's a game, and the first one who talks, loses. He sits with Thalia on the eight-seater halfmoon couch, one arm sprawled over the back, legs far apart, a king-of-the-world attitude in full view. It hardly changes when I approach.

"There you are." I lean over the back, pressing my lips to the crown of Thalia's head. She tenses, her head whipping around so fast I swear I heard a *crack*. I play it down, even though the slight rise of her eyebrow puts a self-indulgent smirk on my face. "It's our turn to play pong."

Dean shifts in his seat, drumming his fingers on his knee for a second before raking them through his hair, ruffling it up as if he's unsure what to do with himself.

I pin him down with a pointed look that loosely translates to: *back off, dude or I'll do good on the threat I never voiced, and remove your hands from your body.*

"Oh, okay." Thalia plasters an apologetic smile onto her lips, glancing at Dean. "Sorry, I won't be long."

Yeah, right. She's not coming back to this asshole.

I lead her away, silently stewing. "What are you doing with him?" I ask when we're out of his earshot.

"You were busy. I didn't want to interrupt."

I can't help the arrogant, desolate satisfaction spreading in my bones at the irritated tone of her voice.

She's *jealous*.

Good. So am I.

So fucking jealous I want to nail Dean for good measure.

"I wasn't busy. I could've used saving from Jasmine. She's Nico's assistant, and she's pretty determined to manage my money." I point at the pool. "That's her girlfriend."

Thalia's cheeks heat to the faintest shade of pink when I lace our fingers. "You're very confusing, Theo."

"No. I'm careful."

I'm a liar. I *am* confusing. Her and myself. I'm undecided. A pendulum going back and forth between wanting her in my bed, not wanting to hurt her, wanting her to be mine, and not wanting to lose her.

"Hey, man!" Adrian, one of Nico's buddies' cheers, swaying on his feet as he saunters toward us. He looks like he could do with a cup of coffee to sober up too. He steps in our way, staring at Thalia. "Who's your friend?"

"Hey, man. I didn't expect you here." *Leave*. "This is Thalia." *Stay away from her, or I'll maim you.*

"You're the new cart girl!" he booms. "Nico told me about you. Now that I've seen you, I might start golfing." He laughs the same way all drunk people do, the sound like needles in my eardrums. "Can I get you a drink?"

"She's got a drink," I say, then swear under my breath because she actually doesn't.

Nico approaches, stopping Adrian from asking another question. He shakes his hand, glaring at me, jaw set tight. "Come on, I need you."

"I'll be right back. Go find Shawn and Jack," I tell Thalia before following my brother. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," he shrugs, tugging from his bottle. "You looked like you needed an out."

"I didn't, but you might want to tell your buddy to back the fuck away from Thalia."

Nico cocks an eyebrow, peeking over his shoulder to where his friend still talks to her, unleashing his charm. "You like her, don't you?"

"Don't be stupid. I told you we're friends. I'm looking out for her. We both know Adrian just wants to fuck her, and she's better than that."

"She's smart, Theo," he says in a school principal's voice. "Don't act all big-brother. She can take care of herself."

I glance in Thalia's direction a moment later, but she's gone and

nowhere to be seen. Shawn and Jack play beer pong versing Jasmine and her girlfriend, but no sign of Thalia there, either. It'd be easier to keep my shit in check if she'd stay in plain sight.

Nico smirks. "Either chill out or make a move."

"Make a move? We live together. I can't sleep with her without it blowing up in my face."

"Sex is all you want?" He shakes his head, entertained by the idea. "You're full of shit, but have it your way. If you don't want her, stop touching her all the time and chill out. If she wants to sleep with Adrian, you can't stop her."

I wave him off, annoyed because who the fuck made him the know-it-all? Thalia's not mine. I've got no right to freak out, but the worry and possessiveness blooming in the pit of my stomach can't be shaken.

Ten minutes later, I enter the house, hoping to find Thalia and Adrian. I also hope I won't find them kissing because fuck knows what I'll do then.

Nothing good for sure.

They're not in the living room or in the kitchen, but I spot Thalia out front. She's not with Adrian, though. She's with Dean again. He's smoking while she rests against my car, arms crossed over her chest.

Shawn enters the kitchen, rubbing his hands together, sporting a supersized shit-eating grin. "Nico said you need some sense knocked into you. What's the deal, bro?"

The sly bastard.

I grind my teeth, pumping my fingers. "I'm good."

Not good at all.

Why is she with Dean?

Shawn shakes his head, dismissing my words like you dismiss kids when they ask dumb questions. "What's stopping you? You like Thalia, and she likes you too."

Muscles in my back tense painfully. I grasp the counter with both hands, hanging my head low.

Why am I only perfectly comfortable when she's close? Why does it feel like I'm wrestling the Hulk, trying to fight what I want? And why am I fighting it?

Because I'm scared, that's why.

She's funny, easy-going, smart, and compassionate. I'm in awe of her positivity, attitude, and confidence. She's beautiful inside and out, and it

scares me.

After holding her all night in my arms, I'm way past sex only. I want more. Much more, but I don't want to lose her. What if we start dating and fall apart after a while? We won't go back to being friends. We'll be perfect strangers, and I don't think I could stomach not having her around.

What if you don't fall apart?

"She's all I think about, Shawn, but what do I know about relationships? Nothing. I'm way out of my fucking comfort zone just thinking about it. I can't make it work, bro. I'll fuck up, hurt her, and lose her."

"It's not rocket science, Theo. You'll figure it out."

So, so helpful.

Maybe I will figure it out. Or maybe I won't.

Decisions, decisions...

She's still outside with Dean, and while I might not know what I want *from* her, I do know what I want *for* her, and Dean isn't it.

I leave Shawn in the kitchen, yank the main door open, and down the concrete steps I go, glancing around the driveway, my chest heaving. She rests against my Camaro, arms folded over her busty chest, eyes narrowed at that asshole. I stop when Dean's voice, as pleasant as a mosquito buzzing overhead at two in the morning, reaches my ears.

"You're not being fair." He kicks the gravel. "I'm trying to make amends. I keep thinking about you, but I also don't want to waste my time, so before I make a bigger fool of myself, I'm going to ask you a question. What's going on with you and Theo? He sure acts like you're his."

"I'm not," Thalia clips, pushing a twelve-inch blade into my chest. "I told you, we're just friends, but don't make a fool out of yourself regardless. You and I won't happen."

"Good, good..." he mutters as if he hadn't heard a word she said after admitting we're *just* friends. "I know Theo, and he's not the kind of guy I'd like to get in the way of.."

Good call, my friend.

"If you say you're just friends, I believe you. Can I pick you up tomorrow? There's a nice restaurant—"

"Dean, stop and listen to me, you're a decent guy when you put your head into it, but I'm not interested anymore."

"Thalia," I interrupt when Dean opens his mouth again, the tone of my voice dripping with territoriality. "Come on, *omorfiá*. Shawn and Jack are

waiting for us.”

They’re not, but I need to take her away from Dean before he gets too close and consequently forces my fist too close to his jaw or nose. Or both.

“I’ll be there in a second,” she tells me, probably wanting to make sure Dean understands she’s not interested. I’m one step away from explaining that to him nonverbally, but it’s probably best not to make a scene.

I should walk away. I should leave them to finish their conversation. Should. Could. Would.

Can’t.

Won’t.

No fucking way in hell.

I descend the remaining steps and crowd Thalia’s personal space, pulling her to my side caveman style. “I’m growing old here. Let’s play.”

Dean’s eyes zero in on my arm casually snaked around Thalia’s waist, his jaw working back and forth.

“I see,” he mutters, and then... he has the fucking audacity to kiss her cheek, marking his territory like I’m marking mine.

Thalia stills in my arms; the kiss not what she expected or wanted, I’m sure. Her lips are sealed as we watch Dean hop into his Porsche. The wheels spin fast when he performs an intentional burnout, sending the gravel flying around and bouncing off the Range Rover parked behind. He speeds down the long driveway, and tires squeal when the car springs onto the street, the rear end flying sideways before disappearing behind a bend.

I grab Thalia’s waist, pushing her against the side of my car. “I’ll break his hands if he ever touches you again.”

“Oh yeah?” She inches closer. A small smile curves her red lips. Lips that almost brush mine. “Bullshit. Are you this possessive over all your friends, or am I special somehow?”

I dig my fingers into her hips, my composure hanging by a thread, desire fizzing inside me, burning a hot hole in my stomach, hurling to the surface like bubbles in a champagne flute. “I’ve never had a friend who’s also a girl. You’re special in every way.”

“What an honor.” There’s an edge to her voice, a spiteful note accompanied by narrowed eyes.

I’m not ready to admit I know why she’s acting this way. “Come on, I need a drink.”

NINETEEN

Theo

PULSE THROBS IN MY EARS when a face I loathe more than anything in the world shows up at the party around ten in the evening. I knew he was in town. He comes back every summer to unwind in his beach house. And every summer, I get out of Newport Beach to avoid bumping into him.

This summer is different. I met Thalia, and the idea of leaving and heading for Nico's apartment in LA slipped my mind.

Logan stands closest, so I grip his arm, pointing at Kai, who makes his way across the lawn that's been turned into a makeshift dance floor for the party. He's alone, his face hinting unease. "Get him out of here before I fucking kill him."

It takes Logan three seconds to get a plan of action while I channel my resolve into keeping myself pinned to the spot.

Logan grabs Nico and taps on Shawn's shoulder, his back straight, fists clenched tight. Seconds later, Jack joins them, a pack of wolves on the hunt.

Kai's face may not be so pretty in a moment.

Thalia sits with Cass and MJ by the pool, a glass of caipirinha in her hand. I cross the garden, my feet moving of their own accord, away from the fury Kai incites and toward the sanity Thalia summons with a touch of her hand.

She looks up when I'm almost there, my body and mind lighter with every step. "What's wrong?" She reads my mood perfectly, casting a sideways glance, checking our surroundings, then looks over my shoulder searching for what got me so pissed off.

Her eyes grow wider, and her lips part slightly. I do a one-eighty, walking away, the rage in my head no longer controllable when I see what she just saw. Logan's nailing Kai in the middle of the garden, either oblivious to the crowd of bystanders or not giving a shit who's watching.

Probably the latter. Logan's wild once he loses his shit, snapping faster

than the naked eye can see. He's in his element, ramming his fists into Kai's face as if the fucker is a boxing bag.

Knowing Thalia saw that, knowing it alarmed her, knowing the asshole showing up here caused the unease in her eyes, I'm itching to tear him apart.

Five fingers close around my forearm but don't come near meeting. Thalia blocks my path, pressing herself to my chest, acting as a barricade. "Why aren't people skinny dipping yet?"

"What?" I frown. God, she's so bizarre sometimes, and I absolutely fucking love that about her.

"Isn't it what usually happens at American parties when everyone gets tipsy?" she continues, moving her small hands to my sides, tapping a monotonous rhythm on my ribs with the tips of her fingers. The sensation it evokes is like a powerful sedative. All my muscles relax as fast as when I'm freefalling while skydiving.

"You want to go skinny dipping?"

She nods, the dark locks bouncing around her shoulders. "I hoped you'd join the fun."

"So, you want to see me naked?"

"I'm pretty sure it'd be a sight to see, but I know better than to hope you'll lead the way. I, on the other hand..." She steps back, hands plucking the hem of her dress.

As if on autopilot, I cuff her wrists and pin them to my chest, stopping her before she gives me a reason to annihilate two hundred people in attendance.

"Don't test me, Thalia."

She beams, the smile genuine and absurdly beautiful. "Relax. I'm not that courageous."

My hold on her loosens, a gesture I quickly regret when she walks around me, that perfect ass swaying from left to right. She has no idea how sexy she is. Fully clothed and still wearing heels, she doesn't slow down or hesitates before leaping into the pool. It doesn't matter that she's not wearing a bikini or that she's not naked.

She'll get me killed regardless.

White dress, olive skin, and a halo of dark hair. She emerges wet and bathed in the orange hue of the pool lights. An incarnation of a Greek goddess.

She beckons me, bending her index finger and winks, arching back to

float on the surface. My heart swells, my pulse roars, and... fuck me sideways. I think I'm falling in love with her.

I yank off my t-shirt and kick my jeans off before following her into the water. She swims away to rest her back on the pool's edge, elbows on the tiles. More splashes happen behind me, followed by a fit of girly giggles, but it all sounds distant, muffled as if coming through a glass wall.

"Thank you." I hold onto her waist with one hand, raking the other through my hair. "That helped."

"I should think so. Her fingers trace the lines of my tattoo, and the fascination on her face is so genuine I couldn't look away if I tried. "It'd cripple my self-esteem if it didn't."

"You're perfect. Don't ever think otherwise."

More people plunge into the pool fully clothed, laughing and cheering—a background noise to my racing heart. I don't pay attention to any of that. All I feel is a thick, heavy air settling around Thalia and me, taking me back to this morning.

It'd take a leap of faith... one second to close the distance parting our lips. One second to throw away all my assumptions and listen to my heart instead of my mind.

I lift my hand to the side of her face, brushing my thumb across her lips, thinking, weighing my options.

"You drive me insane," I whisper, glancing into her eyes filled with need. Who knew I'm such a fucking coward? "Stop."

God, I want her. I want her so fucking much. My hands in her hair, my lips on hers—kissing, nipping, grazing my teeth over her bottom lip. A short, looping video clip plays in my head, and my stomach wrenches with intense desire.

"You first," she whispers, inching closer.

"He's gone!" Nico booms behind us, giving me a heads-up before he approaches with the others.

I step away from the girl who makes me reconsider everything I know about myself and turn to Nico, who must've gotten a few punches in too. His knuckles are bloody, and a red splatter covers his immaculate white shirt.

Jack trails close behind with two beach towels in hand.

"But he'll be back," Logan adds, glaring at me. "He really wants to talk to you."

I nod, refusing to get sucked back into the rage. "Thanks. I owe you."

I hoist myself out of the pool, then help Thalia and drape a towel around her wet body before anyone has a chance to ogle her perfect curves.

“Come on, let’s get a drink to warm you up.” Logan wraps a protective arm around her shoulders, leading her away.

“What did he want?” I ask Nico when they’re out of earshot.

“He wants to make amends,” he says, his face as stoic as always. “He heard about the game you’re pitching to companies and thinks he might be useful.”

Useful? What a joke. All Kai wants is to get his hands on my project, then screw me over like last time.

“What was that about with Thalia?” Nico motions with his chin at the pool. “You changed your mind?”

“I don’t know...” I squeeze the back of my neck to rid the frustration. “She tried to distract me. I was on my way to kill the asshole.”

“I doubt he’ll have the guts to show his face around here anytime soon, but don’t expect this to be over... you’re not listening to me right now, are you?” he clips, following my line of sight to Thalia. “Give up, man.” He slaps his hand on my back. “You’re fighting a lost battle.”

I think I am.

Thalia’s laughing, joking around with Logan by the bar. He might’ve been into her at first, but his stance now tells me all I need to know—she’s no longer on his radar. They grab their drinks, and Logan walks back toward us, but Thalia’s still at the bar, eyeing a man on her right.

We’re fifteen yards apart, but the change in her posture is plain to see. She balls her hands at her sides, back straight and chin raised. When the guy moves away, she blocks his path, shoving him back with both hands.

“What the hell?” Nico mouths.

We’re on the move, eyes fixed on the man who I now recognize as the one Thalia danced with the night we met. He gets in her face, his red, but Thalia doesn’t back down. She shoves him again and then snatches a colorful drink out of his grasp.

“Are you out of your mind?” he yells.

My step falters when Thalia flings the drink in his face and immediately grips his shoulders, bracing against him to drive her knee in his groin. He turns purple, mouth twisting into an o as he grabs his junk with both hands.

Ouch. That must’ve hurt.

“What’s going on?” I ask, stopping beside her. “What did he do to you?”

“Nothing.” She tugs on the hem of her dress to cover her thighs, a ball of pure rage when she glares back at the guy.

“You have one chance to explain,” Nico says, taking her by the arm. “Why did you do that?”

Her cheeks burn scarlet, and she shoves her finger into Nico’s chest, shrugging out of his grasp. “You’re *welcome*. Ask Asher why I kicked his nuts.”

People stand around the four of us, muttering behind their hands, eyeing the scene, as confused as I am. I quickly count how many drinks Thalia had since we arrived. Three. There’s no way she’s drunk off her ass and incapable of thinking straight.

Asher straightens out, his face a faint shade of purple. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Me?” Thalia stomps forward. “*Me?* What is wrong with *you?* I could point my finger at ten women who’d gladly fuck you, so why do you go after those who don’t want your dick?”

“Just... leave me the hell alone. You’re not right in your fucking head.”

“Says the asshole who spiked someone’s drink,” she snaps, shoving him again.

A cold shiver rushes up my spine, and I exchange one loaded look with Nico. “You saw him?”

Thalia turns to me, shoulders sagging as she nods slowly. “Yeah, by the bar. He slipped a pill in this drink.” She waves the now-empty glass in my face.

“I didn’t!” Asher booms, fidgeting on the spot and glancing around as if searching for the fastest way out.

Neither Nico nor I need more confirmation, but Logan’s faster. He springs out of nowhere, draws his arm back, and sends it whooshing through the air to land on Asher’s jaw. Blood gushes from the fucker’s mouth. Thalia steps away just in time, saving her dress from blood stains.

Shawn joins us three precise punches later, emerging out of the crowd to stop Logan from knocking out Asher’s teeth. “Enough. My boys will take over from here, alright?” He takes the glass from Thalia. “They’ll need your statement.”

She nods, no longer in combat mode when I take her to the side, away from the excited murmur of the crowd.

“Promise me something,” I say when we round the building to wait for

the cops. “Next time shit like that happens, tell me. I don’t want you getting in anyone’s face. He could’ve hurt you.”

“And that’s when you’d break his hands, right?”

“I’m serious. Find me and let me deal with it.”

She presses herself to my chest for a hug as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I promise.”



It’s close to two in the morning when Thalia cuddles into me on the couch, her head resting comfortably on my shoulder as she starts nodding off.

The house cleared of guests a while ago. Two squad cars arriving at the scene put a damper on the party. Even more so when the officers started taking statements from anyone who claimed to have seen Asher spiking the drink.

He was taken to the station in handcuffs, but Shawn said he’ll probably be out by sunrise with no charges. Thalia threw the only evidence in Asher’s face, and the cops didn’t find any drugs on him.

It’s just three Hayes brothers, Jack, and a few friends left drinking, dancing, or making out wherever they think no one can see. Nico’s already gone. He took a tall brunette upstairs twenty minutes ago, but not before informing us that the guest bedrooms are available.

Thalia and I packed overnight bags, knowing there was no way we’d bother with a cab at this hour.

I pat her thigh when she stops toying with my fingers—a clear sign she’s falling asleep. “I’ll show you where you’ll sleep tonight. Just let me grab the bags first.”

I intended to leave her in the guest bedroom and join my brothers for a few more beers, then sleep in the adjacent room, but I change my mind with one question from her mouth. Especially since she asks after coming out of the en suite in a pair of short shorts and a tank top.

“Can we at least cuddle?”

Fuck yes.

Wait...

“At least?”

She shrugs, dismissing the question.

I could push for an answer, but truth be told, I’m not ready to hear it.

I'm not ready for her to admit she wants me just as much as I want her because if I do, there'll be no stopping. No retreating and no pretending I can stay away and maintain our friendship.

Despite the tight squeeze on the couch last night, I slept well for the first time since she had the flu. It's crazy how fast I became addicted to holding her close at night.

Three nights. That's all it took, and every night I spend without her, I'm tossing and turning as if I'm having a fit, uncomfortable because her hair isn't tickling my neck, or her elbow isn't digging into my ribs.

Thalia hops under the sheets while I strip down to my boxers and crawl in beside her. I pull her warm body closer, inhaling the soothing scent of her shampoo. She catches my hand, resting comfortably on her stomach, and starts toying with my fingers. I close my eyes, smiling like a cat that tipped over the fishbowl, my chin on the crown of her head.

This is too intimate for friends, so why does it feel right?

"Can I ask about the guy Logan hit?" she whispers.

I consider her words, surprised that my muscles stay loose, and my mind fails to conjure images that rile me up while she's pressed against me. "Long story short? We met in college and came up with a cool idea for a game. I was the artistic side of the project—animation and all. Kai took on programming. We spent three years perfecting the project, and when it was ready, he hacked my servers, erased any trace of my involvement, then sold the game to the highest bidder and made millions."

"I'm sorry..." she utters, squeezing my hand. "But I'm glad I helped before you did something you'd regret."

"Me too. Although I'd probably never regret it." I press my lips to her head. "Sleep. You must be exhausted."

She wiggles that perfect ass closer until we're almost fused together, then brings our hands higher and rests her cheek on my palm, our fingers interlaced.

"Good night," she whispers.

"Good night, *omorfiá*."

She's out within minutes, but it takes me much longer to fall asleep. I'm thinking.

Overthinking, really.

When the only step left to throw the weird friendship out the window is a kiss and wild sex, why am I not making a move? We've slept in the same

bed, taken a bath together, and we cuddle on the couch every day. We're basically a couple minus the most satisfying part...

An hour later, I'm relatively sure I have the answers to my questions, so I close my eyes and let myself sleep.

TWENTY

Thalia

THEO'S NOT IN BED when I wake up around noon.

Despite sleeping ten hours straight, I don't have a headache, even though I usually get one if I stay in bed too long. I guess my body must've needed the rest this time.

I grab the overnight bag, shower quickly, and get dressed. I did pack underwear for today, but I leave the lacy thongs where they are in the bag.

I'm done waiting for Theo to make a move.

I need him.

I want him.

And I'm ready to find out if we're on the same page because the tension is too much. He has no idea I felt his lips on my nape last night when he thought I fell asleep. He doesn't know I felt his thumb caress my cheek or how he kept pulling me closer, kissing my shoulder every time.

He doesn't know I'm secretly falling in love with him.

And I don't think he realizes how much he cares about me.

My hair is wet when I emerge from the guest bedroom's en suite, sticking to my neck. The tops of my boobs peek above the neckline of my short, blue summer dress.

Theo leans against the door, a phone in hand. He tucks it away, widening pupils wandering down my body. "Morning, sleepy head. I was starting to worry you fell into a coma."

My heart leaps out of my chest, but I cross the room to stop right before him. Slowly, I move my hands to the belt loops of his jeans, pushing my fingers under the hem of his t-shirt, up the sides of his hot body. The air around us thickens, hanging heavy, too hot to inhale. His eyes don't veer from mine as my heart pounds in my chest, matching his hastened pulse I feel under my fingertips.

"I don't want to be your *friend* anymore," I say quietly.

He grips my waist, yanking me closer with a shotgun-wedding urgency. “Kiss me,” he rasps in a low voice that sends tingles along my spine.

I know what he’s doing.

He’s coaxing a nonverbal consent, a confirmation that we want the same thing, that he’s not misinterpreting my words or body language.

I inch closer, removing my hands from under his t-shirt, our mouths millimeters apart. “If you want a kiss, you’ll have to take it.” I touch his shoulders, moving my lips to his ear. “I’m still not wearing panties.”

Theo spins us around and shoves me against the door. “That better not be true.” He digs his fingers into my waist, then glides his hand to my hips and inhales a shaky breath, touching the spot where the elastic of my panties should be, but isn’t. “You’ve got no idea what you started.”

“I flipped the safety on a loaded gun.” I bite my lip, inching back. “Pull the trigger, Theo.”

“Hold on...” He grips my jaw, bringing his lips to hover over mine, “...hold on very fucking tight, *omorfiá*.”

His fingers weave through my hair, and his mouth covers mine, tongue slipping in fast. As soon as he touches me, my mind races into a trance-like state of bliss. I knew this would be amazing, but imagination can’t rival reality. My traitorous body trembles in his arms, and Theo deepens the kiss, nibbling on my lips, tasting me over and over again.

I cinch his shoulders when he sweeps his fingers from my temple, down my neck, past the swell of my breast and lower, tracing the curve of my hip. “If I knew this is what I was missing out on, I would’ve dared you to kiss me sooner.”

He smirks, cupping my face and kisses me again, his tongue exploring my mouth in a sensual, rushed rhythm. The softness and fulness of his lips contradicts the demanding tempo of our mouths battling for dominance, battling to prove who wants the other more. My stomach cramps and tingles as he presses his whole body into mine.

