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An  
Ethan Frost  
Novel

# ADDICTED

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TRACY WOLFF

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Ruined*

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An Ethan Frost Novel

Tracy Wolff

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Loveswept

New York

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## Prologue

“Wake up, sleepyhead.” Ethan rolls over on top of me and kisses my cheeks and lips and forehead.

I smile sleepily, stretch a little. “You’re the one who talked me into playing hooky today. I don’t have to wake up.”

“No. I called Maryanne and told her I needed you for a very important project in the CEO’s office today,” he corrects me as he slips inside me.

I arch against him, moaning softly at how good he feels. “Is that what you call this? An important project?”

“The most important.”

Our lovemaking this morning is as tender as last night’s was wild, as lazy as last night’s was frantic. And I love every second of it. Then again, I love everything Ethan does to me. I always have. I always will.

And while a part of me feels guilty for ditching work today, I know that Ethan and I need this time. After everything that happened yesterday, I’m not ready to be separated from him. I can tell by the look in his eyes and the possessive way he touches me that he feels the same way.

He moves slowly, gliding in and out of me in an easy rhythm that nonetheless stokes the fire that is always burning between us. Sweat breaks out on our bodies, tension builds, and it isn’t long before we’re falling over the edge of the world together. Just like it’s meant to be.

Ethan cuddles me for long minutes, his body curved protectively around mine as he plays with my out-of-control curls and presses soft kisses to my shoulder and back. At first I’m a little nervous about this position—my back to his front—but after everything that happened last night in just this position, it seems crazy to worry about it now.

So I do my best to let the fear and the panic go. Oh, I know I’ll never be normal, know that there will always be a part of me that Brandon has a hold on no matter how much I wish it weren’t so. But for now, for today, I want

to concentrate on Ethan and everything that's going right in my life—in our lives—for once.

Eventually his stomach growls, though, and he rolls out of bed with a laugh. “Shower, then breakfast?” he asks, reaching a hand down to help me up.

But I'm feeling lazy and sated and I don't want to move. Not quite yet. The smell of him and me is on the sheets and I want to linger here for a few more minutes and just immerse myself in what we are together.

“You go first,” I tell him. “I'm not ready to get up.”

He smiles indulgently. “All right, then. I'll shower, then make you breakfast in bed. How does that sound?”

“Are you going to be in the bed with me?”

He arches one of his brows in that way he has that makes me crazy. “That can be arranged.”

“Then I say it sounds very good.”

He bends down and gives me a quick kiss that becomes a not-so-quick kiss. But then my stomach wrecks it by grumbling, too. Ethan pulls away instantly. “I'll take a quick shower and then feed you. While I'm in there, decide what you want me to make.”

But he's only been in the shower a few minutes before my plans for a lazy morning in bed get derailed. The doorbell rings, and while at first I ignore it—this isn't my house—whoever is outside is determined to get some response. And once it registers that whoever it is obviously has the code to Ethan's gate, I reach for his robe and wrap it around me. Maybe his cleaning lady forgot her key or something.

But when I finally get to the front door and open it, terror slams through me, weakens my knees to the point that I have to reach out and grab on to the door frame to keep myself upright.

“Hey, Chlo. Long time no see.”

My world shatters. Because it's not Magdalena on the porch waiting to be let in. Instead it's my worst nightmare, Brandon Jacobs, who's staring back at me ... out of a face that's a million times more battered and bruised than Ethan's is.

He steps forward and instinct takes over. I slam the door in his face, lock it, then turn and press my back against it like I need another barrier to keep him out.

As I do, I look up—straight into Ethan’s dark and tormented eyes. And I know that whatever secrets he’s keeping are going to tear me apart.



## Chapter One

“Chloe.”

Ethan reaches for me, his fingers wrapping gently around my arms.

I don't feel them.

I don't feel anything but the ice creeping slowly through me, skating along my skin, slicing through my veins, my blood, my soul. Freezing me, turning everything soft—everything real—into the sharp, jagged edges of puzzle pieces that can't quite fit together.

“What—” My voice breaks, the one word I'm able to get out falling uselessly into the abyss that suddenly yawns, black and endless, between us.

Ethan doesn't answer. He just looks at me, his beautiful face battered and his blue eyes fevered.

The doorbell rings again. And again. And again. A never-ending cacophony that is only adding to the sense of unreality and confusion pressing in on me from every side.

Except it isn't unreality, is it? Because it's happening. It's real.

I don't understand.

No, that's not true. It's that I don't *want* to understand.

I take a deep breath, try to think. Nothing comes.

There's a part of me that wants to go back to bed, that wants to start the day all over again in an effort to wake myself from this nightmare I've suddenly found myself in. But reality doesn't work like that. This isn't a dream and I can't wish it away, can't run away from it, can't hide, no matter how much I want to.

And still, even knowing that—understanding it—I'm determined to try.

Pushing past Ethan, I bolt for the stairs.

For his bedroom at the other end of the house.

For the chance to go back to how things were ten minutes ago, when life almost made sense.

As I run, there's an urgency inside me. A voice screaming for answers, screaming for the truth, and I know it won't be denied forever. But right now, for just this one, ice-drenched moment, I want to pretend I can't hear it.

I want to block it out like I blocked out Brandon and the rape all those years ago.

Like I blocked my parents out.

Like I'm blocking that goddamn doorbell out even now.

But when I get to Ethan's room, it's not the sanctuary I want it to be. Not with the bed looking like a war zone. Not with our clothes crumpled on the floor. And definitely not with the memories—our memories—crowding in on me from every corner.

"Chloe," Ethan says from right behind me, his voice hoarse and aching and *ruined*. "Chloe, I'm sorry."

My heart—frozen, fragile, fractured—shatters in my chest, the shards of what remains slicing through me until I am bleeding and broken all over again.

"Ethan." His name is torn from me, for all that it's little more than a whisper.

"I can ..." His voice trails off.

"What? Explain?" I force the words out of my burning throat and through my aching lips even as I struggle to breathe.

But my lungs are too tight. They hurt.

Everything hurts. Every single piece of me. Every inch. Every cell.

But I'm on the train now, the memories barreling at me like a bullet from a gun. They're coming too fast. I can't run, can't duck, can't do anything but stand here and absorb the impact.

"Please. Explain to me what the man who raped me is doing on your doorstep looking even more beat up than you do."

Ethan looks away, thrusts a hand through his hair, doesn't answer though I'm dying for an explanation. Something—anything—that proves to me this isn't what it looks like.

I want to scream at him to tell me—he's the one who followed me, who insisted on this conversation—but in the end, all I do is stand there. Waiting. Sometimes I think it's all I've ever done.

“Brandon is my half-brother. My mother remarried after she and my dad divorced.”

He drops the words into the void between us and for long seconds they don't register. When they do—when they finally sink in—the meaning behind them hits me with the force of a tsunami and it's all I can do to stand my ground.

All I can do not to sink to the floor and wail. My knees are wobbly, my breath coming way too fast and my heart—what's left of my heart—feels like it's going to explode out of my chest at any second.

And yet ... my body may be completely fucked up but my brain is still working fine. Still putting the pieces together and I can't stand the answers I'm coming up with. The realizations that are slamming through my brain and tying my stomach into ever tighter knots.

“You knew.”

“Chloe.” Again, he reaches for me and again, I shove him away.

“You knew all along and you made l—” My voice breaks. “You had sex with me anyway. You let me tell you everything that happened—do you know how hard that was—and you already knew. You already ... Oh, God.”

“No, baby.” This time he evades my hands and pulls me against his chest, his strong arms cradling me even as they imprison me. “I didn't know until a couple days ago, when I was home. There was a picture of us in a magazine—from that day at the zoo—and my mother recognized you. She told me who you were and—” His voice grows even more hoarse. “I didn't know, Chloe. I swear I didn't know.”

I shove against his chest, desperate to be free. His arms tighten around me and for long seconds I'm afraid he's not going to let me go. That I'm going to have to fight to get away.

He is Brandon's brother after all. That shit probably runs in families.

But in the end, I don't have to do anything but ask. “Please,” I whisper. “Let me go.”

Ethan's arms fall away instantly and he steps back, out of reach.

It's what I want, what I need, and still I feel bereft. Lost. I should be furious, and maybe I will be when the shock wears off, but right now all there is is grief. Overwhelming, all-encompassing, total.

I want to scream until I have no more voice, to rage until I have no more hurt. To just drown in the confusion and horror that has once more ripped

through my life.

But fragments of last night are working their way around in my head, and I'm putting them together even when it's the last thing I want to do.

Ethan, breaking up with me.

Ethan, looking like his whole world was ending.

Ethan, chasing after me and fucking me up against the wall like we were the last two people on earth.

For a moment, just a moment, my body responds to the memory of being in his arms. Of having him inside me. Maybe he really didn't know about Brandon when this thing between us started. Maybe he's telling the truth. He's never lied to me before.

This time when my knees tremble it's from desire as much as it is from pain.

From addiction as much as it is from sorrow.

My eyes lock with his storm-tossed blue ones, as I try to decide what the truth is.

Try to decide what matters, and what doesn't.

But the truth is, everything matters now—and the past most of all. Trying to pretend otherwise will only make it worse. Because being here with Ethan, knowing what I know, brings everything that happened before rushing back in stark clarity. I can't run from it, can't hide. It's all right here, in my head. In my heart. In my soul.

The rape.

My parents' betrayal and subsequent sellout.

Brandon's delight in winning and the obnoxiousness that went along with it.

The months and years of being hassled, of being groped in the stairwell at school by his oh-so-privileged friends, of being called a slut and a whore and a million other names I've tried so hard to forget.

Of never feeling safe anywhere.

"You knew last night."

"Yes."

"And you didn't tell me."

He opens his mouth, starts to say something, closes it again. He looks as sick as I feel. "No."

He doesn't say anything else, but then there really isn't anything else *to* say, is there? His brother raped me. Ethan's brother *raped* me.

My stomach churns and for a second I'm afraid I'm going to be sick.

But I'm not that girl anymore, not the weak, scared little freshman who used to run to the bathroom and throw up because she couldn't handle the bullying or the fear. I'm not the girl who was so desperate for her parents' approval that she let them browbeat her into hiding the truth, into selling out.

No, I walked away from her forever when I left home and came here for college. When I started building my own life on my own terms.

I will be damned if I end up right back inside of her, trapped and terrified, just because Ethan lied to me. Just because Brandon has made a sudden and unwelcome reappearance in my life.

"I need to go."

"Chloe, please." He reaches for me again.

"Don't touch me!" The words come out half sob, half shriek and Ethan freezes mid-reach. It's the first time I've raised my voice since this nightmare began. "I need you to leave me alone. I need—"

My voice breaks and I turn away, start picking my clothes up off the floor. I begin to pull them on, but then realize I'll have to take my robe off for that and the last thing I want to be right now is naked in front of Ethan Frost. Especially when I've already laid myself bare in front of him every way that I can.

I turn and walk toward the bathroom with jerky, uncoordinated steps. I keep expecting him to stop me, keep expecting to feel his hand on my shoulder or his arm around my waist. But he doesn't follow me, doesn't so much as move a muscle in my direction. Hell, I'm not sure he could, even if he wanted to. He looks as frozen as I feel, like he isn't even breathing.

I know I'm not. Not properly. Not the way I should be.

But it's hard to take a breath when you feel the weight of your whole life—past, present, future—pressing on your chest, slowly crushing down on you.

It's even harder to breathe when you realize that nothing is as it seems—and that it may never be again.

## Chapter Two

The bathroom door closes behind me and I sag against it, its support the only thing keeping me upright at the moment.

There's a part of me that wants to scream. To cry and rage and throw things. To shatter everything in this too big, too luxurious bathroom until it looks as broken as I feel.

But there's another part of me that just wants out of here. Away from Ethan. Away from the lies and the confusion and the pain. Away from Brandon and the new carnage he's brought into my life.

Tears roll slowly down my face and I dash them away impatiently. I'm not going to cry. Not here, not now, when Brandon is still lurking around. He broke me once. I'll be damned if I give him the satisfaction of cracking me open all over again. I won't be Humpty Dumpty, not for him. Not for anyone. Not after how far I've already come.

For long seconds, I concentrate on my too-erratic breathing. On forcing oxygen into my too-tight lungs. It isn't easy, and more than once I have to fight back a sob, but eventually I can take a deep breath. Eventually, I have my emotions under control. Or at least a semblance of them.

Dropping my robe on the cold tile, I dress quickly, not bothering to look in the mirror. I tell myself it's because right now my appearance is the last thing on my mind, but the truth is so much more complicated than that. And so much more basic.

I'm afraid of what I'll see if I look in that goddamned mirror. Afraid that between last night and this morning, the new fractures will be all too evident. And I can't have that, sure as hell can't see it. Not if I'm going to walk out of this bathroom, down the stairs and out to my car. Not if I'm going to hold my head up and look right past Ethan, right through Brandon.

And that is what I'm going to do. What I *have* to do.

I walk to the sink, pull my hair into a ponytail using a hairband I'd left in Ethan's drawer one of the nights I slept over. I use the toothbrush he gave

me to brush my teeth, then splash cold water on my face—all still without looking in the mirror.

Then, squaring my shoulders, I reach into my pocket for my car keys. And end up with a handful of the platinum and diamond belly chain Ethan bought me after the first time we made love.

It's the same belly chain I'd ripped off myself in the middle of our fight last night and it's the same belly chain that threatens to shatter my resolve even as I struggle to cement it.

I won't let it.

Not wanting yet another confrontation with Ethan—and I know there will be one if I try to give this back to him right now—I decide to leave it on the bathroom counter. Except it's so much harder to relinquish than I thought it would be.

Maybe because in leaving it here, I'm letting go of so much more than a chain from Tiffany's.

But I won't think about that now, won't think about anything but what I need to do to get out of here. Step by step by step.

Gritting my teeth, I force my fist to relax and watch as the jewelry slips through my fingers and lands in an elegant pile on the marble countertop. My stomach lurches sickly at the sight, and I turn away before I change my mind. Before I do something stupid. Something unforgivable.

Squaring my shoulders, I open the bathroom door, as prepared as I'm ever going to be for what I'm determined will be my last confrontation with Ethan Frost.

But he isn't there to confront. The bedroom is as empty as I feel, only the rumpled covers of the bed—and the ache between my thighs—to remind me of how much better things were even an hour ago.

I'm not thinking about that, though. I'm not thinking about anything beyond getting out of here in one piece. I spend a minute looking for my shoes, but they're nowhere to be found. I try to remember where I lost them last night—the foyer, the kitchen, somewhere in between—but I can't remember. And since I have no interest in looking for them, I guess I'll be driving home barefoot.

No big deal. It won't be the first time.

Pulling my composure around me like a cloak, I head for the front door, looking neither left nor right. I keep waiting for Ethan to appear like a

specter, to pop out from around every corner that I come to. He never does. I tell myself I'm relieved—and I am—but I'm also hurt. Also angry. Do I really mean so little to him?

It's a ridiculous thought, considering I told him to leave me alone. But then, this is a ridiculous situation. Ridiculous and terrible and horrifying all rolled into one.

I plow through the house—a woman on a mission—and don't stop until I get to the front door. I only pause then because I need a moment to compose myself. The doorbell stopped ringing a few minutes ago, which means one of two things. Ethan has invited Brandon in or he's gone outside to talk to him. If it's the latter, if they are both out there, then it's going to be a long trip to my car. One where I refuse to so much as flinch.

Praying I'm wrong, praying Ethan has his *brother* out on the terrace or in his office or in the living room—anywhere but on the driveway where I need to be—I pull the door open. And feel my heart sink as I see the two of them squared off, fists clenched and faces angry, next to a red convertible I can only assume is Brandon's.

Shit.

I don't know why I'm surprised. It's not like any other part of the last twelve hours has been easy. Why should this one be?

Head up, shoulders back, I ignore them as I march straight toward my car. I can feel Ethan's eyes on me, can feel the concern and the worry radiating from him. For a moment, it threatens to melt my resolve, but then I remember that he could have told me this last night. He could have spared me—could have spared the both of us—from this.

My anger roars back to life.

I yank open my car door. Climb in. Put the key in the ignition. And then curse like a sailor inside my head when the car refuses to start.

Not now, damn it. Not now. Please. Any other time. In rush hour traffic. After a long day at work. In the morning when I'm running late for work. Any time other than right here, right now.

The car gods obviously don't hear my plea, though—of course, they don't—because the damn thing won't turn over. I try a third time, a fourth time, but nothing happens.

By the fifth time I crank the starter, Ethan is opening the door. He doesn't crowd me, doesn't press against me in any way, but his presence is enough



to make me feel hunted.

“Let me give you a ride home, Chloe.”

“I don’t need a ride home.” I try the ignition again. Nothing but the sick buzzing sound of a starter gone bad.

“Please, baby.” He still isn’t touching me, but he might as well be. Though I will it not to, my entire body responds to the dark hoarseness of his voice—which only upsets me more. My hands start to tremble despite my best intentions.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, grabbing my purse off the seat and ducking past him as I climb out of the car. It’s less than two miles to the condo I share with my best friend, Tori. I can be home in twenty minutes if I walk fast.

“Wow, times certainly have changed,” Brandon comments from where he’s lounging indolently against the side of his car. “It used to be a lot easier to talk her into a car. Then again, maybe you’re not the brother she wants.”

The words slam into me like bullets. My stomach revolts and for a second—just a second—the control I’ve wrapped around myself like a shield threatens to shatter.

Ethan whirls around, his hand clamping on to Brandon’s throat and squeezing until the younger man’s eyes practically bug out of his head and his air supply is obviously cut off.

“Since you weren’t listening the first time, I’m going to tell you this one more time,” Ethan growls, refusing to relinquish his hold even as Brandon’s fingers tug desperately at his hands. “You don’t look at her, you don’t talk to her, you don’t get near her. In fact—”

I don’t wait around to hear the rest, or to see what happens next. Instead, I take advantage of Ethan’s distraction to duck around him and start marching down the driveway.

I don’t even make it to the gate that borders the street before he’s beside me. “Chloe, baby, you’re barefoot. You can’t go home like that.”

I keep walking, refusing to even look at him. The driveway is hot beneath my bare feet and I know it won’t be long before I start to feel the burn. But I don’t care. The pain of hot cement is nothing compared to the emotions raging inside of me. In fact, I welcome the distraction of it. Welcome the way it gives me something to focus on besides the rage and sorrow and crushing betrayal.

I'm close to breaking and I don't want to do that here. Don't want to do that *now*. Not when I'm so angry at Ethan. And not when Brandon is at the top of the driveway, watching me like the predator he is. I can feel his eyes on me, his malicious delight staining the air around me a dark and heavy gray. It's hard to breathe through it, hard to think through it, but I'm determined.

"Just wait here," Ethan says desperately, and I've never seen him like this. So shaky, so distressed, so obviously *not* in control. "You don't have to go back up and face him. Just stay here and I'll bring the car—"

His hand closes on my arm again and this time I reach out with my other hand and shove him as hard as I can.

It doesn't budge him, doesn't make him stumble back as I'd been hoping it would. But it does freeze him in his tracks, his eyes wide and tortured and blue. So fucking blue that it takes every inch of spine that I have not to tumble straight into them.

He lets go instantly, his hand dropping from my arm liked I'd burned him. I don't feel any remorse. How can I when he's torn me open, my whole being one raw, seething wound that makes it impossible to breathe without bleeding.

"I won't hurt you, Chloe," he tells me, voice soft and hands raised in a soothing gesture.

He already has. But I've never been one to point out the obvious, so I just turn and start walking again. This time, he lets me go.

Relief sweeps through me as I make it to the end of the driveway. The ocean is stretched out in front of me, blue and wild and infinite. A storm is brewing and waves are tossing against the shore, slamming into early morning surfers and slapping them hard into the water. One by one they stand. One by one they get swamped, slammed, *devoured* by the ravenous pull of the ocean.

I pause for a moment, just a moment, and watch because I can't *not* watch. I'm on land but I know exactly how the surfers feel out there. I'm drowning in pain, drowning in shame, being tugged under with no surface in sight.