“I can’t believe I fought this so long.” He cuffs my wrists and moves my hands to rest on his head, silently asking me to force him to his knees. “I’ve imagined this too fucking long.”

I take a wider stance, the anticipation like milky fog in my head as I put a bit of pressure on Theo’s head. He kneels and yanks the dress to my waist, hooking my knee over his shoulder.

His forehead rests against my abdomen, hot breath tickling me as he

nips the skin directly atop my pubic bone. He inhales deeply, breathing me in and driving me wild when his fingers disappear in the flesh of my hips. God, this is the most sensually erotic thing anyone has ever done to me. He savors every second as if he's been living in an apocalyptic world all alone and I'm the first dose of humanity he's encountered in years.

And then, without warning, his lips latch onto my clit, tearing a breathless moan out of my mouth. My eyes roll back into my head when he flicks his tongue over the sensitive, neglected bud before he licks me from bottom to top, groaning quietly as if he finally got what he wanted.

"So wet for me," he whispers, pushing his middle finger inside, and I almost faint when he bends it in a *come here* motion.

"Don't stop," I gasp, tugging on his hair. "Don't you dare... oh, *God...*"

"Shhhhh, little one, you have to be quiet."

His ring finger joins the action, stroking me gently in a torturous, slow rhythm that's the exact opposite of the frantic sucking and licking he inflicts with his hot mouth—a sensory overload. A mixture of slow and fast, gentle and rough.

My mind can't keep up, but my body takes what he offers and demands more. The orgasm builds fast, pleasure so intense there's no doubt in my mind the release will be spectacularly violent. I bring one hand to my lips, biting my hand to keep the moans at bay, but it's pointless.

I've never been the one to hold off. Keeping quiet goes against my instincts. After twenty months of pleasuring myself with a silicone cock, a real man's touch, *his* touch has me poised on the verge inside of two minutes.

"Shhhhh," he coos again, sucking on the overstimulated bundle of nerves, and my breathing hitches.

A wave of chaotic pleasure erupts between my legs, spreading to my spine and chest and lights up my mind. It swells, grows and when I think this is it, the orgasm slams into me, racing across my nerve endings like a hot, silk whip. White light flashes on the back of my eyelids as Theo grips my hips harder to keep me upright.

"That's it..." His warm breath fans my skin, his fingers prolonging my orgasm. "There you go, *omorfiá*. You needed that, didn't you? You needed *me*."

I bite the back of my hand, my body limp, legs no longer fit to hold my weight as the orgasm dies down, leaving me limp and satisfied beyond comprehension. Muffled moans ricochet off the walls when Theo unhooks

my leg, standing tall.

“*Naí. Naí. Kai páli, parakaló*^[6],” I pant, only half aware I switched to Greek.

He clasps his fingers around my throat, the other hand in my hair when he kisses me, and I get a second-hand taste of myself on his tongue. “Again, huh? Next time you come, it’ll be on my cock, but it sure won’t be in my brother’s guest bedroom.”

I’m still floating ten feet above the ground when I fist his shirt with both hands and push him toward the bed, not breaking the kiss until I have him on his back, covered with my body the way I’ve imagined and dreamed of for weeks.

I flip the button on his jeans and yank them down together with his boxers, wasting no time. His perfect, long cock stands to attention, begging for my touch. Since I laid my eyes on him, I knew he was packing good, and I wasn’t wrong. I shiver at the thought of having all those inches thrust inside me. I lick my lips, holding Theo’s gaze when I wrap my fingers around him, stroking in short moves.

“You think it was nice to hide *this* from me all this time?” I lean over him, speaking against his lips, my hair framing our faces. “Sharing is caring.”

He groans through a smile. “Thalia, we—” Words catch in his throat when I squeeze harder, slide down, dip my head, and take him into my mouth. “Fuck...” he rumbles, gathering my hair in both hands so he can watch as I slide my lips down his thick length. “Sweet fucking Jesus... don’t stop, little one.”

The control I have over him at this moment is exhilarating. He’s at my mercy, losing his mind as I sync the rhythm of my hand with my lips, pumping harder with a measured delight of a nymphomaniac.

The head of his swollen cock hits the back of my throat, forcing another low, satisfied growl out of him that spurs me on. I move my free hand up his stomach and brace against his neck, putting just enough pressure on his throat to intensify the oncoming orgasm.

And when he comes, it’s all over my neck.

I lift my gaze, mesmerized by the vein throbbing along the column of his neck, hooded eyes, and parted lips. He’s perfectly still for a few intense seconds, lips parted as warm trickles of his cum splash against my skin. I drop my hand from his neck, satisfied by the ecstasy flickering in his aroused irises.

I lean back a little, resting on my calves, and Theo sits, stroking his thumb along my bottom lip, eyes on the trickle of his seed adorning my neck.

“Pearls suit you,” he says, breathing on the quick side. “I’ll put a string on your neck every now and then.”

I cup his face and steal another kiss, hooked on the fluttering of my heart when his tongue teases mine slowly.

He breaks away first, stamping a sweet peck on my nose. “That’s our friendship officially ruined.”

“We were never meant to be friends. You wanted to fuck me on day one, but you changed your mind halfway through the evening, remember?”

“Because you’re too good to fuck and forget.”

“This,” I point between us, “is in no way over, or anywhere *near* over, and it won’t be over anytime soon, Theo. Understood? I licked you. You’re mine.”

“I licked you too,” he smirks.

“Then I’m yours.”

He grips my jaw again and captures my lips, the kiss different from the others... slow, sensual, and full of passion. Designed to prove he thinks the same—we’re not over.

We’ve barely begun.

“We need to get you cleaned up.” He pats my thigh, urging me to get moving. “Everyone’s waiting for us with lunch.”

“Lunch? Baby, if you’re hungry... eat me.”

“I will.” He curls his fingers under my chin. “As soon as we’re home, you’re all I’ll eat until we fall asleep.”

I hop off the bed, pull my dress down, and head to the bathroom, my mind at ease. “Promises, promises.”

Theo chuckles behind me. “You’re asking for trouble.”

I take the pearl necklace off with a wet washcloth, smiling when Theo stops behind me, flips my hair over one shoulder, and presses hot, open-mouthed kisses to my neck and shoulder.

“You’ll be my biggest weakness, *omorfiá*.”

I drop the washcloth in the sink and knot my hands around his neck. “Good, you’ve been mine for a while now.”

TWENTY-ONE

Theo

ALONE. We're finally alone after sitting through a three-hour-long meal with my brothers, who just couldn't refrain from telling Thalia all the embarrassing stories about her boyfriend—namely me.

Yeah, it's official.

I'm a boyfriend, and my girlfriend? That woman is wild. Passionate. Determined. She takes no prisoners and speaks her mind. I'm almost ashamed that *she* had to be the one to act on the burning lust that consumed us both since I approached her at *Tortugo* all those weeks ago. Almost. I'm mostly just fucking grateful that the hardest part, the first step, is over.

After the mind-blowing blowjob, I took her downstairs and sat us on the oversized couch in Nico's living room. I couldn't deny myself holding Thalia close, so I sat her on my lap.

Shawn and Jack grinned like idiots, Nico treated me with a rare half-smile, and Logan boomed *fucking finally* when I wrapped my arms around Thalia's middle, making my new, in-a-relationship status known. There was no hiding it. No playing it down... not that I wanted to play it down.

She's mine. She was mine the moment I saw her. I just needed a tiny push to act, and she pushed—refusing to stay in the weird, too intimate friendzone.

If not her, it would've been me.

I already decided last night that I want her for myself. She just beat me to the stage.

Ares greets us at the doorway, jumping and barking. The condo is in a state of absolute chaos. I guess he doesn't like spending the night alone. He demonstrated his disapproval by chewing my shoes and the corner of the rug under the coffee table. He peed on it too.

Whatever.

I've got more important things on my mind than cleaning up the mess.

“We should take him out for a walk,” Thalia says, bending to scratch his ears and putting a dent in my plans.

“We should get you naked,” I counter, hauling her into my arms to capture her lips with mine.

Now that I can, I’ll probably be kissing her every goddamn minute of the day. I’ve been thinking about pushing inside her for three hours straight, and I’m about ready to explode.

Thalia inches away. “Patience, baby. You take him for a walk, I’ll clean this mess, and then we’ll get naked and *stay* naked until the morning.” She pecks my cheek, rushing away before I can grab her and try to change her mind.

“Fine,” I huff, snatching the leash off the hook by the door. “Half an hour, not a minute longer.”

She gives me a wiggly wave when I clasp the leash to Ares’s collar and take him out for a very, *very* quick run at the nearby park. He sprints after a ball, running so fast he trips over his paws a few times. He’s not a gracious dog, and it’s Thalia’s fault. They spend too much time together. Ares is growing to be as clumsy as his mummy.

She walks into doorframes, bumps her head against open kitchen cabinets and drops things all the fucking time. There’s always at least one band-aid on her, usually on her fingers that she accidentally cuts with a knife while cooking.

There’s no denying that Ares is ours, not just mine. Thalia loves that dog, and he loves her back. It’d be sweet if he loved me more, but I’m shit out of luck. Thalia’s his favorite.

I keep throwing the ball for twenty minutes, then put Ares back on the leash and head home, my step bouncier than usually. Thalia’s in the kitchen, and the condo is spotless. She rests against the countertop, a cup of coffee in hand.

“Why aren’t you naked?” I ask, crossing the room and yanking my t-shirt over my head. She laughs when I grasp the edge of the counter, admiring her rosy cheeks. “Kiss me and strip.”

She takes a sip, savoring the brown, bitter liquid, making a show of moaning in delight. “Do you want a coffee?”

“No, I don’t want a fucking coffee.” I dip my head to kiss her neck. “I want you naked, shaking and screaming my name loud enough for the whole street to know what it is.” I set the cup aside, and fucking devour her.

My tongue sweeps the inseam of her mouth. With a short sigh, she lets me in deeper, bringing her hands to my jaw so she can steer my face. I grab onto her round ass, lifting Thalia into my arms. Her warm, wet pussy presses against my abdomen when she flings her legs around my waist, clinging to me.

“I waited patiently,” she whispers, tracing the muscles on my back. “I waited for you, Theo. So many nights dreaming of your touch.”

“God, Thalia, *moró mou* [7].”

She shudders, and I’m dazed by the heat radiating off us. Our kiss intensifies with every step closer to my bedroom. I can’t see where I’m going with my lips firmly on hers, but I’ve made this trip many times in the dark.

“Say it again,” she utters when I lay her on the bed, needy, wet, and ready for me.

“*Moró mou*,” I whisper, pulling the dress over her head, then unclasp her bra and sit back, admiring the view. Smooth, olive skin, swollen, rosy lips, and aroused brown eyes. “You’re so fucking beautiful, little one.”

She yanks me down, and I trail a line of kisses across her neck, cupping her breast. The pad of my thumb toys with her pebbled nipple before I continue the journey down her warm body. She parts her lips, back arching as I reach between her legs to caress the wet, warm flesh.

I’m transfixed, mesmerized by the pure bliss on her gorgeous face when her eyes flutter closed. How did I keep myself in check for so long? And why?

Who the fuck was I kidding?

She drops her hands on the pillow, surrendering her body and mind to me, my touch, and my demands. I slide my lips down the silk curve of her neck, dying to taste the candy pink nipples. I curl my tongue around one, sucking and nipping, making her cry out, and she reaches up, tangling her fingers through my hair to hold me in place, silently begging for more.

And more she’ll get.

I let my hunger for her take the reins. There’s no way I can attempt to control the white-hot burning lust when every touch of my hands on her body sends her into a frenzy. She’s famished. Desperate for human connection, touching, kissing, and feeling someone close after twenty months of zero intimacy.

She claws my back, drawing long lines from my nape, down my shoulder blades and sides until she reaches the elastic band of my sweatpants.

She pushes her petite hand inside my boxers and wraps her fingers around my cock.

“I want another taste,” she says, stroking and squeezing me in short, measured moves.

That might be the sexiest sentence I’ve ever heard. A man can tell if a woman enjoys going down on him or if she sucks because she has to. Thalia definitely enjoys bringing me to the brink with just her lips. She’s so fucking good at it that I half expect she took a *how to handle a dick* class.

I won the lottery with this one...

I haul her up, maneuvering her until she’s the one on top, and I’m lying with my head propped against the pillow. She throws my boxers over her shoulder, licking her lips as if she’s about to taste her favorite dessert, but then she frowns and hops out of bed.

“One second!” She rushes out of the room, her boobs bouncing along the way.

I’m on my back, and my dick stands at attention like some badass, angry, bald general. On-hold music is all that’s missing, but thankfully, I’m not eleventh in line before an operator will be with me. Thalia’s only gone ten seconds and reappears with her hair tied in a messy ponytail.

God, you created perfection.

“Ready.” She smiles, running her hands up my thighs, and her warm breath fans the head of my cock. She tastes the first drop of precum, as graceful fingers wrap tightly around the hilt, stroking me slowly. She licks the overly sensitive crest before her pink lips touch the head, and she sucks me into her mouth.

I damn near come on the spot.

A soft moan vibrates up my shaft, the sensation incomparable to what I’ve experienced before. She sinks deeper, her moves hasty as the head of my cock hits the back of her throat.

“You’re so fucking good at this, *omorfiá*,” I groan, barely closing my fingers around her heavy ponytail.

She’s a pro, alternating between pumping and toying with my balls while keeping up the demanding tempo of her lips. I won’t survive much longer. I can already feel the orgasm building at the base of my spine, and there’s no way I’ll spill anywhere other than her pussy this time.

Thalia’s erotic hum fills my head, the silk of her mouth almost tipping me over the edge a few seconds before she releases my cock with a soft pop.

“Now *you* get a taste,” she says, biting the tip of her index finger and climbing higher with a cheeky smile, her knees on both sides of my head. “Deep breath, baby.”

“Where the fuck have you been all my life?” I hook my elbows under her thighs when she’s close enough, grab her waist and yank her down, pressing her hot pussy to my lips.

She tastes like heaven, sunshine, spring rain, and everything that makes me feel good. I’ll spend a lot of time between her thighs. My head spins when I lick her back to front, flicking my tongue over the swollen bud. Every time I do that, she bucks against me, her gasps growing louder.

“Please...” she utters, grinding over my face, “*mi stamatás.*”

I don’t need a dictionary to translate the words—*don’t stop*. Sexy... she’s so sexy when she plays with her boobs, focused solely on the pleasure coursing through her body.

The most arousing sight I’ve ever witnessed.

I tease her entrance with my tongue but don’t push in. Not this time. Soon, but not yet. My cock needs to be inside her next, or I’ll be damned.

Her moans come more frequently, and she rides my face faster while the orgasm builds, gaining momentum. I’m torn between wanting to taste her as she comes and wanting to feel her pulse around my cock, but the need to claim her wins.

I grip her thighs, stopping her movements. “Not yet.”

“Please, Theo—”

“Shhhhh.” I flip her over, spreading her thighs with my knee, I’m hypnotized by her flustered face, bright eyes, and swollen lips when I slide my cock along her wet folds, testing my own patience. “This time, you’ll come with me.”

I glance away from the beautiful girl in my bed for one second when I lean back to open the bedside cabinet, but it’s enough for her skillful fingers to find her clit.

My cock swells, the fullness of my balls painful, while my courageous brunette brings herself to the brink of a breathtaking release. I rip the condom packet with my teeth, slide it on and clutch Thalia’s wrists, stopping her efforts before she spoils the fun for us both.

“*Not*. Yet. You come when I come.” My knees dig into the bed, the head of my cock nestling between her folds. “Brace, little one,” I rasp, plunging inside slowly, her warmth and wetness engulfing me inch by inch.

I press forward, my eyes glued to the relaxed heat of hers as she gasps and trembles, arching her back, eyes fluttering closed. I dip my head, nipping her shoulder as I thrust in the last inch. “There you go... fuck, you’re perfect.”

I lace our fingers, holding her hands close to her head and push in deeper, watching her teeth sink into her bottom lip. Lust burns through us, feral and fierce, when I retreat, settling for a rushed, intense rhythm, loving how her tight pussy sucks me in. Big, perky boobs bounce in sync with my thrusts, and a mist of sweat covers our bodies within minutes. Hastened breaths, soft gasps, and low growls fill the room.

Thalia lifts her knees, wrapping her legs around my waist, and arches her hips to meet my hurried strokes. I sink deeper, stroking that vital spot that makes her shudder and moan.

“Let me touch you,” she breathes, wrestling against my hold on her hands, and as soon as I let go, she cups my face and pulls me down, bruising my lips with demanding kisses. I rest the weight of my body on one elbow, holding onto her ass, driving into her harder and deeper when her walls tighten around me. I never cared if the woman in my bed reached her high, but I want Thalia to come.

I *need* her to come.

I want her to lose herself in my arms, but she’s not quite there. Almost... so close, but not quite there.

“Tell me what you need,” I say when she bites my lip, writhing beneath me. “Tell me what to do, little one.”

She shoves my hand between us, forcing my fingers onto her clit. I rub tight circles for a few seconds before Thalia’s breathing comes in short, desperate puffs. She searches my face, eyes unfocused, every sound escaping her lips louder. My moves quicken with every thrust, the realization I finally have her hits me out of the blue and my entire body shudders, flooded by a wave of intense heat spreading in all directions.

“Fuck,” I stammer. “Watching you take me... your beautiful face... knowing you’re *mine*...” Another wave of blazing heat spills inside my chest. “I’ve imagined this moment a thousand times, but—”

“Reality can’t compare,” she finishes for me. “God, I-I’m... I’m so close, I think I’m go—”

“Fucking *come*,” I clip, rubbing her faster. “Now, *omorfíá*.”

She moves with me, frantically grasping for release. “Th-Theo,” she stammers, losing her sanity. Her back bows off the bed as she shakes,

moaning so fucking loud I'm sure the whole building can hear her. "Oh, God... Theo, yes!"

Her legs lock around my back, and I topple over the edge with her, unable to hold off as I watch the pure, raw ecstasy paint her face. My orgasm hits me like a lightning bolt, all-consuming and powerful, enough to blur my vision with white spots. I stop deep inside her, holding onto her hip, fingers digging into the soft flesh as if that can anchor me in place, or else I might float the fuck away. We're both spent, our breaths sawing in and out. I don't think I ever came this hard.

"Shit," I huff on a deep exhale. "That was—"

"Amazing," she finishes, a blissful smile blooming over her swollen, cherry lips.

"Don't move." I nudge her nose with mine, stamping a kiss on her head. "Stay here. I'll be back in a minute."

I stand on weak legs, my muscles burning more than after the harshest workout, and my heart drums in my chest. I lock myself in the bathroom, staring at my reflection: messy hair, bright eyes, and long flared lines on my back. I discard the condom, clean up, and hold onto the edge of the porcelain sink.

Normally, by the time I emerge from the bathroom, the woman who hit my sheets is dressed or halfway through the task, but that won't be the case today. Thalia lives here. It's not like she'll kiss me goodbye and let herself out.

She couldn't if she tried.

She's mine and going nowhere. It's confusing as hell that I'm *relieved* instead of anxious. Twenty-four hours ago, the idea of a relationship gave me a headache because what do I know about caring for a woman the way she deserves?

Now that I'm with Thalia, the doubts disappear.

I can do this.

And I can do it well.

I've been taking care of her since she moved in here. Not much will change, and whatever will is just a welcome bonus: mind-blowing sex and my status.

In a relationship.

Thalia's still in bed, naked body covered with a blanket, her face half-buried between two pillows. She let her hair down, the mass of curls draped

over one shoulder.

I crawl in beside her, oddly at peace when her lips swipe along my neck. She pushes me to my back and cuddles into my side, forcing my arms around her exhausted, hot frame. I don't skip a beat, pulling her closer, holding onto the beautiful brunette for dear life.

This is just the beginning. The very *start* of us.

"I guess I need to move out," she whispers, ghosting her fingers up and down my torso, tracing every curve.

"Yeah, I guess you do." I kiss her temple, then grip her jaw, twist her head up and find those perfect lips. She tenses a little, unsure if I'm joking. "You need to vacate the guest bedroom and move your stuff in here, *omorfiá*."

TWENTY-TWO

Thalia

“GIRLS’ NIGHT OUT!” Cass exclaims on Friday at the end of our shift. “I want all the saucy details about you and Theo.”

The news about us spread like wildfire on Monday when Theo took me to work and made a show of kissing me outside the front door, where the cart girls waited for Cassidy to arrive and open the Club.

Despite her high absence rate, she’s the only one Jared trusts with keys, even though he’s the one being dragged out of bed whenever she doesn’t show up for work.

A pleasant heat rushed through me at Theo’s willingness to claim me in public instead of keeping our relationship a secret.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask, stripping out of the uniform and into a summer dress. “And who’s coming?”

“Same as last time, plus Kaya. We went to college together, and now she’s the new head of marketing at the Country Club. You might’ve seen her at the party last week.” She lowers her voice before shedding more light on the subject. “She’s the one who slept with Nico.”

Oh, the beautiful brunette. “Fine, what time? Are we meeting at *Tortugo*?”

“No. We’re getting ready at your place.”

“You mean Theo’s place. I thought you hated him.” I stash the uniform in my locker. “You know I have to check with Theo if that’s okay, right?”

“Yeah, I know. Oh! Shit, I almost forgot!” She points to an obscenely large bouquet of red roses in a vase on one of the tables. “These are for you. I signed for them earlier.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “I never pegged Theo for a man who sends his girl flowers.”

Neither have I. “Are you sure those are for me?”

“Is there another Thalia working here?”

“I guess not.”

“Exactly. You should be bouncing up and down, hugging those damn roses, and squealing. You’re one lucky bitch.” She glances at the flowers again, eyes dull, lips curling down slightly.

“Hey, listen,” I say, touching her arm. “If you ever want to talk about—” I trail off, unsure whether mentioning Logan is a good idea. “About anything, I’m here.”

She grimaces again, biting her lip, then curls her lips into a crooked smile, wrapping her arms around me for a brief hug. “Thanks, babe, but there’s not much of a story here,” she sighs, defeated. “I’m okay. It’s just taking an extraordinarily long time to rid the feelings, you know? Logan and I... I thought we were heading in the right direction, you know? But I messed up, and I’m paying the price.”

“There’s always a story. How about we grab a coffee sometime next week, and you can tell me all about it?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think talking is what I need. Don’t worry about me, okay? I’m tougher than I look.”

“You know where to find me if you change your mind. Just say the word.”

“Thanks, babe, it means a lot.” She kisses my cheek. “Text me once you get the go-ahead from your man.” She flings a bag over her shoulder and walks through the back exit to get to the employee parking lot.

Maybe I shouldn’t push Cass for answers, but despite her sweet smiles and outgoing demeanor, I can see that she’s hurting, and there’s more to it than Logan and heartbreak. She might not yet trust me enough to open up since we’ve not known each other long, but I’ve grown fond of her, and I hope my relationship with Theo won’t affect our blooming friendship.

With my own heavy sigh, I pull the flowers out, holding them in the crook of my elbow, and search for a note amongst the roses.

*Roses are red, and freesias are blue.
Baby, I’m lost. I keep thinking of you.*

*Roses are white, and lilies are green.
You chose a knight, but I’ll make you my queen.*

It’s the thought that counts, right?

I hate roses, and the poem is cringeworthy, but knowing Theo went to

the trouble, my heart swells by two sizes. He's not the one to voice his emotions and feelings aloud, but he took the time to write the poem, however awful it may be. It's his way of telling me that he cares, that I'm important, and mean more to him than any other woman.

With the bouquet in hand, I leave the building through the main door, smiling when my eyes come across Theo. He's waiting outside with Ares on a leash.

"There she is..." he says, tucking his phone away. He cinches my nape, pulling me closer for a deep kiss.

"Thank you." I peck his cheek, holding the flowers upright. "They're beautiful."

Theo steps back, yanking the bouquet out of my hand. "Those aren't from me. I know you don't like roses." He pulls out the small note. Muscles in his jaw tick as he reads. "What the fuck?" he clips, striding toward the trash can by the main entrance. "They're from Dean, right?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Cassidy signed for them when I was out on the golf course. Does it matter? It's just flowers."

"Of course, it matters! You think I'll hang back while some asshole tries to steal you from me?"

A raging fire burns my cheeks, matching his anger and raising the stakes. "You think anyone *can* steal me? You think I'll leave you because someone sent me flowers?" I shove at him, puffing and pawing like a fighting bull, my voice bordering on shouting. "Don't forget you're the one who didn't want *me*, not the other way around. You have no right to doubt me, and you better make sure it's the first and last time you ever do."