The muted roar of an engine sounds behind me, and then Ethan's voice—low, demanding, pleading. "Please, Chloe, get in. Just let me take you home and then I'll leave."

I glance behind me for just a moment. Ethan is in one of his many cars—the green Tesla, this time—but for once I feel no modicum of interest, no shred of envy. Yesterday, I would have died for a chance to mess around with the guts of this car but today I don't so much as want to touch it, let alone ride in it.

Our eyes meet and my stomach lurches, threatens to rebel.

He looks as lost as I feel, and angry as I am, I hate knowing that he's suffering. Hate knowing that I caused it, even after everything. I wouldn't wish the pain I feel on anyone, let alone on Ethan, the only man I've ever loved.

That doesn't mean I can stay, though. Doesn't mean I can ever be with him again. Not with all the history crashing down on us like a tsunami.

I turn away, walk down the street toward the ocean. It's stretched out in front of me, blue and infinite and beautiful. For a second, just a second, I think about continuing to walk—down the sidewalk, across the beach, into the water. Walking and walking and walking until I'm totally immersed, the dark water closing over my head, the undercurrent pulling me down.

It's an inviting thought. Too inviting, considering how I spent the months and years directly after the rape. Drowning in fear, humiliation, self-loathing.

Not wanting to go back there—refusing to go back there—I concentrate on nothing more complicated than putting one foot in front of the other. The heat of the sidewalk helps, the edge of pain keeping me sane. Keeping me focused.

“Get in the car, Chloe.”

Ethan's voice is right beside me—he's pacing me in the Tesla—but I don't so much as turn to look at him. I'm done. With him. With us. With this whole fucked up situation.

“Damn it, Chloe! Please. Just let me take you home, make sure you're safe. I promise, I won't bother you after that.”

The crack inside me deepens at his words, breaks me wide open. I can barely stay upright under the onslaught.

But I do stay upright.

I do keep walking.

I don't answer him.

There's a part of me that can't help but respond to the order—and the plea—in Ethan's voice, but I ignore that part. Lock it down so deep inside of myself that I may never find it again.

Which is exactly how I want it. I might not know much right now, but I know this. There is no way I'm getting in that car with Ethan. No way I'm giving him another chance to, however inadvertently, rip me to pieces.

I turn the corner onto Prospect, one of the main streets that runs through La Jolla. I don't look at Ethan, but I know he makes the turn with me because suddenly there's a spate of loud honking. He's still pacing me, despite now being on a street where he should be driving at least forty miles an hour.

A particularly strident horn sounds, loud and long. It's not until it finally stops that I hear Ethan cursing viciously.

It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to glance at him out of the corner of my eye. But I'm not that weak. Not anymore. Not ever again.

The honking stops abruptly and since I'm staring straight ahead I can't miss Ethan suddenly burning rubber up the street.

That didn't take long. Not that I'm surprised. He's never been the most patient guy.

A new wave of agony sweeps over me, drags me under. I don't struggle against it—I learned long ago that some things can't be fought. Can't be beaten. They can only be endured.

Forcing myself to look away from the Tesla's taillights, I once again concentrate on walking, just walking. The faster I get home, the faster this whole nightmare will be over.

But I haven't gone very far—about a block and a half—before I see Ethan striding purposefully down the street toward me. I flinch away when he gets close, though he makes no move to reach for me.

He catalogues my instinctive movement, his eyes darkening to midnight blue as he very deliberately tucks his hands into his pockets.

“I won't touch you,” he tells me in a voice that sounds like gravel. “I won't talk to you, won't do anything else to upset you. But one way or another, I'm going to make sure that you get home safely, so you might as well accept it.”

“I'm not your problem anymore.” The words slip past my lips before I know I'm going to say them.

“You were never a problem,” he answers, his voice warm and steady and familiar. So familiar. It’s the same voice he uses when he cuddles me in bed. When he washes me in the shower. When he tells me he loves me.

Another wave of agony rolls through me and I walk faster. I can see Tori’s condominium complex in the distance and for a moment I’m afraid it’s a mirage. I’m that desperate to get to it—and away from Ethan.

I start running without making the conscious decision to do so. The hot pavement scrapes against the bottom of my feet, but I don’t give a shit right now. Tears are burning behind my eyes, my whole body is shaking and my chest is so tight that I’d think I was having a heart attack if I didn’t know better. I’m one tiny step from falling apart and I’m not going to do that on one of the busiest streets of La Jolla, with Ethan Frost and a million tourists looking on.

By the time I get to the front gates of the condominium, cold sweat is pouring down my back and my breath is coming out in strangled gasps. I’d like to blame it on the run, but I know better. So does Ethan, who’s watching me with pained eyes and a tightly clenched jaw.

I fumble with the key, try to get the front gate open, but my hands are trembling too hard for me to even get it in the lock. Ethan reaches for me, tries to take the key.

“Don’t!” It’s part gasp, part screech, and all batshit crazy. I don’t care, though, not when it gets the job done and he takes a step back.

“Chloe, please. I just want to—”

“I don’t give a shit what you want!” The words are garbled—my tongue feels thick and clumsy in my mouth—but that doesn’t matter to me. Nothing does but getting in my goddamn building and getting the fuck away from Ethan Frost.

Miraculously, the key slides into the lock at the same moment my control breaks. I shove the gate open, and make a run for it.

Ethan calls my name as the gate clatters shut behind me, but I’m too far gone to care. Too far gone to do anything but wrap my arms around myself as I shatter into a million pieces.

Turns out Humpty Dumpty has nothing on me.

## Chapter Three

Tori jumps up from her spot on the couch the second I slam into the condo.

“Chloe?” she asks, the look of expectation on her face turning to horror as my legs give out and I tumble roughly to the ceramic tile of our entryway.

“Chlo?” She crosses to me then, leans down to help me up, but I don’t grab on to the hand she offers. I can’t. Everything hurts and right now, just breathing is all I can handle.

“Chloe, what’s wrong?” When I still don’t respond, she drops onto the floor beside me, her voice growing more urgent with every word she speaks. “What’s going on? Are you hurt? Did you have an accident—”

I laugh then, a harsh, hysterical sort of sound that is torn from deep inside me. It hurts my chest even as it hangs in the air around us.

I want to answer her. I do. If for no other reason than to get her to leave me to lick my wounds in peace. But I can’t. My mouth is dry, too dry to make any coherent noises, and my lips seem to have forgotten how to form words anyway.

I seem to have forgotten everything.

Everything but Ethan and Brandon and the emptiness that stretches between us.

Ethan. His name is a dull blade deep inside of me, a piece of jagged glass that cuts from every edge.

“At least tell me if you’re hurt,” Tori demands, her hands fisting at her sides.

I shake my head before laying my cheek against the cool tile. I’m curled up in a macabre imitation of child’s pose, my knees tucked beneath me, my hips resting on my heels, my face to the floor. Only, there is no peace in this pose for me. No serenity. Only hopelessness and rage and sickness. So much sickness that every breath I take brings a new wave of it.

Brandon. Ethan. Brandon. Ethan.

Their names echo with each beat of my heart.

“Damn it, Chloe! What is going on?” Tori’s face is next to mine now, her green eyes narrow with fear and fury. She looks like an avenging angel—all wrath and vengeance and bright pink hair. At another moment, I might appreciate her determined defense of me. But right now, it just makes me tired. “What did Ethan Frost do to you?” she demands.

Too much. He’s done too much and not enough. He’s ruined me all over again and this time, I can’t even say I didn’t see it coming. Because I did. Oh, God, I did. At the very beginning, when I was fighting this thing between us, I’d known how it would end. I didn’t imagine this—how could I have—but I’d known things wouldn’t end like a Disney fairy tale. Not when my life is so much more Hans Christian Andersen. But even knowing that, I’d let him in, preferring to believe his pretty words and my pathetic heart instead of the hard truths life has taught me again and again and again.

I’m paying for it now. Paying for my foolish optimism and even more foolish emotions. Part of me thinks it’s no more than I deserve. And the rest of me ... the rest of me is too destroyed to care.

“I’m fine.” The words are low and gritty as I force them out of my too-tight throat.

Tori snorts. “Yeah. Because that’s totally what I think of when I look at you. Fine.”

She wraps one tattooed arm around my waist, and grabs on to my wrist with her other hand. Before I know it, she’s pulling me off the floor and into a warm, comforting hug.

Comfort isn’t her typical modus operandi—her shell’s a little too hard for that—so I figure I must look as bad as I feel. It’s a frightening thought, since currently death feels like it would be a step up.

Still, I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my face in the curve of her neck as the tears come, hot and inescapable.

“It’s okay, Chloe,” she murmurs softly as she rocks me for long minutes. “You’re okay.”

I’m not. Not even close. I don’t have the energy to tell her that right now, though, not when I know it will have to come with an explanation. An explanation I am in no way up to giving.

Tori’s my best friend and has been for the last three years—ever since we met in our freshman biology lab at UC San Diego. But even she doesn’t

know about my past. No one here does—except for Ethan, and look what telling him has gotten me.

I take the comfort she offers for as long as I can get away with it, gathering myself a little more with every breath I draw. Finally, when I feel strong enough—when the tears have slowed to a trickle and my lungs no longer feel like they’re being ripped out through my rib cage—I pull away.

“Sorry,” I tell her, my hands flopping uselessly by my sides. “I—”

“Don’t apologize!” she answers firmly. “It’s not your fault Ethan Frost is a total dick. When you didn’t come home last night, I thought he must have come through, but obviously not.”

She crosses to the small, built-in bar in the corner of the room, pulls out a bottle of tequila and pours a couple of shots. “Here,” she says, holding one out to me. “It’ll be good for you.”

I stare at her incredulously. “It’s barely nine in the morning.”

“You’ve just had your heart ripped out of your chest. A little alcohol is called for, no matter what time it is.”

When I make no move to take the drink, she carries it over to me. All but forces it into my hand. “Come on,” she says. “It’ll make you feel better. Steadier.”

I’m pretty sure she’s wrong. After finding out that the man I love is brother to the man who raped and tormented me in high school, the same man whose parents paid mine off to make my accusations go away, I don’t think anything can make me steadier. But she doesn’t know any of that and I’m not up to telling it to her. Not right now.