Theo's lips curve into a smile, dowsing the small torches swirling in his dark eyes. He grips my wrist, yanking me toward him for a kiss. "I didn't want you?" he scoffs, amused, almost fascinated by the idea. "You shouldn't have said that, little one. Wait till we get home." He dips his head to whisper in my ear. "I'll fuck you until those stupid thoughts are gone, and you understand that you're all I want."

One sentence and my chest tightens with breathless, fidgety anticipation. My nipples harden under the thin fabric of my summer dress, and my mouth turns dry and hot.

"We better hurry." I weave my fingers through the hair at the back of his head, pulling gently. "Cass invited me to a girls' night tonight, and she wants us to get ready at your place."

“Our place,” he corrects. “You live there too. I don’t see a problem, but...” he skims his lips along the sweep of my cheek. “...you’re interfering with my plan of keeping you naked all evening, so I have one condition.”

“You want me naked before they come over?”

“You’re very clever.”

“So I’ve been told.” I slip my hand lower, stroking his cock through the thick fabric of his black jeans. He’s already hard. I bite my cheek, peering up at him. “Someone’s happy to see me.”

“He’s always fucking happy to see you,” he grinds out, pressing himself into my touch, my hand trapped between our bodies. “Makes me feel ten years younger.” I tiptoe my fingers up, tugging on the zipper, but he cuffs my wrist. “Careful, little one. If you don’t want me to yank that pretty dress up and fuck you against the building, you better not slip your hand inside my pants in public.”

I chuckle, squeezing him one last time. “Tempting, but I can’t lose this job, so we’ll have to find a different spot for indecent behavior.”

“I know just the place.”

We fall into step, crossing the parking lot and taking a shortcut through a labyrinth of side streets to a park where Theo lets Ares run around, chasing squirrels.

“Are you sure you don’t mind the girls coming over? I can tell Cassidy we’ll do it at her place.”

“I’m sure. What time are they coming?”

I pull my phone out to shoot her a text.

Me: What time should I expect you all?

Cass: Around six.

“Cassidy said six.”

When we get back to the condo, Theo immediately lifts me into his arms and carries me into the bathroom. I don’t get to strip off my clothes before he stands me in the shower and turns on the water, wetting my hair and dress.

I’m addicted to his touch.

Every time he thrusts inside me, my mind turns off. There’s no inner monologue or fantasies designed to help me come as there once were with other men. No, when I’m with Theo, I live the fantasy. He’s not gentle, but I

never enjoyed romantic sex. He's rough, hungry for my body, and demanding.

The one obstacle we struggle with and try hard to work through is my inability to reach an orgasm without the aid of his fingers on my clit. It's just not happening. Theo hits the perfect spot over and over again, and the orgasm is right there... looming within my reach, but unless he circles my clit a few times, I can't fall over the edge.

We're not waving the white flag, though. Theo's getting too creative for his own good with new positions in search of the one that may trigger my orgasm, but we're not making much progress so far.

Still, sex with Theo is *amazing*.

It's an endeavor. A ritual. I'm starved for his touch, his kisses, and the all-encompassing pleasure coursing through me whenever he pins me to the mattress, the wall, or any other surface he deems fit. I love that we're both sex-crazed to an extent, unable to keep our hands off each other for longer than a few hours at a time. I've not had sex for twenty months, and I sure am catching up now.

"Since you're going out, I'll ask the guys to come over for a few beers," he says when we're getting dressed in the bedroom half an hour later. Water drips from his hair, the shimmering beads dotting his broad, tanned chest. All the Hayes are naturally a few tones darker in complexion than the average American, and they have their Brazilian grandmother to thank for that. "Stop looking at me like that," he adds.

"Like what?"

"Like you want to lick me."

My teeth sink into my lower lip. "Is it my fault you're so incredibly handsome?"

He drapes an arm around my ribs, my boobs resting on his forearm when he turns us to face the mirror. "We do make one good-looking couple... especially when you're naked." He nips my neck, soothing the sting with a kiss. "So sexy."

"Enough," I chuckle, freeing myself out of his grasp.

Theo opens the closet to retrieve a two-piece red outfit off the hanger. "Wear this. I'll enjoy taking it off later."

I eye the tight, short skirt and a matching spaghetti-strap blouse with a deep V-neck. It's revealing to say the least. "You don't mind me going out in this when you're not around?"

He smirks, tossing the outfit on the bed. “You can wear whatever you want. You deal with shitheads like a pro, but...” Grabbing my throat, he pushes me against the mirror. I’m sure he’s aiming for *intimidation*, but mischief dances in his eyes and the tender touch ruins the effect. “If any suicidal asshole dares to touch you, I know how to fight.”

“You need to let me go,” I whisper on a sigh. “You’re making me wet all over again, and we don’t have time for another round.” I peck his lips, then duck under his arm.

Instead of the clothes he chose, I open the closet again to grab a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. “I’ll make pasta before I put on the very provocative clothing you picked out.”

“You’re not cooking. I ordered takeout.”

“Why?” I huff, spinning around to shove my finger in his chest. “I have time. I’ll make cold wraps.”

“The girls will be here soon, and I want your pussy for dessert, so no, you don’t have time to cook tonight.”



The doorbell sounds five minutes after I was served as dessert on the kitchen island. I barely had time to slip into the red outfit Theo chose and rush out of the bedroom to get the door, my hair looking like something rats made a nest out of.

Four girls are already in the living room, all dressed and done up to perfection, ready to party. Cass introduces Kaya while they make themselves at home on the couch. A sweet, pungent mixture of four kinds of perfumes filters through the condo, covering the faint, aromatic smell of takeout.

“I thought ‘we were getting ready here,’” I say, eyeing their makeup and hairdos. “You said—”

“That was a misdirection, babe,” Cassidy chuckles, handing Theo a bottle of bubbly with a well-practiced, spoiled look twisting her features. “Be a doll and open it for us,” she says, the claws retracted and disdain that studded her voice when she told him to choke on his beer at *Tortugo*, now absent.

“Misdirection?” I echo, eyebrows knotted in the middle.

“It means that by saying you’ll get ready together, she meant you’ll have a few drinks and bitch about guys,” Theo explains, pulling five flutes out of

the cupboard.

“Okay, I didn’t know *that*, so I’ll have to get ready.”

“Oh, goody!” Amy cheers, bouncing in her seat with Ares in her lap. She might need new make-up in a minute because she’s letting the dog lick hers off. “Dibs on your eye makeup! I have no idea what to do with your hair.”

Theo pops the bubbly open and fills our glasses, handing them out like a professional waiter. Before I get mine, he grips my jaw, stealing a quick, hot kiss. “I’m taking Ares for a walk. Don’t leave until I come back.”

As soon as the words *Ares* and *walk* leave his mouth in quick succession, the dog abandons Amy’s lap, sprinting to the door, jumping as high as Theo’s middle. He’s overly excited, considering this will be his third walk of the day. Theo’s only taking him out to escape the *bitching about guys* part.

“I think I know what to do with your hair,” Kaya says, coming closer. I can’t get over how anyone can look this flawless. Her make-up is so beautiful she looks photoshopped. If any woman could convince me to play for the other team, she’d be it. There’s not one tiny hair out of place on her head. Not one blemish on her symmetrical face, cheekbones like hewn in stone. How fucking unfair. “May I?” she urges, making me realize I’ve been scrutinizing her for God knows how long.

“Oh, yes, sure. Sorry, I was just... miles away.”

I receive movie star treatment for half an hour while four girls tend to my hair and makeup, firing questions about my relationship with Theo.

“Your pussy must have magic powers,” Mary-Jane giggles, contouring my lips. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Theo dating.”

“*Pussio irresistibilis!*” Kaya laughs, waving an imaginary wand. “*Cockus gripus!*”

At that moment, Theo returns, his eyebrows drawn together but lips flickering with amusement. “I’ve been gone half an hour. How much did you drink?”

Kaya turns to Theo, fighting to keep a straight face while the other girls giggle so hard MJ is tearful. She raises her hand, pointing the invisible wand at his chest. “*Orgasmus neverendus!*”

Theo lets Ares off the leash, chuckling under his breath. “Will you need a bucket when you come back, *omorfiá?*”

“*Thalius nopukus,*” I announce. I should lay off the bubbly immediately.

“I’ll stick to caipirinha at the club.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. If you come back too drunk, there will be no *orgasmus*, little one. What time are you leaving?”

Cass checks her watch. “Soon. I’ll order a cab now.”

“Don’t. Colt and Conor will take you there.” He pulls a phone out to call his brothers.

Fifteen minutes later, my hair is in an up-do, and my make-up never looked better—not half as beautiful as Kaya’s, but I’m not half as beautiful as her, so best not to expect miracles.

The door to the apartment opens, Nico leading the way with a case of beer in hand, and in come the rest of the Hayes, minus Cody. Jack and a few guys I remember from the party, follow behind.

A small commotion erupts while the girls filter through the crowd toward the door. Cassidy keeps to the side, suddenly silent and insecure, her eyes following Logan’s every move.

He pays her no attention, twirling me around his finger, a slightly roguish smile on his face as he turns to Theo. “You’ve got nerves of steel letting your girl out dressed like that, bro.”

“They can look, but they can’t touch,” I say, tapping my cheek, urging him to stamp a kiss there.

“Sure, they can’t.” He agrees after the customary cheek-peck. “Everyone knows you’re Theo’s. No one will take the risk. Have fun tonight.”

Shawn and Jack check me out next, taking a liking to my outfit, while Nico’s eyes hardly veer away from Kaya, his shoulders rolled back, eyes slipping down her frame. A vein on his neck pulses at the sight of her short dress, and I’m not sure if he’s turned on or pissed off. Either way, it looks like I might not be the only one whose pussy has magical powers. After all, Nico Hayes is not one to look at a woman again after she has already hit his sheets. At least, according to Theo.

“Call me when you’re ready to come home. Cody will pick you up.” Theo pulls me to his side. “You’re so fucking hot, baby...” he breathes in my ear. “...don’t let anyone touch you.”

“I’ll be good.” I peck his lips. “Have fun.”

TWENTY-THREE

Thalia

PARTY OF FIVE TURNS INTO A PARTY OF TWELVE within an hour of arriving at Q. Girls voted to skip Tortugo in favor of dancing, where MJ spotted a few friends from college, and Kaya dragged two complete strangers into our booth.

I keep a steady pace with caipirinhas while the girls stick to bubbly, chatting, laughing, and rating the guys watching us from the bar on a scale of doability.

One is not even if he were the last man on earth, and ten is I'd let him fuck me right here on this table.

We move to the dance floor when a local DJ starts his set at nine. Most girls pick off random men to dance with, and within moments it's just Amy and me dancing alone. In the next moment, she's snatched up too.

Now that I'm with Theo, I won't let any man into my personal space, so I retreat to the bar, swaying to the music as I wait to be served. "Caipirinha, please," I yell to the bartender over the blaring music. "And a glass of water."

I whirl around, watching my friends dance and spot Kaya writhing around a tall, older man, his hands under her dress, cupping her ass. She beams, her moves clumsy as she sways on her feet, eyes hooded, distant.

I tell the bartender to keep my order behind the counter, sauntering across the dancefloor to save Kaya from letting that man fuck her at the back of the club. The thought of leaving her to fend for herself makes my teeth crack together.

"I'm fine!" she yells when I grab her hand, her gaze unfocused. She drank three brimming flutes of bubbly while doing my hair and had already downed two drinks since we entered Q half an hour ago. "Feel his dick!" she grabs my hand steering it toward the inseam of the man's pants. "It's *huge!*"

I yank my hand back before it makes contact. "You're drunk, girl. Come on, you need fresh air and a glass of water."

She doesn't listen, righting her stance, eyes back on the silver fox beside her, who now looks positively annoyed with me. He snakes one arm around her waist, dragging her further into the crowd.

No way I'll leave Kaya unattended. She's not thinking clearly, giving the guy a perfect opportunity to seize the moment. Whether she likes it or not, I'm not leaving her alone while she can't stitch together a coherent sentence. Cassidy is nearby, utterly disinterested with the guy she's dancing with. It takes nothing more than us locking eyes and me mouthing *come with me* for her to ditch him.

"What's wrong?" she yells in my ear.

"Kaya's wasted. She's basically dry humping that guy." I point toward them, and my stomach churns. His hand is now under her dress... by the look of things, he's fingering her in the middle of the club. "We need to get her out of here, Cass."

"Yeah..." She wrinkles her nose, swatting at the air. "Ignore it, and don't worry about Kaya. She probably asked him to fuck her ten times already. She always does stupid shit like that when she's drunk."

"That doesn't mean we should leave her alone!"

Cass huffs but ends up waving over Mary-Jane and Amy. The four of us separate Kaya from the obnoxious man, using our bodies as a cage for the drunk brunette. He tries to put up a fight, the outline of his hard dick clearly visible under the fabric of his jeans, but he gives up when I get in his face, threatening him with security.

"Should we call her a cab?" MJ asks once we safely deposit Kaya in the booth upstairs. "She's wasted."

"No cabs. You don't know if the driver won't take advantage of her. Give me a minute. I'll ask Theo to send one of the triplets. Get Kaya a glass of water." I walk through the back exit to the large smoking area on the balcony, pressing my phone to my ear.

"Done already?" he asks.

"No, but could you ask one of the triplets to take Kaya home? She's really drunk. We just pulled a very touchy-feely guy off her." I turn my back on the few people enjoying a cigarette. "She should go home while she can still walk."

"Are *you* alright?" He asks, and the chatter in the background drops in volume as if everyone's listening in on our conversation. "He didn't touch you, did he?"

“No, I’m fine.”

“Good. What about Kaya? Is she okay?”

I lower my voice to a whisper. “I’m pretty sure he had his fingers inside her in the middle of the dance floor, but I doubt she’ll remember it tomorrow.”

“Some party. I’ll send Cody over. Are you staying?”

“I think so. Unless the girls want to leave, but it doesn’t look like they care that much. I’ll let you know either way.”

“Yeah, okay. Stay safe, *omorfiá*.”

Clutching the phone firmly in my hand so I won’t miss Cody’s call, I go back inside. Minutes tick by, my party mood deteriorating fast. Even more so when Kaya steals MJ’s flute and dries down the glass in one go, arguing with Cassidy. Her hands fly all over the place, missing MJ’s face by a hair’s breadth.

“Told you,” Cass mutters to me. “Don’t get me wrong, we all like to party, but Kaya’s out of control.”

“Don’t act like her bestie,” Kaya snaps, slurring her words. “You fucked her boyfriend!”

My cheeks instantly chill as if all blood has drained from my face. I gawk at Cassidy, waiting for her to deny it, but she chews her lip, cornflower-blue eyes avoiding my gaze. I knew she slept with one of the Hayes brothers, but considering how she acts around Logan, my money was on him.

Theo didn’t even cross my mind.

Now I know what she meant earlier when she told me she *messed up* and why she didn’t want to share the story.

Theo’s past is just that, a *past*. I’d never confront him about it, especially since I have a closet full of skeletons he’s yet to learn about, but if he slept with her after we met, that’s a different story.

“When?” I ask, feeling sick. “I... I thought it was Logan!”

“Yeah,” Kaya giggles, arms crossed, a bitch face laced with disdain on display. “She fucked them both.”

Holy mother of baby Jesus...

“Both?” I repeat, testing the word. I know the definition, but... shit, my head’s pulsing, and my hands turn clammy, and I can’t shake the *how’s that possible* out of my system. “*Both?*”

Cass’s chin quivers, but she gets a hold of herself before any tears spill. “It was last year. Theo and I... God, it was *nothing*, Thalia. I swear.” She

grabs my hand as if she's afraid I'll get up and leave. Or maybe she's casually restraining me, thinking I'll smack her face. I've not ruled it out. "One night," she continues. "Two strangers. It was just for fun. We met like an hour earlier at the bar, Thalia. Please don't hate me. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but it was so long ago, and it meant nothing to either of us, I promise."

"You sure don't act like Logan meant nothing!" I yank my hand away. "Why should I believe you?"

Her eyes stop sparkling, filling with tears, her cheeks rosy. "Logan's a different story. We were close, we went out for drinks a few times and had dinner, and I didn't know Logan when I hooked up with Theo, and I had no idea they were brothers when I met Logan a few days later. It all happened so fast." She swallows hard, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "It's just different, okay? I cared about Logan. Theo was a mistake, I swear."

The kicked-puppy demeanor doesn't suit Cassidy, but it rings genuine. She's upset and scared of my reaction, which tells me she cares about me and my feelings.

I take a deep breath, rationalizing. Theo's lived here all his life. The city is full of women who were under or over him at some point, but not one was kept for longer than one night.

Knowing my friend slept with the guy I'm falling in love with is not an image I want in my head, but tossing the friendship aside over what she called a mistake that happened long before I knew either of them is irrational at best. Theo's mine. He's with me, and Cassidy gave me no reason for jealousy the few times I've seen her around him.

"Are we okay?" she asks, pumping her frail fingers around my wrist. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No... we're okay, just don't mention it again." I lower my voice. "And you've got to tell me what the deal is with you and Logan now. I know you're not over him, Cass."

"I won't mention it again, I promise. Thank you." She pulls me in for a hug. "One day, I'll tell you all about Logan." She moves away, mindlessly picking her nails, but her cheeks burn brighter as she glares at Kaya. "You're a bitch, you know that? If you want to hit rock bottom, be my guest. Just stop trying to drag everyone down with you."

I'm not sure why she bothers with the speech. Kaya's too busy sucking on the straw, trying to drink from an empty glass, to pay attention.

I fidget in the seat, growing impatient, and check my phone every few

seconds, but Cody isn't calling. It takes five more minutes before a familiar face stops by the booth, visibly annoyed. It's a Hayes, sure. Just not the one I expected.

Nico grabs Kaya, yanking her out of the seat and into his arms. She glares at him for a second before her stunning features twist with recognition. As if a switch has been flipped in her head, she bursts into tears, fisting his shirt and pressing herself to his chest like a lost, little girl. I can't hear what they're saying, but Nico shoves her back into the booth and crouches beside me.

"What did that fucker do to her?"

"He was very touchy, but—"

"You remember what he looked like?"

"Yes, but—"

He grabs me by my upper arm, hard enough that it will leave marks, and hauls me to my feet, pulling me behind him like a misbehaving dog on a leash. We stop at the railing surrounding the VIP section overlooking the dance floor. "Show me."

Neither the tone of his voice nor the way he manhandled me just now agree with me, but I've heard enough stories about Nico's uncontrollable rage that I wouldn't dare argue with him while every one of his gestures screams bloody murder.

I scan the mass of bodies, searching for the man who fingered Kaya. He's by the bar with another girl, equally drunk and leaning into him, swaying on her feet.

"There. Baby-blue shirt, glasses, light jeans."

"The one with the blonde falling asleep on his chest?"

I nod, and prompted by the madness in his eyes, and afraid of what he might do, I go against all my instincts and try to tell Nico he can't blame the guy for trying his luck. Especially that Kaya was willing, but he turns on his heel before I can voice my thoughts.

Maybe it's for the best.

The silver fox sure deserves a punch to the nose for trying to take advantage of Kaya's drunk ass. I just hope Nico won't go overboard. Theo said there's no stopping him once he gets going. He grabs Kaya and takes her downstairs, crossing the room toward the oblivious man.

In a protective move, Nico pulls Kaya behind him. Without a warning or a single word, he rams his fist into the man's face, knocking him off balance.

MJ and Amy stand beside me when Nico grabs a handful of the guy's collar, says something in his face, and hits him again.

Not even a minute later, he leads Kaya out of the building, his arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

"Can anyone explain what the hell just happened?" MJ yells, arms crossed. "Since when is Nico all Rambo over a girl?"

Neither one of us has an answer, but Amy breaks the tension. "*Cockus gripus.*" She shrugs, returning to the booth where Cass awaits with two trays of shots.

"Drink up," she tells me, clinking her glass to mine.

We put the incident behind us and quickly regain our party mood, heading back downstairs.



Cody takes me home just after midnight.

The rest of the party stayed behind, even though Cassidy starts work at seven, just like me, and should lay off the shots already. She's getting dangerously close to Kaya's level of drunkenness. I bet she'll call in sick tomorrow.

Great.

Jared will growl at everyone when he comes over to open the Country Club.

Despite his careless driving, Cody's a lovely kid. He entertains me with chitchat most of the way back to Theo's. I don't stop him to say I don't understand half of the technical terms he uses while he relays the entire spec of his Mustang, sounding as if the car is his pride and joy. Theo mentioned that the triplets are motorheads and love their cars. Cody confirms, telling me that he details the thing every weekend.

"Are the guys still there?" I ask when he turns right, heading down the road to Theo's building.

"No, I took the last lot home before I came over to get you. Once Nico stormed out, the party kind of sucked."

"Yeah, my party sucked, too, when he stormed into the club."

"I can imagine. He was all fire and fucking death when he and Kaya got back in the car." He pulls up by the curb. "Chauffeur Cody at your service," he jokes. "You don't have to ask Theo to call me, you know? Save my

number.”

“I will. Thank you.” I lean over to peck his cheek and then get out of the car, my legs weak from dancing in five-inch heels.

By the time I tell Theo about the eventful night, wash up and change into pj's, I'm so sleepy that no number of kisses could convince me to have sex, but I fight my heavy eyelids, waiting for Theo to emerge from the bathroom so he can cuddle me to sleep. I fail, and the next thing I know, the alarm is blaring at five am.

TWENTY-FOUR

Theo

I FORGOT HOW IT FEELS to crush on someone so hard. The anticipation of seeing Thalia after work has me buzzing like a swarm of bees on a hot day. We spend all our free time together, but I can't get enough of her.

I'm seventeen again: horny, infatuated, excited. A teenager in heat. Although, my feelings for Thalia now are far more mature and intense. Back in the day, I mindlessly lost my shit for any girl willing to spread her legs wide open—perks of being a sex-crazed teen.

I've had more than my fair share of meaningless sex. Now, the desire is different and harder to muster. It's not as easy to pique my interest these days, but Thalia has been on my mind non-stop since day one.

When I get back from work, Nico's white G-Wagon sits parked by the curb. The owner leans against the front grill, clouds of smoke hovering in the hot air.

"Not again." I point to the cigarette in his hand. "What the fuck happened? We quit *together!*"

"And now I smoke *alone,*" he clips, jaw squared, an ever-present air of defensiveness droning around him. "You and Thalia busy tonight?"

I grab the packet off the hood and light one myself, inhaling a long, deep drag. Why did I quit in the first place? "No, we don't have plans. Why?"

"Kaya wants to go out on a double date."

The smoke hits the wrong pipe, setting my lungs ablaze. I cough like I'm smoking my very first cigarette. "Kaya?" I question when I can breathe again. "You two a thing now?"

He shrugs it off as if the fact that Nico fucking Hayes is *dating* isn't the most bizarre and unexpected piece of information to ever reach my ears.

I always expected to settle down when the right woman came along, and I expect the same from Logan. Although, as I said, he'll probably settle down for a couple of years, then change his wife for a younger model, and he'll

repeat that until he's on his deathbed.

We both casually dated a few girls back in school, but Nico? He's never had a girlfriend. I didn't think he could commit to a woman for longer than one evening.

"We've been seeing each other since the girls went out clubbing," he admits, eyes on the ground as he kicks a small pebble around before he glances up. "*What?*" he seethes as I'm still gawking at him with an undoubtedly dumbstruck expression. "You and Thalia are so good together. I thought maybe I should try it too."

"Whoa... whoa... *whoa!*" I push away from the car. "Here I was, avoiding you for the last few weeks, thinking you didn't approve of Thalia and me, and now you—"

"What? Where the fuck did you get that idea from?"

"You always say the life of a bachelor is the best. You've never had a girlfriend, and—"

"Yeah, I haven't. That doesn't mean I'm against relationships. Jesus, you seriously thought I disapprove of you having a girl?" he huffs, half amused, half offended. "You're an idiot, you know that? We're not getting any younger. You think I don't know we'll all settle down at some point?"

"We? No way you mean that. Who the hell are you?"

"Of course, *we*." He rolls his eyes at my theatrics. "You don't know me at all, do you?" He shakes his head, sounding bitter, forcing a sharp pang of guilt through my throat. "I want a family one day. A girl to come home to. I have *nothing* against you and Thalia. I like her. She's fun and keeps you in check."

If he really means that, he's right. I don't know him all too well. I've lived off assumptions. "Sorry, bro. It was shitty of me to just assume."

He flicks the cigarette butt onto the sidewalk. "Yeah, it was. Even shittier of you to avoid me for three weeks. You're a grade A douchebag, you know that? I've no idea what Thalia sees in you, but that's an entirely different conversation."

"Asshole."

"Seriously, though. Double date. Tonight. We're going to my restaurant. I'll pick you up at seven."

He hops behind the wheel, and I'm left to wrap my head around the fact that my younger brother, Mr. *keep them at arm's length* is dating. I wonder if he had the same shut-the-fuck-up moment when he saw me kiss Thalia in his

living room.



“Thalia just got out of the shower, so she won’t be long.” I fling the door open wider to let Nico and Kaya inside.

“*She just got out of the shower, and she won’t be long* don’t belong in the same sentence, bro.”

They walk in, each step calculated, because Ares is right there, jumping and barking beneath their feet.

“Nah, she doesn’t need much time to get ready.”

“Learn from her,” Nico tells Kaya, his tone almost pleading. “It takes your fine ass an hour to choose the dress.”

“Maybe if you’d stop trying to fuck me every time I’m naked, it wouldn’t take so long.” She pats Ares on the head, walking in further. “I’ll go and check if Thalia needs help.”

“Straight ahead.” I point toward the hallway.

She’s dressed to impress in a tiny, bodycon number accentuating her immaculate, model-like figure and long legs. My brothers have a specific type of woman they’re attracted to. Logan’s all about blondes. He might check out a brunette from time to time as he did with Thalia, but I don’t think he ever fucked a brunette.

Nico, on the other hand, never looked at a blonde twice. He’s all about brunettes. Tall, skinny, with sleek hair and cover-worthy faces.

I was never that fussy. As long as I found the girl attractive, I didn’t care about hair color.

I wonder what the triplets will grow up to favor. They’re still a touch to young and hormone-ruled to have a preference. Anything that moves, has a vagina, and is willing to touch their dicks is probably enough at this point.

Nico and I step into the kitchen, and I grab us each a beer to kill time because now that Kaya has joined Thalia, she’ll help with her hair like last time, and we’ll be stuck here for longer than necessary.

Nico picks up Ares off the floor, scratching his ears and leaning back not to let the pup lick his face. “He’s getting heavy. Have you called the dog trainer yet?”

“Yeah, he’s starting classes next week. Thalia taught him a few tricks, but he’s too friendly toward strangers.”

“Gavin will train that out of him.” He pats Ares’s head. “When you learn to behave yourself, you can stay with me sometimes.”

“Don’t count on it. Shawn already called dibs on babysitting whenever I need.”

“He’ll change his mind when they adopt a kid.”

We change the subject, talking about Nico and Jared’s restaurant we’re supposed to eat at tonight, and go through half of our beer before the bedroom door opens ten minutes later.

Thalia smiles, pleased with how I eye her up, then glances down as if to check what has me so satisfied. She’s wearing the same outfit she wore the day we met—a black high-waist skirt and a crop top. “Good? Or not fancy enough?”

“Perfect.” I hold my hand out, silently asking her to come closer so I can pull her in for a kiss. That’s how I want to have her all the time. Close. Mine.

“Come on, lovebirds! I’m starving.” Kaya yells and stilettos toward the door while I sink deeper into Thalia’s mouth.

“If you want to continue the make-out session, do it in the car,” Nico says. “Just keep it PG-rated, alright?”

“I promise nothing,” Thalia chuckles, inching away.

I pat her butt, knot our fingers, and follow my brother and his *girlfriend* to the car. Shit, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to Nico dating anyone. Come to think of it, I probably shouldn’t. He’s too unpredictable, vicious and downright intense to make a relationship last.

I’ve not had a chance to visit Nico’s restaurant yet, but once we step through the door, I pause to admire the place. It’s far from what I expected, given Nico’s the owner. Instead of luxury dripping from every detail, the space is intimate and elegant. A dimly lit room filled with two and four-seater tables, a grand piano on a raised platform in the middle of the room, and a fish tank wall behind the bar, with yellow gobies and clownfish curiously swimming back and forth.

The waiter leads us to a round table tucked away by the window, the harbor visible in the distance, bathed in the hue of orange lamps. Dusk is fast approaching, with the first rays of pink and purple cutting across the cloudless sky and reflecting in the calm waves.

Romantic as fuck.

Thalia sits opposite me, next to Kaya, who impatiently flicks through the wine list.

Not how I imagined this double-date thing, but maybe it's for the best. I don't think I'd do much else other than touch Thalia if she were closer. I was asleep when she came home from a waitressing gig last night and still sleeping when she left for work this morning. Almost twenty-four hours without her is a bit too long to stomach. I'm whipped and not afraid to admit it.

To myself... in my head.

Thalia orders for the both of us: grilled lobster tails for starters and smoked salmon for the mains. Nico, such a *man-man*, chooses a steak, and Kaya settles for pasta, filling us in about the new marketing strategy she's working on to attract a younger crowd to the Country Club.

"We'll host monthly *Unexpected Truth* parties at the Country Club from now on. The first one is in three weeks. It'll be so much bigger than what you've seen before."

"You should think about live music," Thalia says. "Start with local bands, and once the word-of-mouth gains momentum, think about inviting someone more famous."

"Uh-oh." Kaya clears her throat, eyes darting over my shoulder, then to my girlfriend. "Dean's coming over here."

Thalia jerks her hand from mine, trying to fuse with the chair. I don't like that reaction. Not one fucking bit. My head snaps to Dean, who stops at our table, arms crossed, and eyebrows drawn together. He sways from left to right, unsteady on his feet as if he's wearing heels instead of brown leather shoes.

"Wow!" he breathes, glaring at Thalia. "Now I know why you ditched my calls and stopped serving me on the course. I *knew* there was more to this." He points between Thalia and me, "But I thought 'you were smarter, babe. I believed you when you said you weren't screwing around with Theo."

I'm on my feet in a heartbeat, my hand clasped around his throat. "And I thought you were smarter than mouthing off to my girl. If I find out, you so much as look at her again, this will end badly for you," I hiss, shoving him back.

"What's your problem?" He sways on his feet, backing away. "Don't act like you give a shit!"

"*Out*, Dean," Nico clips, holding my arm to stop me from going after the dipshit. "Now. I won't hold him back if he decides it's time to make you bleed, and we both know you won't come out of that with your face intact."

Dean eyes us both with comical astonishment comparable to that of a New York taxi driver who gets tipped a dime. What the fuck is it about my stance that leads him to believe I won't go after him if he says one more word?

Do I look like I'm messing about? *I don't think so.* If I did, Nico's fingers wouldn't be bruising my bicep.

Dean readjusts his jacket in one forceful tug and turns around, stumbling between the tables, his step unstable. He almost trips over his legs, sauntering toward the bar. Nico motions to the restaurant host to take care of Dean, then yanks my arm hard, forcing me back into my seat.

The ashen hue of Thalia's cheeks gives way when I catch her hand, brushing my thumb over her knuckles. "What did he say to you when you went out with him? And why aren't you serving the asshole?"

"He said you'll throw me out of your house when my holes stop meeting your expectations," she explains in a dismissive tone. "I got in his face. I think he finds women who don't let bullshit slide appealing, though. He admitted the flowers were from him and wouldn't stop hitting on me since. I asked Jared to get someone else to serve him when..." she hesitates, cheeks turning scarlet, "he smacked my ass."

Nico grips my arm again to keep me in place, but my blood boils, and hell stirs in my head, sputtering like an old engine. I think he can relate because his hold loosens and features pinch. I know that look. The storm in his eyes is a sign he's changed his mind and is now ready to help me serve Dean some justice.

"I'm sorry," Thalia utters.

"Sorry? You're *sorry*? Shit..." I lean over the table, pressing a kiss to her lips. "You've got nothing to be sorry about. I'm the one who should apologize. I turned this into a game for him when I pulled you away from him at the party."

"Let it go, okay? Please. He's not worth the trouble."

"*You* are. If he touches you again, I'll break his hands."

It takes all I have not to follow Dean, who's currently at the bar, chugging a glass of whiskey like iced tea on a hot summer day, ignoring the host who's politely trying to remove him.

Thalia's not even through her first glass of wine when the bottle empties, the contents in Kaya's bloodstream, affecting her motor skills. The waiter promptly brings another bottle, keen to impress my brother. The food

arrives minutes later, and we go almost the entire meal without another shitstorm.

“Looks like my restaurant is real fucking popular.” Nico clips, grinding his teeth while he stuffs Kaya with two deserts to counteract the wine. I doubt sugar is what she needs. “Kai’s here with his wife.”

My head snaps toward the door, and my muscles tense. I should’ve known I’d bump into him again.

I should’ve mentally prepared.

“Is that...?” Thalia lowers her voice to a whisper. “Is that the guy who stole your game?”

“Yeah,” I say, topping-up hers and Kaya’s glasses with more wine. “Drink up. We’re leaving.”

Kaya downs the glass in one go, polishes off a warm apple pie slice, and grabs her bag all within thirty seconds of me calling it a night. “Let’s go to Q,” she suggests, bouncing in her seat.

“Not a bad idea,” Thalia admits.

I call the waiter over, glancing around the room, and my eyes land on Kai. He sits a few tables away, his eyes on me, a focused, determined look on his traitorous face.

Five minutes later, Nico settles the bill, too stubborn to let me take care of it.

“Do you want to drop the car off at home?” I ask once we’re safely outside after taking the long way out, navigating the perimeter of the room to stay a safe distance—i.e., more than a punch-landing distance—away from Kai. “We can get an Uber from your place.”

“No, I’ll drive. Wait here. I’ll bring the car around.”

When we arrived, the parking lot was packed to the brim, and he left the G-Wagon at the employee parking lot at the back of the building. He takes Kaya with him, either to keep an eye on her or initiate a quick fuck while Thalia and I wait.

“Theo?”

My eyes close for a brief second. A hot glow sweeps over me from head to toe like a lit fuse of dynamite at the sound of Kai’s voice.

“Listen, man, can we talk? It’s important.”

Thalia steps away to stand behind me, still holding my hand, squeezing firmly as if she knows I might stay in control if she’s close. A whooshing sound reverberates in my head, but the rage I’m usually consumed by when I

think about Kai fails to arrive.

Five years have passed since Kai stabbed me in the back, but the sense of betrayal and the all-consuming anger were always in the highest gear whenever I thought about Kai. I was bitter because he made a small fortune off our game, but since Thalia came into my life, money's no longer my focus. She is.

The rage is still there but not as prominent anymore. Thalia keeps me in check, and the touch of her fingers around mine works like a strong tranquilizer.

"We need to talk," he says again, sounding out of place. "Come on, man. It's been years. I'm sorry, alright? Let it go."

I turn around to find him closer than expected, mere three feet away. I might not care about money as much these days, but the sight of his stupid face has me raging, nonetheless. The fuse burns out, and the dynamite goes *kaboom*. No countdown, no warning, just an instant blast.

The next thing that registers with me is Kai on the ground, blood gushing from his nose.

"We have nothing to talk about." I fume, shaking like an uncoiled spring. "Get the fuck out of my face, Kai." I turn to Thalia just as Nico stops the car behind her, shooting out of the driver's seat before the wheels come to a full stop.

Kai gathers himself off the ground, his spine like a metal rod now that my unpredictable brother is charging right at him.

"Get in, Thalia," Nico booms, storming past her. "In!" She steps back, spins on her heel and joins Kaya at the back of the car, slamming the door. "What the fuck did I tell you?" Nico snarls, towering above Kai. He towers above ninety-five percent of people. "Stay away from him."

"I just want to talk and explain, man. Fuck! I made a huge mistake back then, Theo. I was young! Fucking stupid." He rubs his face, then wipes his bloody hands down the front of his pants. "I'm sorry. Truly. Come on, you gotta understand." He steps toward me, but one look at my brother changes his mind.

I can't blame him for cowering. It's fucking scary to have Nico looming over you at any given time, but when he's royally pissed off, you need a bunker to survive. He looks like a death-row inmate—plenty of crazy shit under his belt and nothing to lose.

Kai clears his throat, rocking on the heels of his elegant shoes. "Listen, I

hear you're working on this really cool project. I want to help, you know? Can we grab a drink tomorrow and just talk? My company could help you get your game in front of the right people. It'd be just like the old times."

"Are you serious?" I scoff, and my eyebrows hit my hairline. "You think you can pull the same stunt twice? Whatever you're snorting, either quit using or take half."

"We've changed our minds," Kaya yells, sliding down the window. "Thalia wants to go for a walk down the beach. We can stop for wine on our way there."

"Theo, come on, man. Game on. Play," he fires his shitty lines at me as he did in college. "Remember? We've been friends for years. At least hear me out. We were in college, I—"

"I don't care. You know what they say. Fool me once. You did, and you won't be doing it again."

Nico walks away first, either confident in my ability to keep my shit intact or impenitent to get out of here as soon as humanly possible. I follow suit, deaf to Kai's pleading.

The four of us end up at the arcade half an hour later, where we waste hard-earned pennies on the slot machines, then spend a couple hours at a deserted, dark beach. Kaya and Thalia drink wine straight from a bottle Kaya bought when Nico wasn't paying attention.

We're resting against two six-foot-tall teddies, watching a bunch of high school kids party on a boat a few hundred yards off the coastline. Lucky bastards...

Midnight comes and goes, the dark sky above speckled with bright stars, but the evening turns to shit yet again when Kaya, drunk off her ass, starts arguing with Nico. She wants to go clubbing even though she can't hold herself upright without assistance.

"You!" she slurs, pausing to hiccup. "You *can't* tell me what the fuck I can or—" she hiccups again, eyes bleary. "I can't do!" She pokes Nico's chest with her long, manicured nail, the other hand propped against her thin waist. "Fuck. *You*. I'm going." She starts toward the pier barefoot. Although *zigzagging* paints a better picture.

Nico follows quickly and grabs her by her hips, hauling her up. He flings her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, his chest heaving. "The only place you're going is straight to bed."

"You're an asshole!" She rains his back with little fists, kicking and

screaming, but it's like trying to put a dent in a tank with a nerf gun. "Put me down!"

I smirk when he obliges, letting go of her body and she slides down his front, landing ass first on the sand. "Shut up," he seethes, crouching down to get eye-level with her. "You want to go dancing? Be my fucking guest, but don't come crawling back to me tomorrow crying and begging."

Her beautiful face twists in pure shock. Lips part, eyes widen for a second before filling with fresh tears. She gawks at him, chin quivering, and then *snap*—she's full-on choking and whimpering, tiny rivers flowing down her cheeks. She lunges herself into his arms, apologizing between pathetic sobs.

That's the most bizarre scene I've ever witnessed. All the more when Nico's mood does a one-eighty at the snap of fingers. His scowl slips, giving way to deep fucking *concern* lining his forehead.

"Should we get a cab?" Thalia whispers. She sits between my legs, her back to my chest and tilts her head to speak in my ear. "I'm tired. You'll have to make me come so I'll sleep better."

I kiss the side of her head. "Sounds like a plan."

TWENTY-FIVE

Thalia

USING MY DAY OFF, I crank up the music on the sound system in the living room and open all windows in the condo, then spend the day cleaning every room, organizing the hallway closet, and cooking Theo's favorite meal.

Once done, I take a long bath, pampering myself with body scrubs and face masks, and even cover my eyes with two cucumber slices. The idea seems moronic, but I'm willing to be proven wrong. Who knows? Maybe they'll make a difference? Maybe my skin will be more radiant. Music still plays, but this time it filters through the little speaker on my phone as I lay in the warm water, enjoying a little me-time.

Forty minutes later, I'm wrapped in a towel, I close the bathroom door and tiptoe across the hall and into the bedroom, the wooden floor cold under my warm, water-wrinkled feet. The windows are still open, and a cool breeze breaches the room, but that's not what raises goosebumps across my skin. What the... I pull my eyebrows together for a brief moment while my brain catches up, processing what I'm seeing.

Fear squeezes my throat, moist and sticky.

My legs freeze, glued to the spot in the doorway.

The teddy bear Theo won for me last week at the arcade sits on the bed, propped by a few decorative pillows. His paws are wrapped around a big bouquet of red roses.

His head is missing...

It lays on the floor, the teddy's eyes staring at the ceiling, and a rolled-up piece of paper tied with a red ribbon is stuffed in its mouth.

A shot of adrenaline jolts me into motion. I run back into the bathroom, slam the door and turn the lock. What the hell is happening?

I check the door, making sure it's locked.

And check again.

Dread fills my lungs like heavy mud. My phone is still on the shelf,

quiet music hanging in the air. I clutch it in my trembling hands, the riot of my pulse making it hard to focus. It takes three tries before I successfully dial Theo's number.

"I'm leaving the office right now," he says, answering on the second ring.

My lips part, but no sound comes out. I stop breathing at the sound of rushed footsteps outside the bathroom door.

"Thalia?"

Instead of helping me take hold of myself, the sound of his voice has an entirely different effect. A pathetic, quiet whimper bubbles in my chest and grows more audible when someone slams a hand against the door.

"Thalia, what's wrong?"

"Someone's in the house," I whisper, biting my cheek so hard I taste blood.

"What? What do..." he trails off as if needing a second to connect the dots. "Fuck! Where are you?" Hurried footsteps clap against the floor, and a door bangs on his side of the line, making me jump. "Are you okay?"

"I'm in the bathroom," I choke out, biting my fist to stay quiet when another bang reaches my ears a second before the door handle rattles.

"Stay there. Lock the door. I'm coming, baby, don't move." The engine of his car thunders in the background. "Talk to me. Don't hang up. Stay on the line."

The sound of my heart thumping in my chest mixes with the revving of the big engine, Theo's heavy breathing, and my stifled whimpers.

It's maddening.

Seconds tick by, stretching into eternity.

Another bang on the bathroom door has me ducking under the sink. I cover my head with my hand, shaking all over when the rolled up note from teddy's mouth is pushed through a gap under the door.

"Someone beheaded the teddy," I whisper to Theo.

The tires of his Camaro squeal in my ear. "I'm coming. Stay where you are. Don't move. Did you see anyone?"

"No."

The note is through and whoever is there starts retreating. I listen, holding my breath until the main door slams shut, and my tears come on stronger, relief mixing with fear.

"I think he's gone..."

“Don’t move!” Theo yells immediately. “Don’t open the door, baby. Stay put until I get there.”

“Oh, God!” I spring to my feet, shaking all over. “Ares... I can’t hear him!”

“Don’t open the door!” He yells again as if he can see me reaching for the handle. “Ares is with the trainer, remember? He’s not home. Stay in the bathroom. I’m almost there.”

I sink back to the floor, listening for any sounds, but the condo is silent. “I was taking a bath,” I mutter because I can’t stand the maddening sound of my pulse rushing in my ears. “The music was playing, and I-I left the windows open, and I didn’t lock the bathroom. What if—”

“Don’t go there,” Theo warns. “Don’t think about that. You’re okay. You’re fine. I’ll put you on hold for twenty seconds, okay? I need to call Shawn. Stay with me.”

“I’m scared,” I whine.

I don’t think I’ve ever spoken those words aloud. I’ve never even thought them before. Not even when I was in jail locked in isolation, because the charges could’ve easily gotten me killed. Not when my lawyer said he won’t fight to help my case, not even when my parents threw me out of their house. The disgust on my father’s face when he backhanded me, saying he no longer has a daughter, haunts me in my sleep to this day.

But I’ve never experienced fear as paralyzing as I do right now, and I wonder if it’s because I’m truly happy for the first time in my life. The happiness could disappear if whoever broke in here got his hands on me. God knows what they wanted to do.

“I know, *omorfiá*. I’m not far off.” The engine revs louder. “I’ll call Shawn. Twenty seconds. Count.”

You’ve been placed on hold, please wait.

I crawl across the tiled floor, pressing my back against the bathtub, eyes fixed on the door handle.

You’ve been placed on hold, please wait.

I dip my head, fisting my wet hair, tears threatening to spill. *Get a hold of yourself!* I shut my eyes tight, inhaling deeply.

You’ve been placed on hold, please wait.

Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six.

“Thalia.” Theo comes back, along with the sound of his Camaro speeding across town. “Shawn’s on his way. Did you touch anything?”

“No. Where are you?”

“Close. Don’t move until I’m with you, understand?”

I bite my lip. Theo’s office is in the city center, not far from the condo, but it still feels as if he’s been driving for hours, not minutes. I glance at the screen to check how long has passed since I called, but it doesn’t matter. The roar of the Camaro speeding down the street is no longer just in my ear. It breaks through the walls of the building.

“I’m here.” Tires squeal before the car comes to a full stop, and the door opens before the engine dies.

I shoot to my feet, ignited by an influx of courage now that Theo’s here. I turn the lock when the main door flies open, hitting the wall with a loud bang. I yank the bathroom door, stepping out into the hallway.

Theo grips me by the shoulders. “You were supposed to stay in there,” he says, his heart going faster than mine when he pulls me into his arms, lips on my head. “You’re okay, little one, you’re fine.” He wraps his arms tight around me, cradling the back of my head with one hand. “You’re safe. Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m okay. I’m-I’m sorry, I panicked.”

Shame burns my cheeks. Whoever the girl in the bathroom was just now, that wasn’t me. I don’t panic. I don’t hide. I face whatever the world wants to throw my way.

Not today, though. Today the danger felt too real, the stakes were too high.

“Why are you apologizing?” He pushes me away enough to check me over and brush my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. “You’re okay. It’s *okay* to be scared. I was scared too.”

I nuzzle my face back into his chest. My eyes tear up, but the closeness of his body calms me down faster than any tranquilizer ever could...

I’m in love with him.

I love him, and that’s why I panicked. He’s the only person I can’t stomach losing in any way.

And I will lose him.

The weight of my secrets crush me inside out. I should’ve told him sooner before I let myself fall for him, before he became the person that matters the most, before the idea of losing him started to rip me wide open.

“That was the longest five fucking minutes of my life,” he says softly, stamping one kiss after another on my forehead, then scoops me off the floor

and into his arms like a little girl.

“Longest five minutes of mine, too,” I admit, wrapping my arms around his neck.

He crosses the hallway and sits me on the couch, readjusting my towel again. “I’ll get you some clothes before Shawn gets here.” He disappears into the hallway, my mind splitting in half.

Theo deserves to know the truth. He deserves the chance to make a conscious decision about me, us and our future, but I’m scared to tell him about Vasilis and the murder charges because I know what he’ll do.

He’ll leave like everyone else.

I’ll be alone again, fighting to keep my head above water.

Theo’s silent for a long time. I can imagine he’s standing in the doorway to the bedroom, taking in the scene, the beheaded teddy bear on the bed and flowers in its paws. The closet doors open and close a moment before he comes back with my tank top and sweatpants in one hand and the rolled-up piece of paper from the bathroom in the other.

“Thank you,” I say when he hands me the clothes.

“Tell me you’re okay, Thalia.”

I’m not okay. How can I be? I let my guard down, and now I no longer face losing a friend or the man I’m crushing on.

I face losing the man I love.

I catch his lips with mine, the kiss slow and gentle. “I’m okay now,” I lie. This isn’t the time to voice my truths. Not today. Not like this, but soon. He needs to know, process, and decide what he wants to do with me next.

He helps me get dressed despite my protests. Now that he’s here, the paralyzingly cold thoughts give way, making it easier to hold the gruesome *what-ifs* at bay, stopping them from feasting on my conscious mind.

The wail of police sirens outside grows closer by the second until the engine dies.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back,” Theo says when loud banging shakes the door.

It’s the first time I see Shawn in full police uniform, a gun in his holster, and dark shades pushed back into his thick hair. He’s shorter than Theo and not as broad, but the resemblance is there like with all the Hayes.

“Hey, babe, how are you holding up?” He rounds the couch, crouching before me. “You scared the shit out of Theo. And me too.”

“I’m fine. I just... I don’t know. I panicked.”

“I’d panic too if someone who shouldn’t be there was in my house.” He gets up, glancing at Theo. “Show me what I’m dealing with, bro. The forensic team is on its way.”