Besides, the tequila can’t make things any worse, right? And the pain is still so acute that anything that will dull it for a little while is more than welcome.

Suddenly, drinking seems like salvation. I reach for the shot glass, and under Tori’s approving eyes, down it in one quick gulp.

“Good girl,” she says, holding out the second drink.

I down that one, too, and can’t help noticing the slow burn starting deep inside of me. For the first time since I opened the door to Brandon this morning, I feel something other than cold. It won’t last—of course it won’t—but for now I’ll take it. And if it helps me forget how messed up everything is for a little while, well then, I’ll take that, too.



“You want another?” Tori asks, as she pours two more shots and downs them in quick succession.

“Sure. Why not?” It’s not like I have anywhere else to be today, anything else to do. Ethan talked me into calling in sick to work this morning so we could—

My stomach drops all over again as I realize just how difficult this whole situation has suddenly become. I never want to see Ethan again, never want to look into his blue eyes and see Brandon’s staring back at me. But I have an internship at Frost Industries, one that I busted my ass for the last three years to get. One that I was counting on to help get me into a top law school when I graduate next year.

And now, now I can’t imagine going back there. Can’t imagine facing Ethan ever again. Not with the destruction and devastation that stretch between us. Collateral damage that I never could have anticipated.

But what’s the alternative? Going home to my family with my tail tucked between my legs? Letting my father spend some of his blood money—or more specifically, my blood, his money—to get me into law school? Just the thought makes me sick all over again.

“Is my drink ready?” I ask, desperate for something else to focus on besides how badly I’ve screwed up. It’s ridiculous, really. I’m a planner and always have been. I make a point of thinking out everything, of imagining every possible outcome and contingency plan before I do anything. With Brandon five years ago, I didn’t think, didn’t plan, and we all saw where that got me. Raped, brutalized, bullied. How ironic is it that the first time in five years that I throw caution to the wind, and I end up with Brandon’s brother. Right back where I started. The rape counselor I saw my first year at UCSD would be so unimpressed.

Oh, Ethan would never hurt me physically. I know that for certain—he’s never been anything but exceptionally gentle with me. But this, what I’m feeling now, is so much worse than any blow he could have given me. The fact that he knew, last night ... That he made love to me knowing all along about what had happened between Brandon and me ...

The tequila threatens to come back up.

And though there’s a part of me that knows it isn’t fair to hold this against him—he did try to break up with me when I showed up last night—there’s another part that doesn’t give a damn. Because he didn’t break up

with me. And he didn't tell me the truth. Instead he fucked me until I couldn't stand up, fucked me nearly into oblivion. He told me that he loved me, let me tell him that I loved him. And all along he knew. He fucking knew.

My thoughts must be written all over my face, because Tori rushes over and shoves a glass back into my hand. "Drink up," she orders, slamming back her own shot. I follow suit, then watch as she pours two more shots from the Patron bottle she's brought over from the bar.

"Sit," she tells me, gesturing to the nearest sofa.

I do, because my knees are feeling a little unsteady. Three shots of tequila in five minutes—on an empty stomach, no less—is not something I'm used to.

"I don't want to talk about it," I tell her as I all but collapse on the couch.

She settles down next to me with a snort. "Some things don't need talking about. Especially not the fact that men are assholes. They just are—it's an immutable fact. Like it's written in their fucking DNA or something."

She clinks her glass with mine and gestures for me to drink up.

So I do. Again and again and again, until my head is spinning and my stomach is roiling and the pain ... the pain is still there, but it's cushioned by the fuzziness that comes with having way too much to drink.

"Have another one," Tori tells me, filling my glass yet again.

I moan a little from where I'm lying facedown on the couch cushions. "I don't think so."

"Come on," she says. "We're just getting started!"

Warning bells go off deep inside me, not for the first time when it comes to Tori and drinking. After all, she's had just as many shots as I have and she barely looks drunk while I'm slurring my words and can't even lift my head off the sofa. I mean, she's been a heavy drinker for as long as I've known her, but this ... this is something else. Something more, and I'm pretty sure it's not a good thing.

"No more," I tell her again, taking great pains to enunciate my words. It doesn't work.

"Party pooper." She takes another shot. I don't know how many that is—I lost track of my own shots somewhere around number five. And that was a while ago ...

My phone rings from its spot on the coffee table. I don't have the energy—or the fine motor control—to pick it up at this point, so Tori does the honors. She scowls at the name on the display, then tilts it toward me so that I can see. My eyes are nearly crossing from the tequila, but I squint enough to make out the fact that my caller ID reads Ethan Frost.

“No,” I tell her, burying my face back in the couch. I can't talk to him, not now. Not when I don't know what I want to say ... or what I want to hear. All I do know is that if I so much as hear his voice, the pain will come rushing back, and this time no amount of alcohol in the world will be able to dampen it.

She nods, sends the call directly to voicemail.

Seconds later, he calls back.

She does the same thing and he calls back a third time. Then a fourth time. And a fifth.

Each time he calls sobers me up a little more, makes me feel a little worse.

The sixth time the phone rings, I reach for it. I don't know what I'm going to say to him, but this can't go on. I won't make it if he keeps calling like this, keeps making me think about him when all I want to do is forget. Forget Brandon and my parents, forget the rape and everything that came after it. Forget Ethan and everything he's meant to me. Everything he's done for me.

But Tori shakes her head, refuses to give me the phone. Instead, she answers herself. Without giving Ethan a chance to so much as say hello, she launches into him.

“Hey, dickhead, since it's obvious you can't take a hint, let me spell it out for you. Chloe doesn't want to talk to you right now and she sure as shit doesn't want to listen to whatever you have to say. If that changes, I promise you'll be the first to know. But until it does, stop fucking calling!”

She hangs up with a flourish, then turns the phone off so that I don't have to worry about him calling back—or about him *not* calling back, however this thing is going to play out.

“Have another drink,” Tori says, forcing one into my hand.

“No—”

“Just one more,” she orders. “Trust me, after all that, you look like you need it.”

I feel like I need it, too. So I take it. And one more after that.

The room starts spinning and I close my eyes, falling headlong into the darkness.

\* \* \*

I wake up hours later with my head in a vise and a desert in my mouth. It takes a few moments for me to figure out where I am and what's going on. Only moments, but those tiny spaces in time are the best ones of my whole day. Because for those moments, I don't remember. Anything. For those moments, everything is all right.

Sure, my head hurts and my stomach is churning, but everything else is okay. There's no pain, no rage, no fear. Nothing but my love for Ethan and the knowledge that my world is as it should be. As I've always wanted it to be.

And then it all comes flooding back. Not in a trickle, with little drops of information registering on me slowly. No, it comes back in a flood, in a hurricane of regret that whips me into a frenzy and has me clenching my fists and curling into myself in an effort to keep myself in one piece.

"Tori?" I manage to croak out as I shove myself into a sitting position. My hair is in my eyes and I push the long, random curls out of my face before climbing shakily to my feet. I need Tylenol. I need to vomit. I need ... something.

I need something I can't have.

"Tori?" I call again, but she still doesn't answer.

My mouth is so dry that just saying her name hurts, so I drag myself up and across the room to the kitchen. I pour myself a glass of water, and drink it in three thirsty gulps. That's when my eyes fall on the note written in Tori's elaborate scrawl.

*Out of tequila. Gone to get some more.*

Yeah, because that's definitely what we need right now. More tequila.

Then again, blacking out was nice. It's the waking up that hurts like a bitch.

Very deliberately, I walk to the refrigerator and pull the door open. I study the contents carefully, as if my life depends on it. I examine each apple, each carton of yogurt, each stalk of celery as if it's the most

important thing in the world. Because if I'm thinking about the tiny bruise on the side of one of the apples, then I'm not thinking about my own bruises. I'm not thinking about Ethan or Brandon or how the hell I'm supposed to get myself out of the mess my oh-so-carefully plotted life has so quickly become.

It works, too. When I close the fridge, I'm thinking of nothing more serious than the grapes in my right hand and the piece of string cheese in my left. At least until I catch sight of the blender sitting on the counter next to the sink.

The blender.

Ethan's blender.

The blender that started this whole goddamned thing.

The grapes fall uselessly to the floor as I launch myself across the kitchen. Before I can even form the thought, I'm ripping the blender carafe out of its stand and slamming it, side first, into the granite countertop as hard as I can.

It doesn't break so I slam it again. And again. And again. Against the counter, the sink, even the floor, but the damn thing is indestructible.

Somehow that knowledge only makes me angrier. My relationship is broken, my heart is broken, *I'm* broken, and this goddamned blender is still in one piece. I can't stand it. I can't fucking stand it.

Desperate now, and more than a little crazed, I reach into the junk drawer where Tori keeps a bunch of stuff she doesn't know what else to do with. There's a hammer in there, just like I remember, and I grab it. I barely remember to shut the drawer before I'm whacking away at the damn blender, determined to break it into as many pieces as I can.

It's the fourth blow that does it, the claw of the hammer finally cracking the Plexiglas of the carafe and spreading out in a spiderweb design. I watch the crack spread for a second, fascinated by the macabre beauty of the thing, though I don't know why. And then I'm slamming the hammer into the weakened spot as hard as I can, smashing the carafe into a thousand inconsequential bits.

It's not enough. Not nearly enough to combat the rage inside of me. I grab the base next, start pounding away at the actual machinery of the blender. It's not as sturdy as the carafe—less likely to be dropped, I suppose—so it only takes a minute or two for me to break through the casing to the

guts of the machine. I yank at the electronics with the hammer's claw, then get in there with my bare hands and rip the thing to pieces.

Sometime in the middle of all the destruction a loud, high-pitched sound starts. I'm so caught up in the havoc I'm wreaking that I barely notice it. It certainly doesn't slow me down as I continue to tear at the wires.

I'm hoisting the blender base over my head, preparing to slam it as hard as I can into the tile floor when the front door opens and I find myself face-to-face with a wide-eyed, open-mouthed Tori. She's got a bottle of tequila in one hand and a take-out bag from our favorite Chinese place in the other and she couldn't look more shocked if she'd caught me in the act of setting the condo on fire.