They turn around, disappearing into the hallway. I move to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water, the last thirty minutes surreal, to say the least. The note that was pushed under the bathroom door lies on the coffee table. I unroll it carefully, touching only the corner, then use the remote control and my phone to weigh down the edges. Words are printed in dark red ink, the font a fancy script.

You had a chance, and you blew it. Time to play.

I read it three times, understanding less and less with every pass as the ideas form and morph in my head.

“You shouldn’t have touched that.” Shawn plops down beside me. “Sounds like you hurt someone’s ego, babe. Who did you shoot down recently?”

Theo slumps down beside me, leaning in to read the short note, a frown on his forehead. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“Ah, so you know who it is?” Shawn asks.

I shake my head, not sure who Theo might be suspecting. “I have no idea.”

“No idea?” Theo fumes, raking his hand through the hair on the back of his head. “Dean Striker.”

“You think Dean broke into your house? Don’t be ridiculous!” I whisper-shout.

“Who else could it be? Dean sent you flowers, Thalia. Red roses just like the ones in the bedroom. He was pissed off when he realized he won’t get another chance with you, and this,” he points at the note, “that’s a threat.”

“When was that?” Shawn asks, pulling a notepad out of his vest pocket.

“After the *Unexpected Truth* party at Nico’s. I almost broke his jaw at Nico’s restaurant last week.”

I shake my head, unease squirming like a bucketful of earthworms in my stomach. “I don’t think it was Dean. He’s a decent guy. I can’t imagine him beheading a teddy. What about Asher? He surely holds a grudge against me.”

Theo tightens his hold around me, the muscles in his arms and shoulders tense. “It was Dean, *omorfiá*. I just know it. And sure, he’s very fucking nice.

He basically called you a slut, but he's a good boy."

Shawn scribbles in his notepad. "I'll check them both. I need you to walk me through the day, Thalia. When did you see the bedroom untouched last?"

"I cleaned the house all day. Windows were open. I finished around three, closed the windows, and grabbed fresh clothes from the bedroom before taking a bath. I was supposed to close the window there too, but I forgot."

"How long were you in the bath?"

"Forty, maybe fifty minutes."

Theo pulls his phone out, flicking through the call log. "She called me at ten past four."

"Call it an hour. Ten past three to ten past four," Shawn says. "Did you hear or see anything?"

"No, I had the music on my phone playing. No one was in the bedroom when I got out of the bath. I saw the teddy bear and locked myself in the bathroom to call Theo, but whoever was here banged on the door a few times, slid the note underneath it and left."

"Are there any cameras around the building?"

"Yeah, a few," Theo says, taking my hand to stop me from picking a thread of my tank top. "I'll call the building manager and get you the footage."

Shawn rises to his feet when a soft knock reverberates through the condo. He leads the forensics team to the bedroom, explaining the situation briefly, while Theo's on the phone with the building manager.

"Stop," he says a moment later, pulling me to his side. "Stop thinking. You'll give yourself a headache. I'm sure it was Dean, and as soon as Shawn confirms, I'll take care of that nutcase. He's not getting anywhere near you again."

I press myself to his chest, trying to shush the storm in my head. "Hold me for a moment."

He wraps me in his arms, one hand across my back, the other on the side of my face. My eyes flutter closed, and my heart swells and aches all at once.

"It'll take about an hour to dust the room for prints," Shawn says, and my eyes pop open.

I don't move away from Theo. I couldn't care less what Shawn thinks of me right now. Whether he considers me weak or needy, it doesn't matter.

Deep down, I want to believe Theo will understand when I tell him the truth about my past. I want to believe he won't leave, but why wouldn't he?

Everyone else did.

"Were detaining your teddy bear," Shawn says. "He's not a suspect. We just need to ask him some questions. He has the right to remain silent. Although, I don't expect to get much out of him, even in the presence of a lawyer."

My mouth curves into a smile when Theo's chest bounces with soft laughter. "Lack of head might prove problematic, but I'll call the lawyer just in case."

Shawn chuckles, shaking his head, focusing back on his brother. "Don't engage, alright? Leave this to me."

"I will, for now, but I'm getting my hands on the fucker one way or another."

TWENTY-SIX

Theo

THE HIGH-PITCHED BLARING of the smoke alarm jolts me out of sleep and out of bed within a nanosecond. I'm fully fucking alert when I burst through the bedroom door, stumbling out into the hallway, where I'm greeted by an equally dumbstruck and startled Ares. We exchange questioning looks before bolting to the kitchen, where black smoke hovers in the air, the smell sifting through my nose.

Thalia stands by the breakfast island, hands clasped over her ears. What resembles a lump of coal on a baking tray lays on the counter. I slide the terrace door open, letting warm morning air filter out the smoke and the godawful burnt smell.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Thalia clips, arms now folded over her chest.

"I'm sure you woke up the entire street. It's seven in the morning. Why are you up?" I round the island. "And what was that, supposed to be?" I glare at the lump of coal.

"I was aiming for a strawberry shortcake," she admits in a defeated tone. "I'm a great cook, but I can't bake."

"*Why* are you baking instead of sleeping?"

She lets out an exasperated huff. "I couldn't sleep, okay? I keep thinking about that note. I thought Shawn would have some news by now."

To be honest, so did I. The building manager sent the CCTV footage to him before the forensics team left the condo yesterday. How long does it take to check an hour of footage? Shouldn't it take like *one* fucking hour?

"He'll call as soon as he has anything to tell us. Don't worry. I'm not leaving you here alone. I'll work from home today." I prod and poke the burnt disaster with a fork. "How long was this in the oven? Two days?"

"Forty minutes, but I think I set the temperature too high."

"It's honestly enough that you can cook. Forget the cake." I grab her

hand before she wanders away. “Morning,” I say, kissing her forehead. “I’d much rather have you for dessert anyway, little one.”

“Oh,” she mouths, her eyes growing heavy.

I place her hand on my groin and clasp her fingers around my hard cock. “This needs taking care of.”

Before she can say one word, I pick her up and don’t let go until we’re in the bathroom, under the stream of warm water in the shower.

I’m sporting a bad case of morning wood that grows harder as I lather soap over Thalia’s boobs. She returns the favor, rubbing her hands along my body before her small palm latches onto my cock, and she strokes slowly, *painfully* slow, driving me wild.

“Turn around,” I rasp, planting her hands on the tiles above her head. She takes a wider stance, lifts her chin, and pushes that perfect ass out, meeting the gentle strokes of my fingers on her thighs. “Brace,” I say, guiding my cock inside her hot pussy. I wrap one arm around her ribs, her big boobs resting on my forearm as I fill her with every inch of me. A low growl escapes me once I’m buried to the hilt, and Thalia shudders, gasping softly. “How about that? Tell me you love it when I’m inside you.”

“Make me come.” She throws her head back, exposing her throat, the veins there pulsing, and I almost lose it on the spot.

I slide out, plunging back into her. The hot water trails down her back, forming a trickle where her spine dents, and I whip her dark locks over one shoulder, bending to kiss the nape of her neck, nipping at her silky skin.

I’m still not used to the thought that she’s mine. How the fuck did I land a woman like her? I’m no prize. She could have ten men lining up to take my spot if she’d like, but somehow, Thalia’s oblivious to my flaws. Either that or she notices more good in me than I do.

The wet sound of our bodies connecting fuels my efforts, but no matter the pace, Thalia remains suspended on the tight rope, balancing on the verge of an orgasm. She won’t come unless I put my fingers to work. It’s fucking frustrating to say the least. I’m bending over backwards, pulling every trick known to man, trying every position, but so far, no luck.

I slide my hand down her stomach and lower to circle her clit with two fingers while the pace of my thrusts quickens each time a needy whimper escapes Thalia’s lips.

“You better fucking come for me, little one,” I rasp, my forehead pressed against the back of her head, my fingers doubling the effort. “Let

go.”

Her knees buckle, and a loud moan is swallowed by the water running down our bodies and onto the shower floor. I pull out as she pulsates around me, her orgasm triggering mine. My thighs cramp painfully when I come, spilling over her round, perky ass.



Thalia’s absentminded for the rest of the morning, flinching every time my phone rings until Shawn arrives at the condo around midday.

“No fingerprints in your bedroom or on the note,” he says, resting against the breakfast bar, his hair in disarray and dark circles surrounding his eyes. Looks like he didn’t sleep last night. “The CCTV footage does show a guy, but he’s definitely not Dean, bro. No face in the footage, but the guy is too short for Dean. I thought that maybe it was Asher, but he claims he was home all day. Not the strongest alibi, so we’re checking the cameras around his neighborhood to confirm that.” He pulls out a folded piece of paper from the back pocket of his uniform. “That’s the best angle we’ve got.”

The guy wears a black hoodie and a pair of black sweatpants, but I have to agree with Shawn... it’s not Dean. His six feet seven is hard to hide. Whoever’s in the picture wouldn’t hit the mark even if he jumped.

I rub my face, passing the picture to Thalia. “So what? He breaks in here, scares my girl, leaves a threatening note, and gets away with it? That’s bullshit, Shawn. How am I supposed to leave Thalia alone when he’s out there?”

“We’re working on it. A few of my guys are combing through the city’s CCTV footage as we speak. I’ve also arranged for someone to come by tomorrow and install cameras inside the condo, and you,” he looks at Thalia, “if anything happens, you either call me or text me with *help* or *911*. I’ll set up location sharing on your phone, so I know where to find you.”

She pales a little, and my stomach sinks too when I imagine all the possible scenarios Shawn’s trying to prevent.

This isn’t a game.

This is real.

He expects him to come back and do God knows what.

“Think,” I say, pulling her in, so she rests her back on my chest. “Who could want to hurt you? Could it be anyone from Greece? Ex-boyfriend?”

She shakes her head, not bothering to elaborate on the subject. Again, I'm left painfully aware I don't know much about Thalia's life before she arrived in America. Whenever I bring up her parents or friends, she shuts me out.

"If that," Thalia points to the picture, "wasn't a man, I would've said that every woman in this town could be a suspect. I'm sure the many women who want my boyfriend wouldn't mind if I got hit by a bus."

Shawn smirks. "Yeah, it did cross my mind that one of Theo's past *friends* may have gotten jealous, but unfortunately, this is a guy, and as far as I'm aware, Theo has never tried a dick. Unless he's too shy to share."

"Shy? You should know better. Be thankful I'm not into dicks," I chuckle, patting his back. "If I were gay, no one would want you."

He flips me off, back in business mode. "You two need to keep your eyes and ears open, alright? Call me if anything doesn't feel right."

The door to the condo bursts open, my mother and father inviting themselves in without a single knock.

"We *just* found out!" Mom says, rushing across the room in a blur of white chiffon. "How are you doing, sweetie?" She pulls Thalia into a tight embrace. "How is it that we have to find out from Logan?" she snaps at me, but her features soften when she moves her attention to Thalia again. "Don't you worry, sweetie, everyone who's called a Hayes is looking for whoever broke in here last night."

Thalia blushes slightly, too stunned to get a word out.

"Stop making her uncomfortable, Mom. And excuse me for not thinking to call a Hayes family crisis meeting."

"You should have. Your mother had a mental breakdown at the news," Dad cuts in, rolling his eyes, and I struggle not to chuckle. "You must be Thalia. I wish I could say I've heard a lot about you, but truth be told, I haven't." Another look my way, pointed this time. "You should've also thought about bringing your girlfriend over some time."

Yeah, I should've, but I've been too preoccupied and too selfish, keeping Thalia to myself as much as possible. "We were going to visit this weekend."

For the next hour, Thalia's once again subtly interrogated by Mom while my father, Shawn, and I sit in the living room, brainstorming possible security measures.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Theo

I NEED HELP.

Advice.

A few pointers.

It's hard to admit, but here I am on a Friday evening, sitting with my younger brother in his obnoxiously large living room while Thalia's waitressing at a birthday party on the other side of Newport.

"Spill your guts," Nico says, popping a cap on his Corona and handing me a Budweiser.

He rounds his big-ass couch that would never fit in my living room and plops down in the corner, legs sprawled on the coffee table. "What's going on?"

I toy with the bottle opener. There's no easy way to start this conversation, but I can stall for a bit to relax and get comfortable, AKA *drunk* enough not to care. "Are you and Kaya okay?"

They've been casually dating for about as long as Thalia and me—six weeks, to be precise. Me not having the urge to run far away from my girlfriend and bury the intense affection she brings out in me comes as no surprise. The same from Nico sends a ripple of confusion through my system. I can't wrap my head around the fact that he's not trying to exorcise whatever the fuck he feels. Who knew he could *feel*? Not me.

"Yeah, I guess. She's been good lately."

Good as in not getting shitfaced every evening. That girl has a serious drinking problem. Despite how beautiful Kaya is on the outside, she's hideous inside—manipulative, spoiled, rude, and toxic, *but...* she might become someone worthy of my brother once she gets sober.

One can hope.

It's not just my thinking. Shawn and Logan worry about Nico as much as I do. Shawn even suggested instigating an intervention, but neither Logan

nor I have the guts to tell Nico that the first girl he showed genuine interest in is a monster in our eyes.

Cruella DeMon is Logan's nickname for Kaya. And he's right there. She is a demon, but what kind of a brother would I be if I didn't stand by his side? His choices are just that; they're *his*, and it's my job to accept them unless he's getting hurt or hurting someone else. So far, he doesn't seem bothered by Kaya's stunts. He's got a savior complex, and it shows.

Besides, maybe I'm not entirely fair basing my animosity toward Kaya on a couple of double dates gone bad. Thalia and I had dinner with them a few times, and while Kaya's sober or tipsy, she's cool. Shit goes south once she oversteps her daily alcohol limit, though.

Still, she gets along with Thalia, so maybe she's not that bad. On the other hand, she's besties with Cassidy, who's been spending a little too much time with my girl for my liking, considering our past. Thalia must've been made aware by now that I slept with Cass, but to my surprise, she has never brought it up and invites Cassidy over every now and then.

"Any news on the break-in?"

I shake my head, instantly annoyed. "Nope... it's fucking weird. The guy broke into my place, threatened Thalia, and now silence."

It's been over a week, but Shawn has no leads. Nothing out of the ordinary has happened either, as if whoever broke into my condo changed his mind, but the unease churning in my gut keeps me awake at night.

I drive Thalia to and from work every day, and I told Jared to team her up with another cart girl, for the time being so she's not alone at any point during the day.

"Let's hope it was just a fucked-up prank. Now, get on with it. You're tense. I sense something heavy."

"Kind of. I rub my face, wondering if I should back away from the idea. Maybe I should call Logan? Maybe he's better equipped for this conversation?"

Argh, who am I kidding? Logan would make this even more uncomfortable. Ideally, I'd talk to no one, but I'm at my wits' end after six weeks of trying and failing...

Nico's my second-to-last resort.

I *will* call Logan if I absolutely have to.

"I never thought I'll be coming to you for pointers." I down half of my beer in one go, take a deep breath and hold it until I say what must be said.

“You ever had a girl who couldn’t *come* on your dick?”

Nico cocks an eyebrow, face impassive as he silently processes the topic. We’re guys, alright.

We talk about sex.

We brag about women we’ve had in our beds, but we hardly get into details. At least not me and my brothers. Contrary to popular belief among women, guys don’t share details about their sex life. Especially when the girl we care about is concerned. That shit is private. We might mention something like *I didn’t get much sleep last night* in a tone that implies I didn’t sleep because I was fucking my girl’s brains out, but we don’t get much more descriptive than that.

It takes Nico at least twenty seconds to mull over the topic. He’s always been the one to carefully choose his words, and this time is no different.

Shit, I should’ve gone to Logan. At least with him, I know what to expect right off the bat—laughter. I could’ve even tried Shawn, although he wouldn’t be much help.

Nico leans forward, elbows on his knees, face stoic, no indication as to what he’s about to say.

He’s not amused, and that’s half the battle won.

“You can’t get her off, or she can’t orgasm at all?”

My eyes damn near bulge out of their sockets. I expected a lot of reactions when I decided to ask for advice—teasing, stupid comments, mockery, and laughter, to name a few, but I underestimated my younger brother once again. He’s all business. Not a trace of derision in his voice. He’s focused and determined to help me out. I’m so surprised it takes me a moment to get over the initial shock.

“I can make her come just fine, but only if—” I exhale, swallow my pride, and relax, now that I know this won’t be as difficult as I anticipated. “Only if I use my fingers on her clit. She can’t get off with a toy, either. I’ve tried many things, and I get her close, but not quite there.”

“I need more than *many things*, Theo. What have you tried?”

“I need another beer.” I set the empty bottle on the coffee table. “I’ve tried half of the Kamasutra. I tried setting the mood. I even tried getting her off with a silicone replica of my cock, bro. Did you know you can DIY that at home?”

Nico smirks, handing me a fresh bottle, and grabs one for himself, strategically ignoring the clone-a-dick topic. Well, well, well... I might not be

the only one shoving my erect dick in a silicone mold in my spare time.

“How long before you give up trying? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Half an hour?”

“Half an hour?” I stammer, almost choking on a gulp of Budweiser. “Are you kidding? I’m a fucking teenager around Thalia. She looks at me, and I’m ready. I think fifteen minutes was the longest before I gave up, but I didn’t set a timer.”

He nods a few times and drapes one arm over the back of the couch. We’re alike in terms of looks. The seven of us bear an unmistakable resemblance, but each of us has a unique quality or trait the others can’t hope to pull off without coming across stupid.

I’ve got humor. Out of all the Hayes brothers, I sure am the comedian. Logan’s the sporty type. Built like the swimmer he used to be in college. He’s careless, with a no-bullshit attitude and a short fuse. Nico’s the silent, brooding, confident type. He could wear pink and still be intimidating. I can’t sit like he is now and not resemble a cheap, fake Godfather, and he can’t crack a lousy joke and make people laugh.

“Half of the Kamasutra,” he echoes, seemingly lost in thought. “You tried putting her on her stomach? Flat on the bed, ankles crossed, hands above her head.”

“No. That sounds uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable? You know nothing. Try it. It never failed me, but if it doesn’t work with Thalia, you’ll have to be more patient than fifteen minutes. Edge her. A lot.”

“Edge her?” Have I lived under a rock all this time? “What does that even mean?”

“Bring her as close as you can. A second away. Doesn’t matter how. Fingers, mouth, toys—whatever works, but *don’t* let her come. Stop and wait until she calms down. Do that six, eight, maybe ten times in a row. Get her to the point where she’ll need the release so much that she’ll want to claw your eyes out. If she doesn’t come on your dick after that, you’ll have to accept she’s one of those women who just *can’t* orgasm that way.”

Pondering his words, I picture denying my girlfriend an orgasm ten times in a row. I’ll end up with a split lip and a black eye for sure.

We go through a few more beers while Nico checks how things are between Thalia and me besides the glaring problem in the bedroom. The topic naturally changes, and we’re onto sports as per usual, although this time

it's not baseball. Nico has taken a liking to F1, thanks to the triplets invading his house on race weekends. All the while, at the back of my mind, I wonder how I'll survive torturing Thalia without losing a few teeth.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Theo

“PLEASE, BABY...” Thalia utters, her tone pleading, eyes almost tearful. “I can’t take it anymore.”

I’m only halfway through. Forty minutes of bringing the beautiful brunette to the brink of an orgasm, then denying her the release.

God, this is torture for me too.

I want to give her what she wants, what she desperately needs at this point. Never before her, but *always* with her, I’m a pleaser. I live to make her scream my name while she loses her goddamn mind coming any way I can get her off.

An orgasm is a much different deal for women than it is for men. All we need is pace. Rub us the right way and long enough, and you’ll get us there every time.

Women climax with their mind as much as their body—a fact I learned too late in life. It might be why not many women screamed my name before Thalia. I ignored their mind, the emotional side of sex, and how open they were with me.

Things are much different now. The more relaxed and focused on herself Thalia is, the easier triggering her orgasm becomes. I learned to read her mood better. When she’s stressed or tired, initiating sex is different than when she’s rested and cheerful.

Now, she’s fucking desperate.

Hot, bothered, and needy like I’ve not seen a woman before. She struggles. I think she hates me a little too, but I hope it’ll be worth it. I cup her face and capture her lips with an intense kiss, working her up again.

My cock is harder than a steel bar, but I won’t give up. I’ll get her there, even if I’ll end up spilling on the sheets just from watching her thrash on the bed, hands tied behind her back with one of my ties because she tried to get herself off after the third denied orgasm. Curly hair sticks to her neck, a mist

of sweat glistening on her olive skin.

“Patience, little one. Hold on just a short while longer.” I move lower, down from her neck, tending to both nipples before I close my lips on her clit. Thalia cries out, the swollen bud sensitive to every flick of my tongue. Every time I eat her out, she gets to the edge faster, and by the eighth time, it only takes a minute before she’s right there, ready to be tipped over. She mutters in Greek, probably swears, and threatens to castrate me if I don’t stop the torture.

Eight should do it, right?

She’s so worked up, so needy. Her whole body vibrates every time I touch her.

“Now,” I say in her ear. I flip her over, so she lays flat on her tummy, straighten her legs and cross her ankles. “Brace, little one.” I drive into her with one smooth thrust. We both let out a moan—hers desperate, mine low and satisfied.

“Oh... yes!” she gasps and lets out a strained puff. “God... you feel so good.”

She feels amazing. She’s always tight, but in this position, at this angle, there’s barely any space. Warm, soaked walls spasm around me as I pull back and rock into her again and again, gaining pace, hitting that one crucial spot.

“You’ll come on my cock, even if it’s the last fucking thing I ever do,” I growl, driving into her faster with each satisfied sound flying out of her sweet lips. Audible, titillating moans spur me on, doubling my efforts.

She’s close.

So fucking close.

I can tell by how her breathing hiccups, the exhales falling further apart.

“Let go. Stop fighting,” I say, keeping the demanding tempo intact. “Stop holding back on me. I’m here for you.” I lean over her, kissing a line in the crook of her neck. “You’re safe with me, baby. Always safe. Let go.”

That seemingly insignificant change in position changes *everything*. Thalia stills in my arms for a second, and then...

“Oh God, oh God! Yes! Yes!” She switches to Greek, shaking uncontrollably... and she’s coming.

She’s *coming* on my cock.

“There it is,” I pant, my muscles on fire, but I thrust my hips forward, in and out, harder and deeper. “That’s it, baby. That’s it...”

I could walk on water right about now, watching her spasm beneath me,

an erotic, epileptic explosion of ecstasy. The intensity of her orgasm knocks the breath out of her for a few long, delirious seconds. The spasming of her pussy around my cock borders on pain. Addictive, pleasant pain that triggers a tingle of pleasure in my spine. The sensation wraps itself around my hips and erupts as I spill inside her, my chest heaving, lips glued to her nape.

“*Finally*,” I rasp, pinning her to the mattress with the weight of my body. “You came, little one.”

I slide out and move over, stroking her spine.

“Best. Orgasm. Ever,” she breathes. An exhausted half-chuckle, half-moan leaves her lips as she kisses my chest. “You’re amazing...” she sighs, eyes glossy when she lifts her head off the pillow. The bliss on her face makes the agonizing hour worth it.

She’s been absentminded and on edge since the break-in. We both have, but the grim unease fades into the background tonight. Tonight, it’s just us, locked in a bubble.

At least we were in a bubble...

The heavy atmosphere returns as soon as our breathing comes back to normal. It hangs in the air, foretelling that whatever the fuck that break-in was about isn’t over.

Waiting for the ball to drop is nerve-racking.

My watch shows seven in the evening, and as much as I’d like to spend the rest of the evening in bed, getting Thalia off with my cock now that I know she *can* orgasm that way, we’re supposed to meet my brothers at Nico’s restaurant. Shawn and Jack want our help with some wedding-related shit.

“Can you sit down?” Thalia asks half an hour later and points to the couch when we’re ready to leave.

Her brown eyes lose their glow, and she picks her nails, carelessly chewing her lip. That’s enough to force a pang of worry to jab at my chest.

“Everything okay?”

She straddles me, her hands on my neck, lips on my forehead for a sweet, affectionate peck. “I tried to hold off as long as I could, but I can’t anymore.” She caresses my cheeks and huffs a nervous breath. “We’ve not been dating long, and I don’t want anything from you, okay? Not until you know everything I’ve not told you about my past. You can decide what to do with me after I tell you the truth.”

It takes me a moment to process her words, but when I do, my stomach

sinks, and my pulse quickens steadily like water filling a bathtub.

Fuck.

Jesus Christ.

She's pregnant...

I just know it.

She's fucking pregnant.

It's too soon. Isn't it? Am I ready? Is now a good time? Is my work stable enough? What about Thalia? Will she stay home? Will we need a nanny?

A tornado of contradicting ideas destroys all rational thoughts before they fully form in my mind. I'm furious I knocked her up six weeks into our relationship. I'm furious she held off fuck knows how long before telling me. She's been through so much stress lately. She works six days a week. She should be resting and taking care of herself...

Shit.

We had a couple of beers last night. How will that affect the baby?

Baby.

My baby.

Mine and Thalia's.

A mindless daze of happiness washes over me when my mind floods with enticing images. Thalia with a round belly. A little baby boy taking his first steps. Thalia wiping the dirty faces of our kids while we're barbecuing with my family. I'm overcome with joy... it numbs a little bit of the fury.

Especially since Thalia doesn't seem scared. She's not panicking, even though pregnancy will affect her most.

Questions multiply in my head, and it takes a second before I understand that *I'm* not panicking, either. I'm not thinking of ways to get out of this. I'm not questioning whether I want to build my life and future with her... I do.

How did I get here?

And *when* exactly?

It's not like I ever thought about this moment in time. It seemed like such a faraway concept, but now that I'm here, it feels right. So fucking right that I think I don't deserve to be this happy, but I am.

And that's all I need to know.

Everything else will fall into place with time.

Thalia's unaware of the chaos happening inside my head. It's not even been ten seconds, but I've got a plan of action.

Ring. I need a ring and fast.

I cup her face, catching her lips in a slow, affectionate kiss. Jesus, I'm so fucking full, so fluffy inside, my heart might burst any second. "We'll make it work. I promise, *omorfiá*. I'll make this as easy as breathing for you."

Two wrinkles appear on her forehead, and her expression morphs into pure mortification when I place my hand on her abdomen. "Oh, God! You think I'm pregnant?" she cries, then bursts out laughing. "I'm not pregnant, Theo. That's not what I want to tell you!"

Not pregnant?

Shit, I can't keep up with my own head. It would be too soon, so why does my stomach sink and shoulders slump as if she took away something precious from me?

"You're not? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, but it's nice to know you wouldn't run if I were."

Run? For a few short seconds, I was happier than a giddy toddler at a cartoon convention.

"Then what do you want to tell me?"

She inhales a deep breath, eyes on mine, small hands resting flat on my torso. "I love you."

What? I'm beyond confused now. Of course, she loves—*oh...* she's never said it aloud. I took it for granted because I'd been in love with her for a while. And then it hits me... I've never told her, either.

"You only just realized you love me?"

She shakes her head. "No, I've known since the break-in, but we're so fresh, and I didn't want to scare you off."

"You being pregnant for ten seconds, if only in my head, didn't scare me off. Nothing will." I kiss her again. "I—"

She clasps her hand over my mouth, cutting me off before I can say those three words back.

"Don't," she warns. "Please. Not yet. I have a confession to make first. I just wanted you to know that *I love you*, Theo. More than you could ever understand." She kisses me again. "I'm sorry I left it so long before explaining."

Jittery dread settles around us as she slides off my lap, moving to sit in the wing chair, her fingers knitting an invisible sweater.

I don't like where this is going.

Sometimes you just know your world is about to be tipped off its axis.

That something monumental is about to happen. Something out of your fucking control, and all you can do is sit and watch. An icy liquid works through my veins like some sort of terminal infection, my vocal cords tying into knots.

“What do you want to tell me?”

A shadow of nervousness crosses her face like a gusty wind running across a corn field. “My truth.”

TWENTY-NINE

Thalia

“YOU ASKED WHY I SPENT A MONTH IN JAIL,” I say, picking my nails, my heart racing in my chest.

I’ve been pondering the idea of keeping the reason a secret for the rest of my life, but that would never work. Theo asks too many questions about my past. I’m scared that one day he’ll open his laptop and try to find information online. He knows my last name, and I let it slip at some point that I grew up in Thessaloniki. That’s all the information he needs to find out what I’m hiding. It would take one google search for many shameful articles to pop up on the screen, and then he’d be a few clicks away from translating Greek to English and finding out why I was in jail.

And when that happens, he might not forgive me for not telling him myself. At least now, I can hope he’ll understand why I held off so long.

I can hope that he won’t leave.

“I was charged with murder.”

Theo’s eyes grow wider, an incredulous confusion clouding his handsome face as his lips part ever so slightly. He’s silent, staring at me with unseeing eyes for a few long seconds before he forces a shaky breath past his lips. “You’re here, so the charges must’ve been dropped.”

I open a notebook I hid under the mattress in the guest bedroom since the day I moved in here. It’s filled with newspaper clippings—articles and pictures concerning the trial. I find the one that doesn’t mention my relation to Vasilis and use an app on my phone to snap a picture of the text and translate it from Greek to English, then pass Theo the phone.

Vasilis D. was found dead this morning at his house in Thessaloniki. The details surrounding his death are not yet available to the public. The officer attending the emergency call informed the press that the 34-year-old did not die of natural causes. An inside informer who prefers to stay anonymous told

us that Mr. D. was found in a bathtub. The scene suggests a suicide, but he insisted that murder cannot be ruled out at this stage due to incriminating evidence secured by the police.

Theo looks up, eyebrows furrowed, and I'm pretty sure I know what question dances on the tip of his tongue. The same one any other person would want an answer to after reading this article. I can see it in his eyes, and I have an answer ready before the words leave his lips. My palms grow cold, and my heart beats faster, dreading what will happen next.

Theo should know this by now.

I should've told him about Vasilis early into our friendship, even without mentioning the murder trial. It would've been easier back then. The impact of the news wouldn't have been as big when we were friends as it will be now that we're dating.

Now that I'm in love with him, and he loves me too.

"Who was he?"

"He was the Mayor of Thessaloniki. He was young, but the whole country adored him and his vision."

"Okay," he says, growing impatient but fighting to stay calm. "Let's try this a different way. Why were *you* charged with his murder?"

"Because..." I inhale a deep breath and brace for impact as if I'm back on the plane, ready to skydive, strapped to the instructor like we were a few weeks ago. Only this time, I'm jumping solo and without a parachute. "I was the one who called the police. He was my husband."

Deafening silence fills my ears, and my blood runs cold.

"Your husband," Theo echoes quietly, his voice strained as if the word is too hard to pronounce. For ten seconds, he's not reacting, relatively unaffected by the confession, but then his body turns rigid, and hands fly to his head, clawing at his scalp. His composure snaps so fast I don't catch when it happens. "You were married?!" he booms, scrambling to his feet. "And you didn't think to fucking tell me?"

"Theo, please, let me—"

"You were married, Thalia! It's not *oh, I fucked a few guys before I met you no, this is I loved him so much I wanted to spend the rest of my fucking life with him!* This is big! Fuck! You should've told me before we—"

"Before we ruined our friendship?" I finish for him, tears stinging my eyes, threatening to spill. I promised myself I wouldn't cry, but the disdain in

his voice cuts me with a scalpel's precision. "Would it have changed anything?"

I didn't expect him to quietly sit and listen, but the fire burning in his eyes and the sharpness of his voice are more sinister than any scenario of his reaction my brain conjured up. I squirm in my seat, fighting to stay in place, to let him shout and scream and process the news on his own terms before I explain further, but another thing I've not anticipated happens.

"It sure as fuck changes things now." He flies across the room to retrieve his car keys from the hanger by the door.

"Theo, let me explain, I—" I'm up on my feet, chasing after him, but he opens the door and slams it behind him so hard the frame shakes. Ares leaps out of bed, yelping.

I break down into a sobbing mess at the sound of his car engine springing to life outside.

He's gone.

He left like everyone else...

I slide down the wall, my mind creating endless scenarios of how I should've handled this conversation. I had the perfect opportunity to tell Theo I was married when he asked about my truth before the party. I could've made *I was married for eleven days* my truth that night. But I didn't, and now he has a very vague idea of the truth. I wish he had stopped to listen. I wish he had let me explain that marrying Vasilis was the biggest mistake of my life. That it wasn't even out of love.

I was infatuated with the *idea* of love.

In fact, I could've told Theo the truth even earlier. I could've told him the day we sat on the beach all day, and he asked about my life in Greece, but instead of the truth, I lied through my teeth, feeding him the bullshit story about The American Dream.

I should've told him about my parents when he asked. That I've not seen them in almost two years because, in their eyes, they don't have a daughter. I stopped being their daughter when Vasilis was found dead in our bathtub.

Not just my life was ruined when Vasilis died. The murder charges ruined my parents' lives too. Standing by my side during the trial would've been the equivalent of standing up to the entire nation. They abandoned me to save their good name and livelihoods, and now so did Theo.

Vasilis found a way to break me all over again, even from beyond the grave, all the way across the Atlantic, where I tried to start over, forget the

past and find a way to live a happy, peaceful life. For a short while, I was happy. Happier than I've ever been before, but my life is not meant to be easy. It's even meant to be difficult.

It's meant to be unlivable.

My eyes flood with tears as I glare at the door Theo disappeared behind, willing him to come back and *listen*. I can't stomach being alone right now.

I should've known my relationship with Theo wouldn't last long. It was too perfect.

Curled into a ball on the floor, I cry like I've never cried before. Ares licks my face, then lays beside me, letting me cuddle into him, and he might just be the only reason my heart hasn't shattered into tiny pieces.

THIRTY

Theo

EACH ONE OF MY BREATHS IS FUCKING PAINFUL as if someone's tightening a chain around my chest, pulling harder every time I inhale.

My hands shake on the steering wheel, even though I squeeze it so hard my knuckles whiten.

I'm a mess.

Anarchy in my head.

Hollow emptiness in my heart.

A mild sense of panic clutching my chest.

My fist hacks the wheel as I stop at a red light. With an entire thesaurus of opposing emotions coursing through me, I can't sit still, shifting in my seat, tapping my foot on the pedal, and swearing at the driver in front of me for not flooring it when the light changes.

My husband echoes in my brain like an aftershock of an earthquake, destroying any attempt to rein in my thoughts. I wish it was a joke. The girl I'm in love with was married to another man.

Is this payback for my sins? For not wanting more than casual sex from women all these years?

What an irony—the one girl I want more from than just sex, the one girl I want to build my future with, is the one girl who already found the perfect man. The man she must've wanted to spend her life with.

And I'm not him.

I need to talk to someone, vent, scream, or I may do something really fucking stupid, like pick a fight with a random asshole at a random bar to let out some steam.

And I sure need a few drinks to soothe my jagged nerves.

Thalia and I were supposed to meet my brothers and Jack at Nico's restaurant in less than half an hour, but the plan just fucking changed. I dial Nico's number, holding onto the wheel, trying to decide whether to rip it out

of the steering column.

“What’s up?” he answers.

“Change of plans.” I cringe at the sound of my voice. Even to my ears, I sound distraught. “I need you all at your place.”

“You don’t sound good. What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“Two minutes away from your house. Just get everyone to come over, alright?”

“Yeah, I’ll call them and open a bottle. Let yourself in.”

Cutting the call, I turn left into the gated community and press my foot down, speeding down the road lined with oversized McMansions. I turn again, right this time, onto Nico’s driveway at too-many miles an hour. Tires screech when I slam on the brake pedal, stopping mere inches from the garage door.

It’s warm outside, still in the high seventy degrees range. Sun is setting over the ocean in the distance, the pinks and purples painting the cloudless sky above. The smell of grass wafts in the air, and the delicate rustling of leaves is all the sound that can be heard. No kids are running around the mansions in the vicinity, no dogs are barking, no cars are driving by... it’s a peaceful evening. And it feels as if the whole world is out to mock my misery. It should be pouring rain right about now.

Or, better yet, there should be a vicious storm brewing overhead with bolts of lightning ripping the sky wide open, bleaching Nico’s posh house with stark whiteness.

Or even better: a hurricane to match my foul mood, but no.

Not even a fucking drizzle.

“You look like shit,” Nico says when I barge inside, stomping across the marble-lined hallway into the ostentatious living room. “You and Thalia alright?”

I pace back and forth between the glass wall and the grand piano, which takes eighteen goddamn steps one way. I’m trying to gather my thoughts and plan a coherent, sensible sentence. Not that it’s working.

The inside of my head resembles the chaos on the main floor of the Bellagio. My thoughts fight for attention, a cacophony of incoherent noise. I down half the whiskey Nico shoved in my hand when I passed the couch for the third time, and I dig my fingers into the back of my stiff neck.

I should wait until Shawn, Jack, and Logan arrive, but I might have a fucking stroke if I don’t start talking right away.

“Remember Thalia’s truth from the party?”

Nico sits on the armrest of his stupid couch, elbows on his knees, eyes following me around the room. “Yeah, she spent a month in jail.”

I gulp the rest of the stupid whiskey and slam the stupid glass on the stupid fucking coffee table.

I think I need a few deep breaths...

“She was charged with murder.”

A few long silent seconds pass with no reaction from Nico. I think he’s waiting for me to burst out laughing.

Won’t happen, bro.

“She’s not in jail, so...” he starts out slowly, his tone reserved as if he knows it’ll take one wrong word for me to snap.

“Ask me *who* she allegedly killed.”

There’s a subtle change in his expression, as if he’s starting to make sense of my shaking hands and clipped tone, but before he opens his mouth, were interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Great timing.

“Come in!” Nico yells.

Logan enters first, closely followed by Shawn and Jack, each with a bottle of whiskey. Nico must’ve given them a heads up about the situation over the phone because they pat my shoulder without a word.

“I’ll bring you up to speed.” Nico crosses the room to get three crystal glasses from the liquor cabinet. “Thalia told Theo why she spent time in jail. She was accused of murder.”

“Murder?” Logan mouths, eyebrows pulled together as he takes his baseball cap off. “Who did she kill?”

“*Allegedly*,” Nico clips, filling their glasses. “I think we’re about to find out.” They grill me with expectant stares. “Who?”

Muscles in my neck and arms bunch again. The words taste like an old piece of gum. “Her *husband*.”

That piece of information gets to them faster than the murder accusations. Their expressions match the mayhem inside my head: confused, surprised, shocked. Logan’s face twists with recognition too, as if he suddenly realized why I’m pacing the room, steam whistling out of my ears as if I’m ready to kill someone myself.

“She was *married*, and she didn’t tell me.” I plop down on the couch, my shoulders sagging. I’m a bit lighter now that it’s out in the open. I’d like to say calmer, but that’d be a blatant lie. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“What did she tell you about the murder case?” Shawn asks, the police officer in him taking the reins. “The charges? Why was she a suspect?”

I shake my head, glaring at the ceiling. “Who cares? She’s here, so the charges must’ve been dropped. She was *married*, Shawn. *That* matters. She had to love the guy to marry him, right? She must’ve thought he was the one. What the fuck does that make me? Second best choice?”

“You do realize those are questions you should ask Thalia, not us, yeah?” Logan asks, toying with the glass in his hand. “What else did she tell you? How long were they married? She’s only twenty-four, so it couldn’t have been long. What if it was a drunken night in Vegas type of thing? Or what if it was one of those arranged marriages?”

“Arranged marriage in Greece?” I scoff, my temper flaring. “Not likely. What if she really loved him?”

“Loved would be your clue,” Jack says, gunning me down with a pointed stare. Of course, he’s on Thalia’s side. She can’t do no wrong in his eyes. He’s basically her bestie. “Past tense.”

Nico grabs his iPad, places it on the coffee table, and starts tapping the screen.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Asking Google.”

“What I should do?”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “I worry about you sometimes, Theo. I’m trying to find any articles about the murder trial. You know the husband’s name?”

“Vasilis. Thalia’s from Thessaloniki, and her last name is Dimopoulos.” I squeeze the glass tighter, seeing red all over again. Fuck this shit. It’s probably *his* surname, not hers.

“We sure could use Thalia’s help with translating,” he says, but a beat later, he opens another tab in the web browser and lets Google Translate work its magic. “I’ve got something,” Nico says after a bit of back and forth between translating from Greek to English.

He pushes the iPad my way, taking my empty glass to refill it while I read a translated version of the article aloud, so we don’t waste time waiting for everyone to catch up.

A murder investigation has been launched after Vasilis Dimopoulos, aged 34, the Mayor of Thessaloniki, philanthropist, and presidential

candidate, was found dead at his property late last night (Tuesday).

Police responding to a concern for welfare call-out shortly before 10p.m. discovered the body. The victim's wife, aged 22, has been detained for questioning.

Detective Nikolaos Balaskas said: "We cannot speculate at this stage about what took place. We are working very hard to establish the circumstances of Mr. Dimopoulos's death. We cannot rule out any possibility at this stage."

Detectives investigating the murder are urging people to come forward to help them piece together the circumstances.

"Anyone who witnessed or heard anything suspicious in the area should contact us immediately. Cordons have been erected around the address, and there will be a heavy police presence in the area as we continue our investigation."

"He was running for president?!" I snap, my blood boiling again. That sure doesn't help the fucked-up situation. "Mayor and philanthropist versus plain old me."

"You're dumb," Shawn clips, rolling his eyes. "I get that you're riled up, but you don't have to act so fucking stupid. She loves you, Theo."

She does. I don't doubt that for a second, but it doesn't change the facts. I'm not sure what hurts more—that she was married or that she didn't tell me. Both hurt, I guess, but the fact she didn't trust me enough to share that piece of information sooner cuts deeper.

I hand Nico the iPad. He glances over the article again before he copies and pastes different paragraphs into the translator to find more information that may shed further light on the murder mystery.

The next one he finds confirms what we already know—Thalia was charged with murder. I know the scene initially looked like suicide, but articles relating to that little detail are vague, and there's no description of what the scene actually looked like other than the guy was found in a bathtub.

Nico then stumbles upon an interview with Thalia's parents and friends. "Listen to this. This is what Thalia's father told the press. *We no longer have a daughter. There are no words to describe how ashamed and outraged we are. We truly believe that justice will be served swiftly, and we expect the strongest possible punishment for this heinous crime.*"

What kind of parent would spew such venom about their daughter? No

matter what shit I'd get up to, my parents would never turn their backs on me.

"There's more."

He reads the statements of a few of Thalia's friends, who unanimously repeat the same lines: ashamed to have known her, willing her to rot in prison. At the top of the page, there's a picture gallery with images of Thalia's parents standing in front of a vandalized house—broken windows, trash littering the front lawn, and graffiti marking the walls.

Nico flips through the gallery, showing us pictures of thousands of flowers laid outside Vasilis's house, pictures of crowds standing outside the courthouse, holding nasty banners. And the one that makes my stomach somersault—a picture of my girl in handcuffs inside the courtroom, standing next to a lawyer whose arms are crossed. He's nonchalantly looking away from his client as if representing her is a nightmare.

This isn't how I imagined the trial. I've not had much time to imagine it, but I wouldn't have pictured *this* regardless of how long I'd have to think.

Thalia was deemed public enemy number one. Everyone hated her, including those whose love and protection should've been unconditional—her parents.

I fight the impulse to vomit, bitter bile climbing up my throat. This must be why she never talked about her parents, friends, or anyone she left behind in Greece. This is why she dodged the topic at every turn.

No names, no stories, no pictures.

The murder accusations must be the reason why she came to America. To escape the hatred back home.

"That's odd," Nico says. "Two days before the end of the trial, all charges were dropped." Deep creases line his forehead when he reads the article in silence. "No explanation. Vasilis's death was ruled a suicide, and Thalia walked away without a mark on her record."

He gives me the iPad, so I can read the concise and straight-to-the-point article. "That makes no sense."

My mind splits in half. An unruly, prickly itch whizzes through me at the mere thought of the hell Thalia's life must've been during the trial, but I can't shake the main issue.

"She was *married*," I remind them, my words coming a bit slurred now that I'm onto my fourth drink. "She wanted to spend her life with that guy."

"They were married for eleven days, Theo." Jack counters, throwing the little detail we learned from one of the articles back in my face. "That's

hardly a lifetime. We all have a past. I get why you're upset, but you can't hold her accountable for what she did before she met you. You did some crazy shit over the years, and I bet you didn't tell her any of it."

"Sure, we all have a past, but I was never married, and if I were, I would've told her about it before we got so fucking serious. I wasn't even engaged. Fuck! I was never in love before I met her." I massage my temples with the tips of my fingers. "I'm so confused."

"Did she say why she didn't tell you sooner?"

"I didn't let her get a word in," I admit, shame ringing in my voice. "I stormed out..."

Logan's jaw tics, but the tone of his voice is measured and neutral as if not to rile me up further. "You won't get to the bottom of this if you don't talk to her. You read the articles. It sounds like she went through hell. I'm sure talking about it isn't easy. She's trying to forget it ever happened."

"That doesn't absolve her. She should've told me sooner. This isn't trivial, Logan. I've been thinking about a future with her. Ring, wedding, kids... and now I find out there already was a fucking husband!"

"You've got some odd priorities, bro. She was accused of murder," Nico clips, drilling a hole in me with his vicious, black stare. "That should concern you more."

"The charges were dropped. She didn't kill him."

He doesn't respond, staring straight ahead, jaw working in tight circles as he tries his hardest not to speak.

"You think she killed him?" I boom, my temper all over the place. "You have got to be kidding. You've seen her! You think she could overpower a guy?"

Nico seems to struggle not to let my attitude flip the rage switch in his head as he downs the rest of his drink. It doesn't take him long to lose his cool. Sometimes it takes as little as a single misplaced word to earn a split lip or a black eye.

"I don't know what happened, and neither do you. And you won't unless you talk to her."

That's the problem. I'm so disconnected from reality I don't think I can hold a conversation with Thalia without letting the emotions take the reins. Not filtering my words and spewing the tangled web of my thoughts is not the best idea. I'm sure I'd end up screaming things I don't mean and regret them in the future. I need to sleep this off; rest, recharge, and arrange the

sudden influx of unexpected and unwanted information.

We'll have to talk at some point, but when the time comes, I need to trust myself to let her speak because all I want to do now is scream at the top of my lungs. She put a dent in my trust today, and that shit is hard to rebuild.

THIRTY-ONE

Theo

THE MIND-SPLITTING HEADACHE comes as no surprise when I wake up in Nico's guest bedroom. The same one where my relationship with Thalia began.

I sat downstairs with my brothers until the early morning hours, and I don't remember how I got to bed. The good news is that I didn't puke, despite having six whiskeys on an empty stomach. At least the sixth is the last one I remember drinking. I might've had more.

I can't recall the last time I got so wasted, but the hangover is a blessing in disguise. I'm too unwell to even think about my girlfriend's dead husband. I'm also too unwell to scream or throw shit around, which will work in Thalia's favor once I get home to talk to her.

Nico and Logan are downstairs when I haul my ass over there. They'd both easily pass for extras in a zombie movie—bloodshot eyes and pale faces. And to think, this is what we used to look like every weekend back in college.

"Morning," I say, my mouth drier than the Mojave Desert. I sit at the breakfast bar, my elbows on the counter as I hang my head low, willing the kitchen to stop fucking spinning. I'm twenty-seven, for God's sake. I should know better than to drink like I'm sixteen. "What time is it?"

"Half-past eight." Logan throws a bottle of painkillers at me. It bounces off my head, landing on the floor. "Take two, or maybe five. Have you made your mind up?"

"About what?" I need those pills, but if I bend over to snatch them off the floor, I may not come back up.

"Whether you'll ask Thalia to marry you."

"*What?* I said that?"

Nico starts the coffeemaker, the noise like needles to my eardrums, but the bitter aroma compensates for the misery. "You don't remember much,

huh? After the sixth whiskey, you were back and forth about going down on one knee.”

“Fuck it! She married him, so she’ll marry me too. She’s not going to have his fucking surname. She’ll have mine.” Logan quotes, overly theatrical.

“What if she says no? What if I’m not the right guy for her? What if she doesn’t love me?” Shawn joins our gathering, fresh as a daisy. “You’re such a drama queen. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re the gay one.”

“So?” Nico urges, smirking behind his cup. “Are we going engagement ring shopping this fine morning?”

“I was drunk,” I huff, playing it down, but my heart is going faster than a train on the tracks at the thought of Thalia becoming Mrs. Hayes. “Get over yourselves.”

“Yeah, you *were* drunk,” Logan says, arms crossed over his chest. “Drunk people are honest. You won’t end it with Thalia. I’ll personally kick your ass if you do because, let’s face it, you’re a lucky bastard to have her. What makes you think you’ll find another woman gullible enough to love you?” He elbows my shoulder and successfully dodges the apple I hurl at his head. “I’m joking, but for real—stop moping, put your big-boy pants on and *talk* to her.”