It's only at that exact moment, only as I'm standing here, poised to strike the final blow to the first present Ethan ever gave me—and more than likely to Tori's ten thousand dollar tile floor, as well—that I realize the high, keening sound filling the condo isn't electronic.

It isn't coming from the blender.

It's human and it's coming from me.

I'm screaming.

I'm ... screaming.

The realization knocks the last of the fight out of me and the blender slips from my suddenly nerveless fingers. It slams into the edge of the counter with a thud, bounces off and lands unceremoniously on the floor, a few inches from my toes.

The sight of the sad, pathetic remains of the blender lying drunkenly on its side does for me what none of the wanton destruction did. It shocks me back into myself. Shocks me silent.

For long seconds, neither my roommate nor I move. We just stare around the kitchen at the absolute disaster I have made. There are shattered bits of Plexiglas everywhere, electronic wires and plastic casing strewn across the floor and from one counter to another. There's even a piece resting drunkenly on top of the toaster.

I want to make an excuse, but they say a picture is worth a thousand words and nothing I come up with is going to combat what Tori just walked in on. So in the end, I just stand there and wait for her to react.

It doesn't take long. After a minute or so, she takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders—almost like she's deciding something, or is

preparing herself for battle. Then she walks straight to the hall closet and pulls out the broom and dustpan we store there. Without a word, she starts sweeping up the detritus of the blender.

I try to take the broom from her—I'm the one who made the mess, after all—but she just shoos me away. It isn't until she's done, until all the pieces have been swept up and deposited in a brand-new garbage bag—even the ones on the toaster and inside the mixer—that she finally speaks.

“So, are you sending this mess to Ethan Frost with a giant *Fuck you, I quit* attached to it? Or am I? Because one of us is and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to be the one to hand deliver it to the fucker.”

## Chapter Four

In the end, neither of us delivers the decimated blender to Ethan. Instead, I take the trash bag out to the Dumpster in an attempt to get a couple of minutes alone so I can think—which turns out to be a bad idea, because the summer sun is so blinding that it makes my hangover worse and pretty much takes away any small ability to form rational thought that I might have.

When I make it back to the condo, Tori has the food set out on the table and is pouring wine into a couple of long stemmed glasses. Since the last thing I want to do is add any more alcohol to my already shaky mental state, I fill two cups with water and bring them to the table.

Tori rolls her eyes, but she takes the glass I hold out to her. She even takes a couple of sips before trading it out for wine.

“So, are you feeling any better?” she asks as I settle into the chair directly across from her. “Because I’ve got to tell you, that level of rage was pretty fucking impressive to witness.”

“I’m fine,” I tell her while concentrating way harder than necessary on spooning rice onto my plate.

“Where have I heard that before? Oh, right, just before you drank yourself into unconsciousness and then went batshit on a blender.”

“I’ll take full responsibility for the blender, but the excessive tequila drinking was all your fault.”

She ponders this for a second before nodding. “It really was, wasn’t it?”

“Completely.” I take the two Tylenol she has very thoughtfully placed next to my wineglass. I start to thank her, but the fact that she obviously thinks it’s a good idea for me to use pinot grigio to wash down painkillers is a little concerning.

“So, how are you going to quit?” she asks me a couple minutes later over a shared order of kung pao chicken. “By email? Voicemail? Or are you just not going to show up for a few days? The last one is a bit passive-



aggressive, but I'm sure it won't take that asshole Ethan long to get the message."

"He's not an asshole."

"Don't defend him. That's pathetic."

"You don't even know what he did!"

"Because you won't tell me. But, really, does it matter? Anything he did that had you showing up looking like your world was ending makes him a total dick in my book. And just so you know, I never liked him."

I nearly choke on the bite of chicken I'd forced myself to try to eat. "Oh, no. You don't get to rewrite history now. You're the one who hounded me to go out with him in the first place."

Tori thinks about that truth for a second, then sniffs haughtily, in a manner only she can carry off. "Yes, well, that was back when I thought he was going to treat you right. Now that he obviously isn't, I don't like him. And I never will."

I don't have the energy to argue with her, not when it's taking every ounce of strength I have to just sit at this table and pretend like I'm not falling apart. It's hard though, now that the shock and the anger have worn off. Now that all I'm left with is the grief.

Besides, she's not wrong. Ethan *didn't* treat me right. Not when he ignored me the last few days, not when he chose to freeze me out instead of breaking up with me properly, and not when he decided to make love to me last night when he knew about Brandon. Knew how I'd react.

"You are so totally quitting," she announces again, like it's a foregone conclusion.

"So that I can do what? Wait tables at some bar? *That* will look great on my law school applications."

"So will losing your shit on some other non-combative piece of machinery and getting carted off to jail or some mental hospital somewhere."

"The blender was a one-shot deal."

"So you say. But do you really want to take the risk? Besides, what's the alternative? Going back there and seeing him every day? I'm not claiming to be the most mentally healthy person around, but even I know that's a bad idea. I saw you this whole weekend, saw how upset just being ignored by

him made you. How are you going to handle that at work? Especially after whatever went down between the two of you last night?”

I know she’s right, know that seeing Ethan again will only make things worse. And not just between us. It’ll make things worse for me. I’ve worked so hard to get past the rape, to put it behind me and build a decent life for myself. But how can I keep the past where it belongs if I’m confronted with it every day?

Frost Industries is Ethan Frost and after this morning, I can’t imagine looking at him—looking into his blue eyes that are identical to Brandon’s—and thinking about anything but the rape. Anything but what happened in that deserted parking lot five years ago, and what came after.

It’s not a good idea.

I’ve survived this long because I just don’t think about Brandon or my parents or what happened to me. At all. I put it out of my mind when I moved here and I refuse to be dragged into it. Refuse to be the girl I was when I moved here three years ago. The girl Brandon and his friends made me.

At the same time, I can’t imagine giving up my dream so easily. I mean, sure, getting into law school isn’t all about where you intern. A million other factors go into it, factors that I’m hoping to have locked up. But at the same time, the kind of law school I want to go to almost always requires connections to get in. I don’t have those connections, so I need to make sure my application is better than anyone else’s.

An internship with Frost Industries’ legal department does that for me. Or at least, it did. Now, I’m not so sure. About anything.

Tori seems to sense my indecision, so she spends the rest of dinner giving me the hard sell for quitting. I have to admit, what she says makes sense—if I don’t look too closely at my future. Once I do ... all the arguments seem to fall away.

Well, all the ones that have nothing to do with my mental health, at least.

Hours later, I’m still thinking about it. To be honest, for the rest of the day and most of the night, I do nothing *but* think about it. God knows, just the idea of going into work tomorrow and having to see Ethan makes me physically ill. I can’t imagine how awful it will be to sit in a meeting with him about the Trifecta merger we’ve been working on. Or how much I’ll

hate running into him in the halls or the cafeteria. Or, God forbid, what it will feel like if he seeks me out. Or worse, calls me into his office.

I won't be able to handle it. I know I won't be able to. Not when everything inside me is scraped raw and I can't so much as breathe without bleeding.

But at the same time, I can't just skulk away with my tail between my legs. This isn't my fault. None of this—bar falling for my employer—is my fault, and I refuse to act like it is.

I ran away and hid once, because my parents forced me to and I swore then that I'd never do it again. While this situation is different than that one, it feels eerily similar. Considering how well it worked out the first time, I can't believe I'm seriously considering running away—hiding—ever again.

No. I've worked too long and too hard to get where I am to just throw it all away because of a past that I buried a long time ago. A past I have no control over.

Which is why, after a sleepless night—when I finally watch the beginnings of dawn wind its tendrils of lavender and gold above the endless Pacific—I am shaky but resolved. I am going in to work today and I am going to do my job. If Ethan seeks me out or tries to talk to me, I'll find a way to deal with him. And if he fires me ... well, then, he fires me. But at least I won't be the one giving up on all my hard work, giving up on the future, and the security, I want so badly I can taste it. Besides, it will just give me another reason to hate him ...

"You know you don't have to do this," Tori tells me as I walk out of my bedroom dressed in my one and only designer suit. In the grand scheme of things, it isn't much, but it's the only armor I've got and at this point, I'll take whatever I can get.

"I don't *have* to do anything," I tell her as I walk into the kitchen, carefully skirting the crack I caused in one of the floor tiles with the falling blender. "But I'm *going* to do this."

She sighs heavily, like my stubbornness is personally offensive to her. Then again, it probably is.

"By the way," she tells me as I stand in the kitchen, wondering what I'm supposed to do now. "Your brother called again last night. He said it was urgent."

"He always says it's urgent."

“He does. But this is the fifth time he’s called in the last five days. Maybe it really is urgent this time.”

“Maybe.” But just the thought of talking to him, of hearing about my parents and the company they built with his inventions and the money they got for selling me out, makes me crazy. And since this week is already filled with more than enough crazy, I think it might be best to just let this one slide for a little longer.

Not forever, I promise myself. Just long enough for me to get my shit together again. However long that might take.

In a bid to do just that, I start to pour myself a glass of orange juice, but my stomach is churning so badly that I figure adding anything acidic to it probably won’t end well. Instead I settle for a small glass of water and a prayer that I’ll be able to keep it down.

“Are you sure you don’t mind running me in to work today?” I ask as I sip cautiously at the water. “I’m ready early enough that I can still take the bus.”

Tori snorts. “Like I’m going to let that happen. I’ll drive you to work all week if you need me to.”

“I’m hoping that won’t be necessary.” I didn’t deal with my car yesterday because I just couldn’t, not on top of everything else that happened. But it’s not like I can leave it parked in Ethan’s driveway forever. “I’ll call for a tow truck to pick it up at Ethan’s today while he’s at work—his housekeeper is there all day today, so if I call and warn her, I’m sure she’ll open the gate so they can tow it back here.

“I’ll stop by the auto parts store after work today and then I can put in the new starter when I get home. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours.”

Tori rolls her eyes. “You know, there are mechanics who can do that for you.”

“Yes, well, mechanics cost money that I can’t afford to waste—especially not if I keep this internship instead of getting a paying job—”

“Another brilliant idea, if I do say so myself,” Tori interjects.

I ignore her, pretend I don’t hear the doubt in her voice. It’s hard though, considering it’s the same doubt that’s been riding me hard from the second I made up my mind. “Besides,” I continue, like my mental health and my stomach lining aren’t dependent on how well the rest of today goes, “I’ve been working on cars since I was in elementary school. My brother used to

take them apart just to see how they worked and then I'd help him put them back together again. I can put in a new starter in my sleep."

"I should probably be impressed by that."

"But you aren't."

"Not even a little bit." After downing her coffee, Tori reaches for the oversized Louis Vuitton bag she carries everywhere. "Ready to go?"

"Not even a little bit," I echo. But the longer I put it off, the harder it will be to do, so I grab my briefcase and head for the door.

"I totally owe you," I tell her as we take the elevator down to the parking garage beneath our building.

"You don't owe me anything," she answers. "A ride to work is no big deal."

Maybe not, but it's more than nearly anyone else in my life has ever been willing to do for me. And though Tori is uncomfortable acknowledging it, we both know I owe her for a lot more than a ride to work. Between letting me live in her condo rent free so I could take this internship and the pep talks she delivers at regular intervals—whenever my own confidence flags—I'm not sure what I would do without her.

But when we get off the elevator and head toward the two parking spots designated for our condo, I only make it a few steps before stopping in surprise. Because right there, in my parking spot, is my car. Obviously washed, obviously detailed, and more than likely already repaired.

Ethan.

I haven't cried since those moments yesterday, clutched in Tori's arms after that horrendous walk home, but as I stand here I feel tears well up in my eyes all over again. Of course Ethan had my car fixed. Of course he had it brought back to me.

That's just the kind of guy he is.

"Well, I guess he's not a total asshole," Tori drawls from her spot beside me.

"He's not an asshole at all."

"But I thought—"

"It's complicated," I tell her, walking the last few yards to my car.

"Isn't it always?"

She really has no idea. I reach into my purse, pull out my spare set of keys. And then I'm in the driver's seat, cranking the ignition. Sure enough,

it starts right away. Not to mention the fact that it all but purrs. Something tells me the faulty starter isn't the only thing Ethan had taken care of on my little Honda.

I want to be angry at his presumption, I really do. But it's hard to be upset when he's doing what he always does—and what up until yesterday, I always loved about him. He's taking care of me in whatever way he can, whatever way I'll let him. Besides, I took most of my anger out on the hapless Vitamix last night. I don't have any rage left. At least not toward Ethan. Not right now.

"So, I guess I'm heading back upstairs," Tori says after a minute. "Unless you need me for something?"

"No. I'm good. Thanks, Tor."

"No problem. Knock him dead, Chlo."

"I'm not even going to see him today," I protest.

She smiles wryly. "Of course you're not."

"I'm not." I can't. Just the thought of seeing Ethan makes me shaky. I may not be angry at him, but that's a far cry from wanting to see him. And I don't. I really don't. Not now, when all I can see is Brandon's mocking grin. When all I can hear is him calling Ethan his brother. *His brother*.

Maybe it's cowardly, maybe it's self-preservation. To be honest, I don't really care. All I want to do is get through the day without any more casualties.

Surely that's not too much to ask.

Except obviously, it is. Because as I move to set my briefcase on the passenger seat, I see a thick, cream envelope on the passenger side floorboard. It's facedown, but I don't need to see the Frost Industries return address to recognize Ethan's stationery. He's sent me so many letters and packages over the last few weeks—all on or accompanied by official company letterhead—that I'm pretty sure I'd recognize it in my sleep.

For a second, I'm tempted to take the coward's way out. To leave the envelope where it lies and pretend I never saw it.

Except I've never been a coward. And though there's a part of me that thinks there's no excuse Ethan can make, no story he can tell, that will make what happened yesterday okay, there's another part of me that wants him to try. That wants to see what he has to say.

It's a double-edged sword, one I'm afraid I don't have the skill—or the heart—to keep balanced on. And yet, even knowing how dangerous it is to my own mental health, I reach for the envelope.

For long seconds, I just hold it in my hands, watching it like I expect it to spontaneously combust. When it doesn't, I eventually lift it to my nose and breathe in the elusive, barely there scent of it.

Like rain on a sunny, summer day.

Like blueberries and warm, sweet maple syrup.

It smells like Ethan and the truth of that nearly brings me to my knees.

Again, I almost set the envelope aside unopened. Again, I think about shredding it, burning it, throwing it away whole. About doing anything and everything to it but the one thing Ethan intended—opening it.

And yet, knowing Ethan wrote whatever is in there exclusively for me, makes it impossible for me to do anything but run my fingertips along the envelope seams in an effort to pry it open.

Eventually I get it open and the first thing that falls out is a picture of the two of us.

Just looking at it gets the tears burning behind my eyes all over again, but I clear my throat, blink several times. I've cried too much in the last twenty-four hours and I'm not going to do it anymore. Not now. Not today.

It's hard though, very hard, because I remember the day this picture was taken. It was right at the beginning, right after Ethan and I first met. It was a charity event on the beach benefiting the environment and I'd been trying, hopelessly I might add, to build a sand castle. Ethan had come around and—much to my chagrin—sat down next to me. Within half an hour, we'd built one of the most impressive sand castles on the beach. When one of the judges came by, she'd given us a perfect score and that's the moment this picture had been taken, Ethan's head and mine tilted backward with laughter as we stand over our sand castle and the tide slowly rolls in.

It had been a good night, one of the first nights we spent time together. I had tried so hard to keep Ethan at arm's length, but I know that this is one of those times that I can point to and say that this place, this moment, is when I began to really fall for Ethan.

Though I know I should probably throw the picture away, I shove it in my purse instead. Then I pull out the only other thing in the envelope, a folded letter that seems to actually be burning my fingertips.

For long seconds, I just sit there with the letter in my hands, eyes squeezed shut and body shaking. Part of me is dying to open it, dying to know what Ethan has to say. But another part of me is terrified of what I'll find, terrified of what his words will do to me. I'm barely hanging on as it is. The slightest thing—good or bad—might very well send me over the edge.

In the end, though, I don't have a choice. Knowing what Ethan wrote is a compulsion within me, one I have no shot at not obeying. With a deep breath, I unfold the paper, smooth my fingers over the creases. And then I start to read.

Dear Chloe,

After everything that has happened, I know I don't deserve the chance to speak to you, let alone the chance to try to talk to you about the past—and the present. And yet I'm asking you for just that, for the opportunity to show you how much I love you and how sorry I am that I didn't tell you about Brandon the second I found out about him and how I'd do everything differently if I could just turn back the clock.

But I can't turn back time, can't change all the mistakes that I've made. All I can do is move on from here, loving you. And I do, Chloe, more than I ever dreamed it was possible to love another person. This picture is one of the few we've taken together, and it's my favorite, because we took it at the very beginning of our relationship when almost everything between us was just a possibility, just a maybe. I knew even then that I wanted you, that I would do anything to have you, but I also knew that you didn't feel the same. Not then. Not yet.

I know you're hurt and scared—you have every right to be—but I'm asking you to take another chance on me. On us. You took one once and I hurt you because I wasn't strong enough to take care of you, wasn't strong enough to trust our love to get us through.



This time, I won't hurt you. This time I'll put you first no matter what. This time I'll take care of you the way I promised to all those weeks ago.

You are the bravest woman I know, and though you'll argue with me about that statement (you always do), I assure you that I mean every word of it. I love you, Chloe, so much more than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone.

I'm not asking for forgiveness and I'm not asking for you to simply move past the pain and rage inside of you. I'm asking only that you give me a chance—to love you, to take care of you, to help you through whatever comes next.

I love you, Chloe, and I'll be here whenever you're ready to talk.

Please let me love you again.

Ethan

I read the letter several times, Ethan's words breaking over me like an early morning thunderstorm breaks across the dawn. I'm not sure what to feel about what he has to say, any more than I know what to feel about him. Sure, it's a sweet letter, but it doesn't tell me anything more than I knew already.

He lied to me. He's sorry. He promises not to do it again.

But does it matter? His lies, his apology? Does any of it matter at all when the past stretches between us like a nightmare? Like a bloody battlefield that I can't escape from? Like a specter I'm terrified will haunt me for the rest of my life?

I don't know. I don't know anything right now, except that if I don't leave right now, I'll be late for work.

Carefully, very carefully, I fold Ethan's letter and slip it back into the envelope. I put the envelope in the inside pocket of my briefcase. And then, after taking several deep, steadying breaths, I put the car in gear—it goes smoothly, without its usual hesitation—and pull out of the parking space.

As I turn onto Prospect Street, I pretend my stomach doesn't hurt. I pretend I'm not terrified of what comes next. I pretend, just for a little

while, that everything is okay even though I know that nothing will ever be okay again.

## Chapter Five

I'm a mess by the time I get to work, totally unsure of what I expect to happen next.

Is Ethan going to be waiting in the parking lot for me?

Are my personal items going to be boxed up and sitting on my desk?

Is everyone going to be staring at me knowingly as I walk to my cubicle?

Maybe all of the above?

It turns out that none of those things actually happen, though. In fact, nothing out of the ordinary happens at all. I park in the same spot I've always parked in. Walk the same scenic path to the building that houses Frost Industries' legal department. Dodge the same snide comments from Rick, the second-year intern who has made my life hell since my second day on the job, when I was assigned to the big case that he thought he deserved to cover.

Logically, I know that it makes sense that nothing has changed. After all, it's not like Ethan would broadcast to the entire company what happened at his house yesterday. But at the same time, it seems unreal. Inside me, everything feels different—I feel different—so I can't wrap my head around the fact that the cataclysmic events of this weekend, events that nearly broke me, have changed nothing else in my life at all. It's not like I expected the earth to rotate off its axis or anything, but still. Something should feel different, something should *be* different—besides my relationship with Ethan. How, after everything that happened between us, can my role at Frost Industries be exactly the same as it was when I left the office late Friday afternoon?

But it is, it seems. Exactly the same.

Same desk, same case folders on my desk, same to-do list tacked to the wall of my cubicle. As I settle into my desk and boot up my laptop, I try to take comfort in that fact.

It almost works.