They all nod in unison, the helpful little bunch.

Fucking assholes.

They annoy the crap out of me half the time, but honestly, I don’t know what I’d do without them. They call it as they see it, and right now, I’m grateful for the proverbial bucket of ice-cold water tipped over my head because Logan is right.

They all are.

I need to talk to Thalia and get to the bottom of the issue instead of throwing the relationship away at the first sign of problems. Thalia didn’t hold me accountable for living my life as a man-whore until I found her. I’ve got no right to hold her accountable for her mistakes, but I need to hear the whole story. I need to know why she married that guy and how he died.

Shawn’s phone pings in his pocket, and blood drains from his face when he checks the screen. “Shit…” He looks up at me. “It’s Thalia.”

My headache gives way in an instant when he shows me the screen with the text from my girl.

Thalia: 911

My legs, like two tubs of water, slow me down when I run to the living room to retrieve my phone. The same text waits on my screen, sent less than a minute ago.

“Don’t call her!” Shawn yells when I’m about to dial. “You don’t know what’s happening. If she’s hiding and you call, you’ll make things worse. The phone location shows her at your condo.”

“Let’s go!” Nico booms from the door, keys in hand.

Everyone’s suddenly sober and alert. We hop into his G-Wagon while Shawn’s on the phone sending a squad car over to my place. I open the security system app to check what’s happening, and my stomach sinks.

No picture.

If the feed was interrupted, there’d be an error message, but there’s just a black screen which means the camera near the front door is covered.

I rewind the recording to when Thalia approached the door less than five minutes ago, eyes red and puffy as if she had cried all night. She opened the door, probably expecting to find me on the other side. Her beautiful face paled, and she slammed the door closed with all her might. She remembered to snatch Ares off the floor in the mayhem of fear that must’ve been running through her head, then bolted into our bedroom.

Shit. There’s no lock on that door.

She can’t hide there.

She should’ve aimed for the fucking bathroom!

Two seconds later, something covers the camera. My heart slams like a hammer, bruising my ribs. The sour taste of fear on my tongue makes me sick. I’ll tear that asshole apart when I get my hands on him, whoever he is.

“She’ll be okay. She can handle herself,” Shawn assures, trying to soothe me. “Try to calm down. We’re almost there.”

“*Calm down?*” I snap, my hands shaking. “Would you calm down if Jack was locked in your house with some nutcase? He’s *inside*, alone with my girl!”

“The squad car is just a minute away. She’ll be okay, Theo. She’s got more fire in her bones than many guys I know.”

Nico speeds across Newport like we’re in a high-budget action movie. The engine roars, and tires squeal on every corner. Seven minutes. Seven long minutes pass before he slams the brakes outside the building, leaving the car in the middle of the road.

Blue and red lights flash on the roofs of three cop cars. The door to the

building stands wide open, and one officer is outside, probably securing the perimeter and keeping a crowd of bystanders from getting too close.

I sprint inside first, bouncing off the wall in the hallway, my heart in my throat as I burst through the door. “Thalia?!”

“We’re here,” a male voice shouts from the bedroom.

I’m there in a heartbeat, every muscle in my back pulled tautly. Thalia sits on the bed with Ares curled beside her, no tears staining her face. I charge straight at her and pull her to me, the touch of my hands urgent. She’s okay. She’s not hurt.

The warmth of her body soothes my unnerved mind. “I’m here,” I say, cupping her face. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

A quiet whimper slips past her lips, and she goes perfectly rigid in my arms. “Don’t hold me. It hurts like hell.”

I let go, checking her over, only now noticing that her right shoulder is twisted back in an unnatural position. “What the hell happened?”

“No one was here when the first squad car arrived,” the cop explains just as Shawn joins us.

“He ran when he heard the police sirens,” Thalia says.

“But they’ve got him,” Shawn adds quickly as if he knows I need that piece of information or I’m going to flip. “They caught him running down the back alley.”

“Who? Who the fuck was here?”

“Kai.” Thalia rests her forehead on my shoulder, and I risk wrapping my arm around her middle, careful not to touch her dislocated shoulder.

Kai.

Why didn’t I think of that dipshit sooner?!

The note he left last time flashes before my eyes. I should’ve dug deeper when Shawn confirmed it wasn’t Dean or Asher. I should’ve known Kai wasn’t going to quit so easily.

You had a chance, and you blew it. Time to play.

Play.

Game on.

Fucking sick son of a bitch.

“You’re one tough cookie,” Shawn says, a small smile curling his lips. “The guys tell me you threw half of the pans in the kitchen at the guy.”

“Kitchen?” I echo, confused. I didn’t even look that way when I ran inside. “I saw you hide in here with Ares.”

“I locked Ares here, sent you two a text, and came out.” She pats the dog on the head. “I don’t know what Kai thought was going to happen. He came unarmed. He had a cloth, which I assume was soaked in chloroform, and he tried to grab me when I got out of the bedroom, but I kicked his nuts and ran for the kitchen.”

God... he was going to take her. Use her to blackmail me and force me to hand over the game.

I press my lips to her temple, unsure which one of us needs it more. “How did you dislocate your shoulder?”

The officer next to Shawn chuckles at that. “She tried to stop him from running away and slipped in the living room, landing on the coffee table.”

I don’t know if I’m more pissed off or proud. The last time Kai was here, she locked herself in the bathroom, but today she faced the nutcase head-on. She shouldn’t have taken the risk. She got hurt, and despite the brave face, she’s barely holding tears at bay. I know how much a dislocated shoulder hurts, and I can’t believe how well she’s holding up.

Where the hell is the ambulance?

I kiss the side of her head. “You’re too brave for your own good, you know that?”

“I was scared until I saw who it was. Men like Kai act tough, but they’re weak. He was unprepared and stalling, saying how you destroyed his reputation and no one in the business wants to work with him. He kept going on and on that he’s broke and wanted to be your partner, but you shot him down and left him no choice but to act.”

“The ambulance is here.” Logan stops in the doorway with Nico close behind. “You good, Thalia?”

“Yeah, but I’ll be better when I get some painkillers.”

One of Shawn’s buddies directs the ambulance crew to the bedroom, and a moment later, a young woman enters. She tends to Thalia, forcing me to move out of the way. My jaw clenches painfully when the paramedics check her over. They’re helping, but as they do, they’re causing her pain, and I can’t fucking handle seeing her beautiful eyes tear up.

“We’ll need her statement.” Shawn steers me, Logan, and Nico out of the bedroom to show us the kitchen where his buddies are taking pictures, securing whatever evidence they find. “Kai’s being detained for questioning.

I'll make sure he goes down for this, Theo, but don't hope for much. Two years is max, considering he didn't steal anything. All we have is breaking in with the intent to cause harm, which isn't much."

"He'll walk out next year for good behavior, right?" I hiss, taking in the mayhem in the kitchen, where the contents of the cabinets lay scattered all over the floor.

"Probably, but don't worry about it ahead of time." He pats my shoulder, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "One hell of a woman you've got there."

Nico and Logan agree, smirking under their noses when Thalia argues, rather loudly, with the paramedics that she doesn't need to be carried out on a stretcher. She wins the battle, and moments later, I hop into the back of the ambulance, holding her hand all the way to the hospital. She's not so rigid now that she's on painkillers, the pain bearable if not numbed completely.

"We need to talk," she says, her voice small.

"Not now, baby. We'll talk once you're better." I graze my thumb over her knuckles. "It'll all be over soon, I promise."

Not as soon as I hoped.

It takes almost three hours before Thalia's finally wheeled into a recovery room. My left-hand bears half-moon, bloody marks of her nails. She broke the skin, squeezing my palm while the doctors realigned her shoulder. I'm sure some of my teeth cracked when I fought the urge to knock out the people who were helping. Pain meds dulled her a little, but when two doctors were setting her shoulder back in place, she cried and screamed, making my stomach flip.

Now, she's in the hospital bed, dressed in a blue gown, covered in white sheets, and asleep thanks to the IVs surrounding her bed—pain meds and a mild sedative. She didn't need it, but the attending worried she was in shock and refused to risk a meltdown once the adrenaline wore off.

He wants to keep her overnight as a precaution. I doubt he'd do so with any other patient, but she is *my* girlfriend, and I'm a Hayes and the mayor's son, so... special treatment.

I don't fucking want her to stay overnight. I want her out of here and back home where she can wear her own clothes and watch Netflix with me all night on the couch. Back home, where I can have her wrapped in my arms, kissing her head over and over again. Where Ares can curl into a ball at her feet, keeping her warm.

I take my phone out of my pocket when it vibrates for the ninth time. Missed calls from most of the family wait on the screen, along with a few text messages.

Dad: Shawn told us what happened. How's Thalia?

Mom: I'm on my way to the hospital. I stopped by your house to grab some clothes and toiletries for Thalia. Call me when you get this.

Cody: Pick up your phone, asshole. We're in the waiting room. No one's telling us shit. How is she doing?

Mom: Theo, please call me. I'm worried sick!

Nico: Call me if you need anything. I'm helping Shawn.

I shoot Dad a text and reluctantly leave Thalia alone, knowing damn well the waiting room is packed with family by now. I don't mind. I'm actually grateful they're here. That they give a damn. It's reassuring to know they're ready to help whichever way they can.

Me: She's asleep now. Shoulder set back in place.

As expected, it's not just Mom and Cody waiting for news. All three of my youngest brothers sit in the uncomfortable plastic chairs, along with Jack and Logan. Even Cassidy, Mary-Jane, and Amy are here, tucked in the corner, out of everyone's way, as if afraid they'll bite.

"How is Thalia doing?" My mother is the first one up on her feet, a small travel bag tucked under her chair. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me into a hug while everyone gathers around us, eager to hear the details. "I was so worried when Shawn called. Are you okay? Do you need me to do anything? I can take Ares home or—"

"It's okay, Mom. They set Thalia's shoulder back in place. She's got a mild concussion, but she'll be okay. She's asleep now. Her doctor wants to keep her overnight as a precaution, but I don't think that's necessary. She'll be much more comfortable in her own bed than here."

I don't want her to spend the night at the hospital. There's no way I'll fit in the small bed with her, and there's no way I won't fucking try if her

attending doesn't let her go home.

"There's no need for you to sit here. If something changes, I'll call you. Thalia needs the rest, so none of you will see her tonight." I peck Mom's head. "Don't worry, okay? She's tougher than she looks. You can come by tomorrow when she's home."



I was eventually allowed to take Thalia home for the night. After the doctor huffed and puffed, adamant about changing our mind and keeping Thalia under observation. She's not badly injured, so other than impressing my father, the mayor, he had no reason to keep her here.

After reassuring the doc that I'll bring her back tomorrow for a check-up, he signed the release papers. Thalia's arm is in a sling, and I've got a bag of painkillers and the supplies my mother brought over.

"Straight to bed," I say as we walk inside the condo.

Ares is right there, but he's not jumping high as per usual, as if he can sense that he shouldn't. Instead, he stands on his back legs, sniffing Thalia's sling.

She pats his head, still slightly confused thanks to the meds, but she nods at me, aiming for the bathroom. "I need a shower, and I think I'll need help." She points to the sling.

I follow her into the bathroom, pull her sweatpants and panties down, and then help her out of the t-shirt. I undress once she's safely in the shower, standing under the stream, tilting her head to let warm water splash her face. A large bruise is already forming under her skin, a mixture of red and purple marking the shoulder, collarbone, and shoulder blade.

"How are you feeling?" I press her back to my chest.

"Tired, but I want us to talk."

I take her healthy arm and spin her around, my mouth catching hers. She tries to block the kiss, lips in a thin line, one hand pushing me away, but I'm not having it. I grip her jaw and fight my way into her mouth until she gives up and lets me in. My tongue skims over hers, the kiss demanding but affectionate.

"I love you," I say, resting my forehead on hers. "I love you, and nothing will change that." I inch away but not before I peck her lips. "We'll talk tomorrow. You need to sleep."

She bites her lip, blinking a few times, and I think some of the droplets trailing down her cheeks are salty. “I love you too.”

“I know, *omorfiá*. I’m sorry I stormed out last night. I had to think and find a way to deal with what you told me.”

She bobs her head once, pressing herself to my chest. “Tomorrow. I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

The unease reappears. She sounds defeated. As if she’s waiting for us to end once she says whatever is left to be said.

I push the thoughts aside, spin her around and wash her hair, probably doing a lousy job. I’ve never done this before, and Thalia’s got more hair than any woman I ever met, so it takes fucking ages. She’s silent throughout and doesn’t utter a word while I help her get dressed. I think she’s afraid that she won’t stop talking if she says one more word tonight.

THIRTY-TWO

Thalia

“MORNING,” I say, standing in the doorway to the kitchen where Theo fiddles with the coffee machine, wearing a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a plain white t-shirt.

He cocks his head to the side. “Morning. Why are you up?”

“I’m done sleeping.”

“I noticed. How’s your shoulder?”

I walk further into the room and try to haul myself onto the kitchen island, but the shooting pain and the sling stop me pretty fast.

Theo takes over, lifting me by the waist. Once we’re eye-level, with my bum resting on the cool marble, he kisses my forehead. “Stop being self-sufficient and stubborn, and start asking for help.”

“I need painkillers, and I think I’ll take a day off.”

“Yeah, and the rest of the week too.” He takes out the prescription pain meds from the drawer. “You’re staying home until you don’t need painkillers.”

“You’re not dressed for work.” She frowns, searching my face. “You don’t have to babysit me, you know?”

“No, I don’t, but I want to.” He hands me a cup of coffee and rests against the cupboards.

The atmosphere shifts instantly as centipedes with icy feet scurry along my spine. The distance between us has me bracing for a conversation I shouldn’t have to have with anyone and one I’ve been unconsciously preparing for since the day we met.

My heart beats faster, and stomach ties into knots—I hate that. I never want to feel insecure and uncertain around Theo, but the dread is unmistakable. My mind is already gearing up to deal with the worst outcome. The dam that holds my tears threatens to burst when I curl my fingers around the warm cup.

“Did you?” he asks slowly, voice steady, face determined. “Did you kill your husband?”

I swallow the lump in my throat to make room for words. I’ve never told anyone about that night. Not even my lawyer. He was appointed by the court and had no choice in the matter. If he could say *no* to representing me, he’d scream it from the rooftops.

“Vasilis was a God in Thessaloniki long before his political career.” I start as all stories should—right at the beginning. “Since his twenties, he fought to secure funding for orphanages. He was pictured in newspapers, taking heaps of toys and sweets to the kids, smiling and hugging the little ones to his chest.”

I remember my fascination with the man. Surely this isn’t how Theo imagined the conversation, but if I’m to paint the picture and explain the marriage and the murder charges, I have to do it on my terms. “When he decided to pursue a political career, he won the election for mayor with eighty-nine percent of the votes. I volunteered as part of his election team.”

“Thalia,” Theo urges, gritting his teeth and balling his hands into tight fists. “Please, just... answer the question. Did you kill him?”

I’ve rehearsed this conversation in my head a thousand times already, and *this* is the best scenario I came up with. “We only dated for a few weeks before he proposed,” I continue. “Two weeks later, we were married. He loved me and wanted to have kids... as many as I’d agree to. I love kids, Theo. I’ve wanted to be a mom since I turned eighteen.” I take a sip of coffee, toying with the bracelet on my wrist, too ashamed to look him in the eye. “I was fascinated by his love. To this day, it feels like I was under a powerful spell. Blind to the obvious.” I take in a deep breath.

“We moved in together, and he immediately started planning his presidential campaign, locking himself up in his office until late in the evenings. It was the only room in the house I wasn’t allowed to set foot in, but he never locked the door. It stood wide open day and night. It was his space, but that morning...” I swallow hard, my voice breaking, and a lonely tear breaks through the dam.

This is harder than I could’ve imagined. I’ve recalled that day hundreds of times, but it’s different to think it, than to talk about it. Different than actually sharing the secret, risking my life. I might be far away from Greece, but there’s no place I can hide if he decides to find me.

I inhale a deep, steadying breath wiping my tears away, my hands

trembling when I wrap them around the cup again. “I was playing with our puppy, tossing a ball. He ran into his office, and I chased after him.”

Each word is harder to get out, and I’m pausing more often, doing my best not to break down when images I never want to recall flash before my eyes.

I chance a glance at Theo. I’m not sure what I see in his eyes, but judging by how he’s drumming his fingers on the underside of the counter, his patience is wearing thin. I’m sure he wants me to answer the question, but at the same time, he’s holding onto the counter as if trying to stop himself from coming closer and taking me into his arms.

“I didn’t plan it too well,” I whisper through my tears, my vision blurry. “I knew a dealer from my school years. When Vasilis came home that evening, I slipped a roofie in his glass, then drew him a bath while he could still walk.”

Theo shifts uncomfortably, the color draining from his face. On some level, he knew the answer to his question before he asked. He had to. He told me last night that Nico found articles about Vasilis’s death, but didn’t get into details and kept saying we’ll talk in the morning. I bet he anticipated the truth. Or considered it, at least.

Now, he opens his mouth to speak, but I’m not done with the story. If he interrupts me, if I hear contempt in his voice, I won’t get another word out, and he has to know exactly what happened and why.

“It’s not as easy as you’d think... slicing someone’s wrists,” I whisper, choking on my tears, but I don’t wipe them away. I let them stain my cheeks and nose, my hands firmly clasped around the cup of coffee. “It takes more strength than you’d anticipate. Especially when using a small kitchen knife.”

I’m focused on my fingers, pulling on a cuticle, but I catch movement with the corner of my eye when Theo shifts from one foot to another, silent and most likely horrified. I can’t imagine what’s going through his head. Is he worried? Scared that I’m unstable and could hurt him too? Does he want to know why, or is he wondering how to get rid of me fast?

“The police performed an autopsy. They checked Vasilis’ toxicology results and knew he was roofied. Evidence was there... my one-way ticket to jail. Everyone turned away from me. Friends, family, the whole town. The whole country. I became a villain. The worst kind because I killed the man everyone loved. The hero.”

My voice grows steadier again. I learned to block the pain of what

society did to me. The only pain that remains buried deep inside isn't for me. It's for *them*. For those who couldn't protect themselves.

"People are cruel. I was spat at, threatened with death, and called every name you could think of. I received hundreds of vile letters while I remained in custody, awaiting trial. Not one person stood by me, but I refused to plead guilty. I didn't feel guilty, Theo. I still don't."

Even I know it sounds crazy. How can I not hate myself for taking someone's life? I've wondered that for almost two years, nitpicking my behavior and personality for signs of mental instability. What if I'm a psychopath?

Maybe I am...

Maybe I should be locked up in a psych ward.

My tears dry, and hands stop shaking. I don't regret what I did. It was worth the pain and suffering I endured later. None of it could compare to what *they* went through.

"I did what I thought was right. The trial was the top news, and the judge worked hard to bring me to justice as soon as possible. I never told them if I killed Vasilis or why. No one asked. They assumed, but no one got it right. Only one person knows the real reason—his father. And now, you'll know too."

"Why?" Theo mouths, prompting me to look at him.

And once again, I'm not sure what it is that shines in his eyes. Fear? Contempt? Curiosity? Maybe a mixture of all three. Maybe something else entirely.

"See, that office? I learned why I wasn't allowed inside. I learned why Vasilis was so involved with helping every orphanage in the area. I saw the reason on his laptop. His screensaver was a collage of pictures of little boys and girls... *naked*."

"Fuck," Theo breathes quietly, his eyes wide, glued to my face, skin ashen. "Was he...? Jesus," he huffs, unable to call the monstrosity for what it was.

I don't blame him. I can't think of a single crime worse than that committed by my dead husband.

"A folder loaded with video clips of Vasilis raping children was on his desktop," I say quietly. "In plain sight. Not hidden, not password protected. He was a powerful man, with an even more powerful man behind him—his father, former president of Greece. I don't know if Vasilis felt invincible

or...” I huff a sigh, digging my nails into my palms. “His father would’ve buried the evidence and made my life a living hell if I tried to expose Vasilis. I didn’t know how else to stop him from hurting children.”

Two years later, I’m yet to come up with an alternative. A solution that would’ve let him live. One that would’ve allowed me to stay in Greece with my family.

I take another sip of coffee, waiting for Theo to process the information. He’s lost in thought, absentmindedly grinding his teeth. Minutes pass before he speaks, and when he does, his voice sounds strained, as if he’s forcing his vocal cords to work.

“Why were the charges dropped?”

Relief tries to sneak into my heart because he doesn’t seem afraid of me. He doesn’t sound as if I’m a disease feasting on his life. I wouldn’t have regretted spending twenty-five years in prison for killing Vasilis, but that doesn’t mean I wanted to. After he took his last breath, I seized his laptop, knowing the evidence on it could be the bargaining chip able to save me from a life behind the bars of a maximum-security prison.

“Halfway through the trial, Vasilis’s father agreed to talk to me. He arranged for a private conversation with no witnesses.” I look up, meeting Theo’s dark eyes. “I blackmailed him. I told him what his son did and that if I go down for his murder, I’ll take him and his good name with me. Rizos was my chance to walk away. I told him I’ll make the evidence public. It’d be the end of him. The end of his family, and he’d never allow it.

“Two weeks later, he returned with a stack of legal documents—his insurance policy to make sure I’d never tell anyone why I killed his son. The charges were dropped, Vasilis’s death was ruled a suicide, and I was released.”

Theo takes the first step forward, but I jerk back, holding my hand out before he can touch me.

“Don’t underestimate this. I *killed* a person. I slit his wrists and watched him bleed out. Take a second to think about what you want to do next.”

His jaw works furiously, but he stays at a distance when he voices another question. “Would you do it again? Would you kill him knowing what you know today? Knowing your family and friends will hate you? Knowing you won’t have them in your life?”

I don’t have to think about the answer. I’ve had a long time to deal with what I did, to relive every second of that fateful day. I lost my life as I knew

it. I can never tell my parents the truth, and despite the charges being dismissed, they firmly believe I'm guilty, and they don't want to know me. It would cost them their livelihood if they stood by my side.

"Yes," I answer truthfully. "I'd kill him again. Over and over because I don't know what else I could've done to stop him. I've not saved the world, but even if it's just one child who won't suffer, it was worth it."

He doesn't let me stop him this time when he comes closer and cups my face, ghosting his thumbs across my cheekbones before his lips come down on mine in a deep, slow kiss.

My world crumbles around me, and in an instant, it's rebuilt with renewed strength, new hope, and new life.

"I love you, *omorfiá*. So fucking much. You're stronger than me and my brothers combined, and I'm so proud that you're mine." He presses his lips to my forehead. "I'm never letting you go."

I move my hands to his sides and wrap them around his back. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I try not to think about it because it hurts that I won't ever see my parents again. I can't tell them the truth."

"You told me. You can tell them too."

I shake my head and close my eyes tight. "You believe me. They won't."

"Why the fuck wouldn't they? You're their daughter."

"Not anymore. I tried to talk to them after I was cleared of charges, but they wouldn't even let me in the house. My father backhanded me and told me never to show my face there again. I wanted to write them a letter, but I can't say more than I already told them. I shouldn't be letting *you* in on the secret. If Rizos finds out I broke the NDA, I'm going straight to jail."

"I won't tell anyone, Thalia. You can trust me. I swear."

"I do trust you. You hold my life in the palm of your hand. You're the only person who knows and the only person who matters."

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me to his chest, and kisses the top of my head. "I'm your family now. Me, my brothers, and my parents."

THIRTY-THREE

Theo

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU FIND OUT the woman you love killed her husband?

Run?

Stay?

Call the cops?

Each can be the right choice, depending on the situation. Only one fits *my* situation.

Thalia and I spent the rest of the day on the couch, talking and watching “Ozark”. Well, she was watching while I replayed what she told me earlier, waiting for fear or doubt to creep in. Waiting for the sane response to arrive. After all, I’m holding a woman who *killed*. I’m holding a woman who slit a man’s wrists. A woman who successfully blackmailed the former president of Greece into getting out of jail time and succeeded.

And at the same time, I’m holding a woman who helped a friend when she was too drunk to see reason. A woman who saved a stranger from being raped by confronting Asher. A woman who made sure my dog was safe and secure before she faced Kai. A woman who brought out the best in me and jolted me into feeling alive and happier than I’ve ever been.