It probably would work, in fact, if I didn't spend the whole day looking over my shoulder waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for Ethan to seek me out or call me or send a message for me to report to his office.

But, except for the letter I found in my car this morning, there's nothing from him at all. At least, not through any of the normal work channels. And since I'm still too chicken to turn my phone on and see if he called back or texted after Tori told him off last night, email and interoffice messaging is all I have to go on.

It's a bad day for so many reasons, and I'm nowhere near as productive as I normally am. I still get work done on the Trifecta merger—the takeover bid that Ethan had me assigned to when I first started at Frost Industries, before I had a clue that there was going to be something personal between us—but it's not as much as I need to get done. Especially considering the fact that I took yesterday off.

I stay late to compensate, determined to clear my in-box and make headway on the final case research the attorneys need to blend Trifecta's intellectual property with Frost Industries'. The office quiets down at five and by seven-thirty I'm all alone. Which should be exactly the impetus I need to get things finished, but without the buzz of my co-workers, all I can think of is Ethan and the disaster everything has become.

I love him, I really do, but that isn't enough. Not with Brandon in the picture. Not with Brandon smirking at me, his too-perfect face twisted—

I shut my thoughts off before they can lead me even farther down the twisted rabbit hole I've so abruptly found myself residing in. I focus on the case in front of me, focus on the sound of the air conditioner kicking in, focus on anything and everything but the things I need to be focusing on. The truths I need to be facing.

My stomach starts growling around eight o'clock, reminding me that I haven't eaten anything all day. Hours ago, I'd thought about going down to the cafeteria to grab some lunch, but in the end had opted to stay at my desk since I wasn't hungry. And because I didn't want to face anyone else. Even now, with my stomach literally begging for food and most of the workforce already gone for the day, the idea of walking into that cafeteria where I first met Ethan and actually trying to eat something nauseates me.

Finally I decide to hell with it. No matter how long I sit here, I'm not going to get any more work done. After a long day of trying not to think

about Ethan, my brain is completely fried.

With a sigh, I shut down my laptop and then take a minute to gather my things. As I pull my purse out of my desk drawer, I think about reaching inside it. About pulling my phone out and turning it on. About checking to see if there are any messages from Ethan.

I resist the urge, though. Partly because I don't want to be disappointed if he didn't call and partly because I don't want to freak out if he did. Sometimes, it really is better not to know. Besides, if he truly wanted to talk to me today, he would have found a way. It's not like he doesn't know exactly where I work ...

Except now that I've given myself permission to think about him, to wonder, my stupid phone is practically burning a hole in my purse. No one would know if I checked, I tell myself as I gather up my briefcase and the sweater I grabbed this morning to combat the early morning chill that comes with working near the ocean. No one would care.

Except me. I would know. I would care. And pining over him, wondering and worrying over when I'm going to hear from him, will only make this whole situation worse. And make me crazier than I already am.

Leaving my phone exactly where it is, at the very bottom of my purse, I head out to the parking lot, calling a quick good-bye to Jorge, the security guard currently manning the small reception area in this building.

He jumps up from behind his desk. "Ms. Girard, wait. Let me walk you to your car."

I guess the fact that Ethan and I are no longer together really is still under wraps. Not that Jorge isn't a nice guy, he is, but I haven't seen him offering to walk any of the other female interns—or employees, for that matter—out to their cars.

"Thanks, Jorge, but I've got it. It's still light out."

"It's not a problem," he tells me with a polite grin as he holds the front door open for me. "Things are quiet around here tonight."

I want to argue with him, but I can tell by the determination in his eyes that nothing I say is going to make a difference. I give in gracefully because he's just doing his job and partly because a girl never can be too careful and my history makes me jumpier than most.

It's a short walk, only takes a few minutes at the most, but I'm struck dumb almost as soon as we come around the curve that leads to the parking

lot. Because, there, leaning against my car—ankles crossed and muscular arms folded across his chest—is Ethan.

I stop dead when I see him, just freeze completely as my body suddenly forgets how to walk. How to breathe.

Jorge shoots me a curious look, but Ethan chooses that moment to push away from the car and prowl toward us. With his tanned skin, too long, dark hair, and predatory grace, he looks more like a sleek jungle cat than a man.

“Thanks, Jorge,” he calls to the security guard. “I’ve got it from here.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Frost.” Jorge all but salutes before turning toward me. “Have a good night, Ms. Girard.”

Somehow I manage to unglue my tongue from the roof of my mouth long enough to mutter, “You, too.”

And then he’s gone, walking back along the path to the building and I’m left alone with Ethan, whose mood I can’t begin to gauge. He seems calm enough, but there’s a fierceness in his eyes—a determination—that makes me wary even as it gets my heart beating triple time. His black eye and bruised jaw only reinforce the danger rolling off him in waves.

“I called you,” he says as he stops right in front of me. He’s not crowding me, not really, but he isn’t giving me any wiggle room, either. He’s close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his long, lean body, more than close enough for me to breathe in the dark, musky scent of him with each inhalation that I take. “You didn’t answer.”

“My phone was off.” It doesn’t occur to me to lie as I force the words out of my too-tight throat. I know I sound stilted and awkward, but it’s the best I can manage at this point. “I haven’t checked my messages.”

He nods, his cerulean eyes blazing so brightly that I can’t help feeling the burn of them on my skin. In my blood.

I wait for him to say something else, but he doesn’t, and long moments pass while the two of us just stand there staring at each other. When I can’t take it anymore, when the tension between us threatens to snap like a rubber band stretched too far, I square my shoulders. Start breathing through my mouth. Pretend that being this close to him isn’t painful and arousing and terrifying all at the same time.

“Thank you for getting my car fixed.”

He nods, his face pained, but he still doesn’t say anything, which only makes my anxiety worse.

“Look, I need to go,” I tell him. “It’s been a long day and I’m hungry and exhausted—”

“Let me take you to dinner.”

“No.” The word is ripped from me before I even know I’m going to say it. No softness to cushion the blow, no polite excuses. Just the loud, irrevocable negative that can’t be mistaken for anything but the denial it is.

“Let me take you home, then. We can stop and get takeout—”

“No!” Again the denial is instinctive.

“Chloe, please—”

He reaches for me and I flinch back instinctively. He freezes, arms outstretched and face tormented. I know I’ve hurt him and I want to apologize, but I can’t bring myself to say the words. Not this time.

“Okay,” he says, dropping his hands to his sides. “We’ll talk here, then.”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Ethan.”

“There’s everything to talk about! I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Brandon. I’m sorry you had to find out the way you did. I’m sorry that he hurt you. I’m sorry, Chloe. About everything. I’m just so goddamned sorry.”

“I know,” I say, because I do. I was there two nights ago when he tried to end it between us and I was there yesterday morning when he nearly tore Brandon to shreds. “I’m not angry at you.”

“You should be. God knows I’m furious at myself.”

“You shouldn’t be. None of this is your fault.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do mean it. Absolutely.”

And I do. I’ve had over thirty-six hours to think about things, to try to figure out how it’s even possible that the only man I’ve ever trusted, the only man I’ve ever opened up to, is actually the brother of the man who nearly destroyed me all those years ago. I don’t have an answer as to how it happened, as to how fate could be so cruel. But I do know that it’s no one’s fault. That there were no warning signs or coincidences that Ethan and I turned a blind eye to.

In an effort to shed every trace of my old identity, I legally changed my last name as soon as I turned eighteen. There was no way for Ethan to know who I was when he first met me, any more than there was a way for me to know who he was. Brandon is his half-brother on his mother’s side. They

might share the same colored eyes, but they don't share much more than that. They definitely don't share a last name.

Should he have told me about Brandon as soon as he found out? Absolutely.

Should he have slept with me two nights ago, knowing that our pasts were forever intertwined in the worst possible way? Absolutely not.

But he did try to break up with me when I went to see him that night. He did try to end it as painlessly as possible. I'm the one who went off the rails, the one who lost it because I couldn't understand how the man I loved could have done such an abrupt about-face.

No, this mess we are in is no more Ethan's fault than mine. He didn't rape me and he didn't try to cover it up afterward. Holding him responsible for that would make me no better than all those people who blamed me for speaking up about what Brandon did to me.

"Jesus, Chloe, how do you even exist?"

I go for humor, but it falls flat. "Just unlucky, I guess."

"No." He reaches for me then, and this time I don't have the strength to push him away, not even when he lowers his head and rests his forehead against my own. "There's nothing unlucky about you."

I'm the one who laughs then, a harsh sound that comes from deep inside me. That's much more of a sob than it is an expression of amusement.

"Let me take you home," he whispers, his breath hot against my cheek. "I'll run you a bath, cook you dinner. Then we can talk—"

"I already told you." From somewhere I find the strength to push him away. "We don't have anything to talk about."

"We have *everything* to talk about." His fingers tighten on my arms, not enough to cause pain but definitely enough for me to sense his desperation. The same desperation that I spent most of yesterday trying to come to terms with myself.

"No. We really don't." From somewhere I find the strength to step back, to shake him off. "It's never going to work between us. It can't. We're over before we ever really had a chance to begin."

"Don't say that, Chloe. It isn't true. I won't let it be true."

"Even your formidable will can't change what is, Ethan. No matter how much you want to."



“That’s bullshit!” The words explode from him, loud and harsh and vicious in their intensity.

“It isn’t.”

“It is!” He grabs me again, pulls me close, and though there’s a part of me that wants nothing more than to melt against him, I can’t. Because he feels different now that I know. We feel different and I’m smart enough to figure out that I’m never going to get past that.

“I know that you still love me. I can see it in your face. I can hear it in the way your breathing stutters when I touch you.” He brings a hand between us, rests it on my chest. “I can feel it in the way your heart is beating way too fast, even now. I won’t let you walk away from that.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“Damn it, Chloe, please. I love you.” He presses hot kisses to my forehead, my eyes, my jaw. “I love you so much. I’ll fix this. I swear, I’ll fix it. Just give me a chance. I’ll find a way—”

“There is no way to fix this, Ethan!” I bring my hands up and shove at his chest, hard. This time, he stumbles back, though I know it’s more from the emotional impact of the blow than it is from the blow itself. “There is no way to rewrite the past.