Fear and doubt fail to arrive. I’m peaceful of all things, proud and grateful that she stumbled into my life.

Thalia nodded off a while ago, but the show keeps playing as a background to my internal monologue. She’s so beautiful, cuddling into me as if I’m all she needs. As if I’m all she has.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I *am* all she has.

There are friends and my family, but I might just be the only person who loves her, and that thought constricts my throat. I pull a blanket higher, tucking her in, careful not to hurt her shoulder. My fingers sweep up and

down her arm in a monotonous, steady rhythm.

I drift back to when I thought she was pregnant, recalling the inordinate sense of warmth and excitement running through me at that moment. Deep down, I always knew settling down would be a breeze once the right woman came along. It might not be the best moment for this decision, but I'm sure I'll never come to regret it.

Me: Boys, I'll need that ring.

Shawn: No. Fucking. Way! You really gonna propose?!

Logan: I see you two worked shit out. Good. You waste no time, huh?

Me: Yeah, unless... is there some timeline for this I'm unaware of? A sign from up above I'm supposed to wait for.

Nico: {gif}

I watch a gif of a guy walking down the street, holding a piece of cardboard far above his head that reads, "This is a sign." I swallow my laughter. A huge weight lifts off my shoulders and dissipates like smoke in the evening air.

My brothers and I have always been careless. I guess I missed the moment we matured and grew up because their approval and encouragement comes as a surprise and means the world. Relief fills me like hot air fills an air balloon, and I gently kiss the crown of Thalia's head, careful not to wake her.

Shawn: Jack says he knows a jeweler who'll make whatever the fuck you want.

Nico: Should I free some cash? Did she explain the murder mystery?

Me: Jeweler sounds good. No cash, Nico. And yeah, she explained. It's all good. We'll talk tomorrow. Got my girl asleep here. She'll make me pay if I wake her up.

Logan: Shit. I need to get me some of that domestication. Sounds fun.

Anyone got a girl I could marry?

Nico: Depends on how desperate you are.

I dim the screen and set the phone aside. It vibrates a few times, hinting that their discussion is still going, but I'm not interested. I press my lips to the crown of Thalia's head, ready for whatever is to come.



A week.

That's how long Thalia had to wear the sling.

A whole *week* of strictly no sex.

As soon as the doctor took the sling off and I triple-checked that she was no longer in pain, we marched out of the hospital and sped across the city, heading home.

And as soon as we step inside the condo, I'm all over her.

"Too long. A week is too fucking long, *omorfiá*." I tear the t-shirt off my back and work on Thalia's summer dress so fast that the seams give out when I yank the zipper. "I'll buy you a new one." I twirl her around, ripping the rest of the fabric off her body until it falls to the floor in a heap of white and blue.

She spins on her heel and, without a moment's hesitation, drops to her knees, yanking my jeans down and freeing my cock in one swift movement. That's not what I had in mind. She took care of me with her mouth all week. It's her pussy I need, but words catch in my throat when she cuffs the base of my cock with one hand and wraps those silky lips around the swollen head, licking the first drop of pre-cum as if she hadn't tasted me in months.

"Fuck," I rasp, but instead of helping her to her feet like I intended to, I hold her in place when she takes me in deeper.

I'm rendered speechless when she sucks, her cheeks hollow, hooded eyes looking up to me. How the hell did I get so lucky? I can see she loves the control she has while her hand pumps in sync with her lips, and I'm at her mercy.

"Fuck," I mutter again when my cock hits the back of her throat. "You're so good at this. So good..."

I wrap her locks around my wrist, but once the orgasm builds at the base

of my spine, I pull on her hair, silently asking her to stop.

But she's not done.

She claws at my thigh, twisting her hand as she strokes my length, twirling her tongue over the tip before sliding her lips as far down as she can.

"Thalia," I warn, but my resistance dies down the closer to the edge I get. She doesn't stop and doesn't let me pull her up. "Shit," I growl, spilling into that perfect hot mouth, holding her head to keep her in place for a few intense moments.

She releases my cock with a pop, and I bend down, lift her up and carry her to bed. I don't throw her as I usually do. Her shoulder will take longer to heal than a week, and I still need to be careful with how I handle her for a while.

I cover her body with mine, capturing her lips in a long, deep kiss. "You'll pay for making me come before I had a chance to feel *you* come on my cock."

She bites the inside of her cheek, weaving her hands through my hair. "Don't pretend you're upset."

"Oh, I'm not upset," I whisper, grazing my teeth on her neck, "but you might be unable to walk once I'm done with you tonight. I need half an hour of recoup time. Let's check how many orgasms you can have in thirty minutes."

"Is that supposed to be a punishment?" she chuckles, but not even ten seconds later, she gasps softly when I circle my thumb on the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs.

"Treat it as you wish." I move lower to twirl my tongue over her pebbled nipple.

It doesn't take long for the first orgasm to come. Two, maybe three minutes before she stills, biting my lower lip when I try to swallow those erotic moans.

"One. Now, I need a taste," I say, pushing her further up the bed. The first lick of my tongue has her fisting the sheets with a soft moan. Her hips buckle within minutes, and I slip a finger inside when she's just about to come. "Two," I utter, licking her dry. "There's nothing I like more than seeing you come."

We get to five before I'm ready, and the first deep, urgent thrust scoots Thalia up the bed. "I missed you so fucking much." I hover above her, resting my weight on one elbow while the other hand holds onto her neck.

“I missed you too,” she whispers, the words like a breathless staccato when my thrusts gain pace, and her legs wrap around my waist. “Oh, God... punishment,” she mumbles a moment later. “Definitely *punishment*. It’s too much, I—”

“It’s not too much. Let go.”

I close my mouth on her breast, tipping her over the edge again. She’s oversensitive, every orgasm easier to trigger, and I wonder if it’s possible to get her to ten.

“I love you,” she says, sinking into my lips when another orgasm vibrates through her body.

I’ll never get bored of hearing that. “Say it again.”

“I love you.”

I close her lips with a desperate, deep kiss. “I love you more.” I drive back into her faster and hide my face in the crook of her neck, kissing the tender flesh. “So. Fucking. Much. I want you on top, little one.” I flip us over, leaning my back against the headboard, one hand draped across Thalia’s lower back, the other higher, holding her hair in a tight fist. “Slowly.”

She tries to keep her moves steady, despite her weak, exhausted body that almost melts into me as if she wants to soak in my closeness. Her small hands roam my shoulders, tracing the muscles. She pulls on my hair and touches my face over and over. Our breathing hastens, and kisses turn urgent, hot and affectionate all at once.

“Easy,” I coo, stopping her while I’m buried deep inside. “Don’t rush. Not tonight.” I steer her hips, adjusting the tempo to my preference, and hold her close while she rides me, clinging to my chest.

And it’s right there and then that I know she’s all I’ll ever need. Mine. Now and forever.

EPILOGUE

Theo

SAME PLACE. SAME GIRL. SIX MONTHS APART.

This is where I first saw Thalia and her head full of thick curls entering *Tortugo* wearing a two-piece black outfit. She crossed the room, eyes on the bar, hands clutching a small bag, the curvy hips swaying from left to right.

I remember Nico talking about the restaurant he and Jared were about to open, but their voices faded into the background when I saw her. The most surreal moment of my fucking life. I felt like I'd been watching TV every day for years, and she was the first real thing I saw.

One decision—to walk up to her—flipped my life upside down. Up until then, I only cared about myself. Sure, I love my family, and I'd give my right hand to help every one of my brothers, but on a day-to-day basis, I only had myself to worry about.

Everything changed that night six months ago in this very bar. In *this* very spot.

Thalia leans against the counter, her hair draped over one shoulder, eyes sparkling as she waits for the bartender to get our order. She's beautiful. Not just now, but always. Even when she gets out of bed in the morning, scowling and growling until she drinks the first sip of coffee.

The bartender places Thalia's caipirinha on a napkin and slides it across the bar while she's scanning the room over her shoulder, waiting for my brothers and her friends. I told her we're meeting them here for a few drinks before heading to *Q*, but no one's coming. I've got a different plan for tonight. One drink and then, hopefully, a road trip. Just the two of us.

Next to the tall glass lays a red velvet box.

The lid is open, revealing a diamond ring I spent a whole day choosing. Maybe it would've been easier if I visited the jewelers alone instead of dragging Shawn and Jack with me.

The silver band is embellished with tiny diamonds and a big one in the

center. It catches the light from the halogens above the bar, shimmering as rings should.

Thalia smiles at me before her eyes fall to the drink, and she stills, staring at the little red box. I'm glad she's this dumbstruck. For a moment today, I worried she saw through my ploy and knew what was coming, but the way her cheeks flush pink and eyes widen tells me she had no idea.

"You think I'm handsome, Thalia?" I ask, forcing her attention on me, my elbow still casually resting on the bar. "Funny? Interesting?" I take her hand and pull until she takes a step closer. "I believe Vegas is just five hours away. How drunk do I need to get you before you say *I do*?"

The confusion and surprise on her pretty face morph into the most beautiful smile. "I see my sense of humor is rubbing off on you, but you should know better than to challenge me."

"First, you need to say *yes, omorfiá*."

She grabs the box and shoves it in my hand. "You haven't asked the question."

I smirk. I knew she'd make me work for it. "I wasted almost three months keeping you as a friend when I wanted us to be more. I won't waste time keeping you as my girlfriend, when I want you to be my wife." I take the ring out of the box and hold it up to her finger, ready to slide it on. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say if you say *no*, so don't do that."

She smiles wider, wriggling her fingers, waiting for the question. I think the whole bar is waiting with her because no one is talking.

"Will you marry me?"

Thalia shoves her finger into the ring. "Did you really think I'd say no?" she chuckles, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning in for a kiss. "Yes. Of course, I'll marry you."

People clap and cheer, but I don't really hear them. I drown them out, and just like the first night, I don't exist outside the *Thalia and Theo* bubble. It's just us, kissing by the bar, my hands in her hair, lips working in sync.

"You said *yes*," I say into her mouth, inching away. "Now, answer my first question."

"What question?"

"How drunk do I need to get you before you say *I do*?"

Her eyes widen for a moment, and then another smile twists her lips, telling me she thinks I'm joking.

I sure as shit am not.

There's a suitcase in the trunk of my car to prove it.

Thalia downs the drink, all the while eyeing the ring. "I think I'm drunk enough, Mr. Hayes. Now what?"

"Now?" I take her hand, and we fall into step, heading toward the door while people shout congratulations. "Now we get married, *omorfiá*."

Thank you so much for reading *Too Much*. I hope you enjoyed the book. Please take a few moments to leave a review. It doesn't have to be long.

Continue for chapter one of *Too Wrong*.

You can pre-order it here: [Too Wrong](#)

TOO WRONG

ONE

Logan

“WHY ARE YOU MAKING SUCH A BIG DEAL OUT OF THIS?” I ask, helping my younger brother rearrange his living room to accommodate the fifty-odd people he invited to his wife’s birthday party. He’s been married for two years, but it’s still unnatural to think of my baby bro as a husband. “It’s not like you threw a party last year for her twenty-fifth, and that was more significant than twenty-six.”

Theo grabs one end of the sofa, prompting me to do the same with the other. I’m honestly not the guy for this fucking job. I’ve got muscles, alright. I work out in my home gym four times a week to stay in relatively good shape. I swim fifty lengths of the pool in my backyard if the weather permits. That’s why I’ve got a swimmer’s body and a swimmer’s strength. Lifting couches isn’t my strongest suit.

Besides, I’m lazy as fuck.

The only reason I’m here, suffering through the joys of helping Theo, is that he’s my brother. A long time ago, I made it a rule not to say *no* to either of the six assholes I’m related to if they need help. That’s not to say I won’t sue if I throw my back sparring with the monstrous couch.

Theo dropped the ball calling me for help with heavy lifting instead of asking our younger brother, Nico. That crazy so-and-so would throw the couch over his shoulder and go for a run. No biggie.

“We were on holiday for Thalia’s birthday last year,” Theo reminds me, walking backwards down the hallway to stash the three-seater, heavy as a cow, bright orange couch in one of the guest bedrooms for the duration of the party.

I guess I’ll have to stand all evening... this party just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t it?

“This year, I want everyone here. Thalia and Mom still don’t get along, and we don’t have many chances to fix that.”

Inviting fifty people won't give them the best opportunity to bond, but I don't waste my breath pointing it out. I also don't remind him about the last unsuccessful Mom slash Thalia bonding time. A get-together at our parents' house last month didn't go down well. Poor Thalia stormed out halfway through dessert after Mom insulted a strawberry cheesecake which, according to Theo, took Thalia six hours and four tries to make.

Internally, I sided with Mom when she chirped in an artificially playful tone that the cake looked like something a toddler threw up, but I hadn't said a word to Thalia.

If I'm perfectly honest, she scares me a little. She's beautiful, caring and all-out amazing, but there's a side to her I don't enjoy so much: fiery, Greek attitude; a living, breathing volcano. The colorful, thick accent flares whenever she's angry, rendering English words impossible to understand.

Mom's reluctance to accept her as a part of the Hayes clan surprised all its current members. Dad included. Even more so because when Theo and Thalia started dating, the two were on the right track to winning a mother and daughter-in-law prize of some sort... right until Theo decided to marry the girl in Las fucking Vegas.

Once Mom found out a big Church wedding won't happen, she changed her tune.

Theo and Thalia dated for a few months before Thalia's surname changed from Dimopopololu or Dimopopus or Dimo-something or other to Hayes, so that probably didn't help their case either, but it's been almost two years of T&T's unbridled, sickening happiness that makes me want to double over and puke a fucking rainbow half the time. I thought Mom would get over herself by now.

She always wanted a daughter—hence seven sons—but now that she technically has one, she morphed into a stereotypical monster-in-law. Jealous, petty, and ostentatious. Theo has a lot more patience than I do. I'd chew Mom's head off if she treated my girl with the same cool, harsh restraint for no apparent reason. Not that I have a girl but case in point.

In Dad's words, Mom realized that one by one, all her sons will be snatched by a woman, leaving her alone and unwanted. Cue in operation "*Make Mom feel needed.*"

The seven of us visit more often and ask for help with anything that springs to mind. It's incredible how calling Mom at seven in the morning, asking for a pancake recipe, lifts her mood. Unfortunately, the trick does little

to warm her up to Thalia. *Civil* is as warm as they get.

“I bet it wouldn’t hurt if you took Mom out to dinner and just talked to her,” I say, trying to pirouette the sofa through the door, my mind flashing with Ross, “Friends”, and *pivot*. “Listen to what she has to say. Just the two of you. No Thalia.”

“Yeah,” he grunts, drops his side, and steps back to assess the situation. This shouldn’t be so fucking difficult, but here we are facing a dilemma worthy of two toddlers in front of a shape sorting cube attempting to fit a rhombus in a heart-shaped hole. “I’ll think about it.”

“While you think about that, take a second to think about getting your wife pregnant. You’ve been together for two years. You’re married. What the fuck are you waiting for? Some kind of an invitation? I’ll print out one if you want. Maybe Mom would be happier with Thalia if you’d start the grandchildren production already?”

Theo barks a laugh, gesturing for me to stand the couch vertically. Shit... where the hell is Nico when you need him?

“You sound like Shawn and Jack. You know they ask us to babysit Josh at least twice a month? They think taking care of the devil will get Thalia’s maternal instinct going.” He steadies the couch when it wobbles, threatening to fall on top of his head. I doubt he’d come out of that without at least a snapped spine. “So far, all it does is make me want to get a vasectomy.”

The Duracell Bunny has nothing on Josh. He stirs hell everywhere all at once, even when he’s not actually in the room. Our eldest brother, Shawn, adopted the little man with his husband, Jack, shortly after Theo and Thalia’s half-assed wedding ceremony at the highly reputable *Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel*. What a fucking joke. I was ready to kick his ass when he sent a photo of him and his bride standing outside said reputable establishment to the Hayes brothers’ group chat.

Josh was fifteen months old at the time. Last week, he turned three, and he’s got more energy in his index finger than a bucketful of Red Bull. It might be the reason why I love the kid so much. I’m the favorite uncle, closely followed by Cody—my youngest brother and one-third of The Holy Trinity, as I like to call the triples. Cody, who lets Josh get away with murder. The other two, Colt and Conor, steer clear, busy chasing pussies as they should. They’re nineteen, sophomores in college and living their best lives.

“We could do with another baby in the family,” I say, maneuvering the couch back to a horizontal position. It’s too tall to fit through the door

upright. “You’re not getting any younger. Get to work and aim for a girl, alright?”

“Says you?” Theo smirks. “You’re older than me, Logan. You’re *thirty*. And I don’t want a daughter. Shit, imagine raising a girl in this day and age. I’d need to dig a basement and lock her in there until she turns eighteen.”

A burst of laughter seesaws past my lips. “You’re delusional. She’s got six uncles ready to gut any asshole who dares to disrespect her, Theo. Don’t worry, we’ve got her.”

“I’m delusional? You’re talking like she’s just behind the wall, sleeping in a crib. She doesn’t fucking exist, bro. You’ve got *nothing!*”

With a grunt and a heave, he braces against the opposite wall, forcing the couch inside the guest bedroom. We both freeze at the sound of fabric ripping. A sound that foretells marital trouble. No sex for a week if I’m to venture a guess.

I don’t want to be here when Thalia sees the tear. And I don’t want to be here when the time comes to drag the sofa back out, so my phone will be switched off tomorrow.

Theo spins on his heel, marching back to the living room. “My reproduction schedule is none of your goddamn business. If you want a baby girl in the family, go and fucking make one.”

“With my hand? Highly unlikely.”

“Too much information.” He cringes but amusement tugs at his vocal cords too. Even though he’s grown up and domesticated, there’s still an immature side to him that likes to rear its head every so often. “It’s about time to replace the hand with a girl, don’t you think? You want me to set you up? Thalia’s got plenty of friends. You could pick and choose.”

I do pick and choose.

Well, not *I*, per se. Theo, Nico, and our two buddies, Toby and Adrian, chose for me. They’re too creative for their own good trying to find a woman who’ll say *no* to me. They’ve been at it every Saturday for two months, choosing girls from each end of the spectrum. I’ve wooed them all: tall, short, plump and thin; older, younger, loose and conservative. Despite having to buy me a watch of choice each time they lose the bet, they aren’t giving up. Not the brightest bulbs in the box.

Enough women moaned my name, and enough women ogled me as if I’m sex on a stick to make their words ring true... I am, as most of them put it, *irresistible*. As dumb as that sounds. It doesn’t matter how uptight the

woman is. I can charm the panties of a nun if I put my head to it.

At first, the guys chose between pretty, feisty teens and pretty, naïve twenty-something year-olds. The bets spiraled downhill from there when they started choosing the not-so-pretty ones.

I should probably stop this nonsense.

I'm *thirty* and have been for a couple of months now, but damn. I don't have anything better to do with my life.

Is it my fault all the best girls are taken? I should've settled down a few years ago when the easy-going, pretty, and smart girls were still available, but back then, I thought with my cock, not my brain. Although considering the bets, I still think mostly with my cock, I guess.

"It'll happen when it'll happen," I say, not keen on discussing the subject. "I'm fine as I am for now."

We continue to clear out the living room. For some reason, it seems smaller without the furniture, which isn't usually the case while I oversee the builds at work. Maybe because I've not seen most of those spaces furnished, so I've got no comparison. Last year, Theo traded his cozy condo for a four-bedroom house with a big garden and a pool. He should really put a few kids in those spare bedrooms.

The catering company arrives half an hour later, wheeling in trolleys brimming with food. Some set camp in the kitchen; others move outside where the BBQ is ready and waiting. The logo on their aprons is that of Nico's restaurant, *The Olive Tree*, which he owns in part with Adrian. It used to be Nico and Jared's, but since shit hit the fan a over a year ago, Nico paid Jared off and appointed Adrian as his business partner.

He then appointed Thalia as head chef. And what a good choice that was. The restaurant quickly became the must-go-to place in Newport Beach thanks to the Greek specialties she introduced. She's a fantastic cook. Useless with cakes, though.

"Right, I need your opinion because I kind of lost the battle." Theo leads me outside so he can grab a smoke. If you ask him, he doesn't smoke. At least not in front of his wife. "Thalia invited Cassidy. You think I should give Nico a heads up?"

"Why? Because she's friends with Kaya?"

Theo cringes at the sound of the unspeakable name, and a knife opens in my pocket too when I recall *that* night.

The murderous rage flashing across Nico's face as he stormed out of the

employee changing room at the Country Club, where he caught his best friend of twenty years nailing his *girlfriend* of seven months. Deep down, Nico knew Jared did him a favor taking the crazy bitch off his hands, but she was the first and, so far, the only woman he ever dated. All my brothers think Kaya's betrayal impacted Nico most, but I know losing his best friend hurt him more. That's not to say he took Kaya's cheating lightly. He cared about her on some level. He had to, or else he wouldn't have lasted seven months.

No sane person would.

I never met a woman so toxic. So manipulative. So fucking persuasive. She wrapped Nico around her long, manicured finger making him dance to every tune she played. And she played a lot of tunes to flesh out, fuel and nurture his flaws, compulsive overprotectiveness, jealousy, and rowdy temper. He always had a short fuse, but Kaya turned it to eleven.

Even though it's been over a year since they broke up, he never returned to pre-Kaya mode. Thankfully, he didn't linger in the rage-filled during-Kaya phase. Now he's just... on edge. Wary. Fire, brimstone and fucking death. He snaps faster than the naked eye can see.

"Obviously," Theo drawls. "Thalia and Cassidy are close, and with Cass being Kaya's bestie, I don't know what to expect from Nico. Thalia doesn't spend time with Kaya, I swear, but Nico might come to that conclusion."

"Yeah, a heads up might not be a bad idea."

Theo grinds his teeth, taking the phone out to dial the number. "Here goes nothing." He straightens his spine, suddenly wound taut like bowstring when Nico answers. He's not even here, but his commanding personality works over long distances just as well. "Hey, bro, listen—"

I leave him to it, entering the house to steal a few appetizers while the catering company gets ready. Thanks to Thalia's excellent culinary skills that she passed down to the other cooks at the restaurant, the food tastes just like the heaven she serves when she invites us for dinner every now and then.

Even The Holy Trinity joins in more often now that they finally hit the age where all seven of us can sit in one room and talk like equals. They matured a lot since graduating high school and moving out of our parent's house to live with Nico.

"What's the verdict?" I ask when Theo strolls back inside, his face sullen. "Don't tell me he's not coming."

"Oh, he's coming. Took him a whole fucking minute to mule it over, though," he snaps and follows it with a heavy sigh. "I hate choosing between

either one of you or Thalia.”

“You’re not choosing. It’s not like you invited Kaya. Chill. There’ll be fifty people here, but if it makes you feel better, I’ll make sure Cass and Nico don’t cross paths, alright?”

“Yeah? You sure? I know you’re not a fan of hers either.”

That’s not entirely true.

Three years ago, Cass and I went out a few times for drinks. I even took her to dinner before we sealed the deal in bed. Newport Beach is small, though. My brothers found out we spent the evening at my favorite restaurant the very next day. Less than twelve hours after I claimed Cassidy’s beautiful, toned body, Theo informed me he got there first.

“I don’t mind her.” I rummage through the fridge on a hunt for a bottle of beer. “I’ve not talked to her since—” I apply the brakes before the end of that sentence slips out.

Theo and I both know when I talked to Cass last, and the subject is widely avoided: the night Nico caught Jared nailing Kaya. Cassidy was the one who randomly texted me a cryptic message that day after a year and a half of relative silence.

Cass: Nico should know something. Get him to the Country Club tonight at ten. Employee changing rooms. Delete this message. You don’t know this from me.

I took the bait. Cass failed to arm me with any specifics; she hadn’t mentioned Kaya or Jared, but she mentioned Nico, and deciphering the cryptic message proved all too easy. I wasn’t keen on Kaya from the start. I had a gnawing feeling she was cheating on my brother long before Cass sent that text.

What I never would’ve guessed is that Cruella DeMon was cheating with Nico’s best friend. God, it felt good to nail Jared’s stupid face. I never liked the prick. Nico steered out the first punch, but I broke Jared’s nose, and Theo knocked out his front tooth. As a cop, Shawn stood to the side, turning a blind eye to the obvious violation of the law.

“Thanks. I owe you one,” Theo says. “Now help me with the wing chair.”
Why the hell did I answer when he called?

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