“I told you when we met that I was broken. I told you that you weren’t going to be able to fix me.”

“You’re not broken, baby. You’re not.” There are tears in his eyes, tears in his too-thick voice, and it hurts. Oh God, it hurts so badly to see him like this. To know that I’ve caused it, that I’ve reduced this strong, beautiful man to this when all he’s ever been is kind to me. It’s a blade deep inside me, an open, aching wound that can’t close because the knife keeps twisting, twisting, twisting.

“I am.”

“You’re *not*. Maybe you were, but you aren’t anymore. I wish you could see yourself the way that I see you. You’re strong, baby, so strong that some days it’s all I can do to believe that you’re mine. That I’m the one who gets to touch and kiss and hold you.”

He shakes his head, the look on his face saying that even now he can’t believe his luck. I know the look, because I wore the same one every day we were together when I thought about the fact that this as-gorgeous-on-the-inside-as-he-is-on-the-outside man was really mine.

“How you could have gone through everything you have and come out the other side this beautiful, brilliant woman ...” He shakes his head. “It overwhelms me. You’re so smart and so talented and so sure of what you want, sure of how you’re going to get it. Don’t you see, sweetheart? That’s about as unbroken as you can get.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes! You are. I wish you could see yourself the way that I see you. Wish that you could understand. I’m in awe of you, Chloe. You’ve been to hell and back and you’re still here, still fighting to make a life for yourself. Still fighting to make the world a better place. None of that has anything to do with me. That’s all you, baby. It’s you, not me. You’ve healed yourself. Don’t let my bastard of a brother change that. Don’t let him ruin what you’ve built. Don’t let him ruin us.”

Now I’m the one crying. Again. I swipe at my cheeks, trying in vain to stem the flood of tears.

“Fuck.” Ethan breathes the word out and this time when he pulls me into his arms, I don’t fight him. I can’t, not when I crave his touch like a junkie craves a fix. I’m addicted to him, to his strength and his kindness, to the way he holds me and the way he makes my body burn with just a touch.

Except tonight. Tonight I’m cold. Cold to the bone. Cold to the soul.

It only makes me crave him more.

“Baby, don’t cry. Please, Chloe, don’t cry.” He kisses my tears away, one by one by one. Over and over again. In between the kisses, he murmurs incoherent fragments of love and loss and apology and I can feel the crack widening deep inside me. Can feel myself breaking into thousands of irreparable pieces. So many pieces that even Ethan won’t be able to hold them together, no matter how strong or safe or determined he is.

I take a step back, out of his arms. Away from his warmth. It hurts, physically *hurts*, but I know I don’t have a choice. I have to push him away now, while I still have the strength. Or we’ll both end up destroyed under the weight of my failures.

He tries to hold on to me, tries to keep me in his arms. But all it takes is a whispered, “Ethan, please, stop,” for him to let me go.

“I can’t do this,” I tell him. “I’m not strong enough.”

“I am,” he tells me. “Let me be strong enough for the both of us. Please, Chloe.”

He reaches into his pocket, then presses something metal into my hand. I know what it is before I even look down.

“You had it fixed.”

He presses a gentle kiss to my temple. “Always.”

I stare at the belly chain, my fingers stroking familiarly over its cool platinum and diamond links. I want it so badly. Want to wear it. Want to feel the weight of it around my waist, a tangible symbol that I belong to Ethan. That we belong to each other.

“Can I put it on you?” he whispers against my ear as his fingers brush against my waist.

Yes! I want to scream my assent, want to beg him to claim me again, to make me his. I want to feel safe in the way I do only when Ethan is all around me.

But I can't let him do it. Not now when everything is so, so awful.

“No.” It's quieter than a whisper, so soft that I can barely make out the sound of it and I'm the one speaking.

But Ethan hears. Somehow he hears, and he looks away, but not before I see the obvious hurt in his eyes, hurt that echoes the agony slicing through me like the dulllest of blades.

His fingers clench on my jaw, and we stand that way for what feels like forever, the same pain that is keeping us apart somehow also tying us together. And then he's tilting my chin up so that I have nowhere to hide, no choice but to look at him.

And I do. God, I do. The anguish of the past couple of days is etched into his face. I can see it in the bruises from the fight, in the dark circles beneath his uninjured eye and the grooves around his mouth that weren't there last week. Before I even know I'm going to do it, I reach up to stroke the deep line to the right of his mouth. He turns his head then, brushing his lips against my fingers.

The pain intensifies until it feels like there's a fist around my diaphragm, squeezing, squeezing, squeezing. I know I need to pull away, but I can't. Not when Ethan is pressing soft, sweet, tender kisses across my palm.

My breath hitches in my throat at the feel of him and Ethan smiles a little at the sound. Then it's his turn to brush a thumb across my lips, his turn to shudder when I press a kiss to the tip of it.

“Chloe.” My name is soft on his lips, reverent, as he slowly lowers his head, giving me plenty of hints as to his intention ... and plenty of time to move away if that’s what I want to do.

It isn’t.

It should be. A little while ago, it was. But right here, right now, there is nothing I want more than for Ethan Frost to kiss me.

The first touch of his lips on mine is tentative, sweet, like he’s asking permission or forgiveness or both. It’s gentle and lovely and so not what I want from him that I can’t resist pushing to my tippy toes, can’t resist wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him into the kind of kiss we’re both craving.

It’s hot and heavy and carnal, tongues sliding against and around, over and under, each other. It’s teeth nipping at lower lips and mouths mashing against one another. It’s murmured whispers and violent heat, terrible pleasure and even more terrible pain. It’s everything a kiss with Ethan is meant to be, everything it always has been and everything I’m terrified it will never be again. It’s sex and seduction, lust and love, and I can’t get enough of it. Enough of him. This man who has given me more in a few weeks than anyone in my life has given me ever.

Maybe that’s why I cling to him, arms wrapping around his shoulders, fingers digging into the nape of his neck, mouth sucking desperately at his own.

He tastes like the ocean and feels like it, too. Powerful, violent, infinite. I want to immerse myself in him, to drown in him. And I want this kiss—this feeling—to go on forever.

But even as I cling to him, even as I stroke my tongue against the warm roughness of Ethan’s, I can feel the magic fading. Can feel the horror creeping back in until the heat fades and all I’m left with is the frigid, terrible cold that has taken up residence deep inside me.

“Chloe.”

He bends his head to kiss me again and I let him because I am weak and he is not and I can’t believe this is happening. I don’t want to believe it.

His fingers skim my waist, burrowing under my blouse and the fitted waistband of my suit. He strokes my stomach, my hips, my lower back and I know he wants to fasten the belly chain around me, I can feel his need to reclaim me, to mark me as his, throbbing in the air around us.

But when he takes the chain from my hand and slides it around my waist, every alarm bell I've got inside of me starts to shriek. Letting him do this will break both of us. Already I can feel the jagged pieces inside of me shifting around, trying to make room for this new reality. But there is no room. There is nothing but horror and fear and emptiness, so much of it that I can't feel anything else now that he is no longer kissing me.

"Chloe, please," he says in the husky voice that has sent shivers down my spine from the first time I heard it all those weeks ago.

"No," I tell him, pulling the offending chain from around my waist with a definite air of determination. It makes me sad in a way I'm not expecting. After everything that's happened between us, after everything he's given me, I never thought I'd be able to deny Ethan anything. But for both our sakes, I have to deny him this.

"I can't be with you, Ethan. I can't. It will ruin me. Undeniably. Irrevocably. Being with you now will destroy me in a way that Brandon didn't come close to."

"You don't know that," he tells me even as the light dies in his eyes. His beautiful blue eyes that suddenly look so much like the ones in my nightmares. The ones that have haunted me for five long years.

"I do know it."

"How?" he demands, and for once he sounds as impatient and confused and hurt as I do. "How can you be so sure without even trying?"

"Because," I tell him, my voice breaking on the truth I can't hold back any longer, the truth I never wanted to say out loud—for either of our sakes. "Because now, when I look in your eyes, all I see is him."

Ethan reels back like I've struck him and I want to take the words back, I do. But I can't, because they are my deep, dark truth. They are the insurmountable obstacle standing between us, and they always will be.

"I have to go," I tell him, fumbling my car door open and climbing inside.

This time he doesn't try to stop me.

## Chapter Six

“That’s it! I can’t take it anymore!” Tori says, making an abrupt right turn into the parking lot of University Towne Center.

“Take what?” I ask, absently staring out the window at the passing traffic. UTC is one of the biggest and busiest malls in San Diego and it’s also Tori’s personal nirvana. Well, next to Paris and Rodeo Drive, that is.

“The moping! Always with the moping.” She brings the car to a stop at the valet parking stand, then all but drags me from the passenger seat. “You’ve been miserable for two weeks and I can’t take it anymore.”

She’s not wrong—I have been miserable for the last two weeks, ever since I left Ethan standing in the parking lot at work, tears in his eyes and his heart on his sleeve. But I can feel myself getting defensive anyway. I don’t know what she’s complaining about. I’ve gone out of my way to make sure my misery doesn’t spill over onto her or anyone else.

If I spend most of my non-working time locked in my bedroom, staring blankly at the text messages he sent me all those days ago when my phone was off, whose business is that but mine?

If I don’t go running or to the gym anymore, who am I hurting besides myself?

And if I don’t want to go out and party with Tori every night in an effort to meet a guy who won’t ever come close to measuring up to Ethan, then why should I?

“I’m not moping,” I tell her as I make a desperate grab for my purse from the backseat.

“What would you call it then?” she demands as she drags me through the gates and into the open air mall.

“I’m thinking.”

“Yeah, well, you’re making yourself sick with all that thinking and I, for one, have had enough of it.”

“So we’re going shopping?”

“Don’t sneer,” she says, narrowing her eyes at me. “I will have you know that shopping is the cure-all for everything. Even your bad attitude.”

“I don’t have a bad attitude!” I tell her with a glare that combats the words. “I’m just tired. Work’s been crazy lately.”

“Work, shmerk. You’ve been brooding. And I get it. I do. Losing Ethan Frost isn’t an easy thing for any woman to recover from—even if he is a total douche.”

“He’s not a douche.” We’ve been over this same ground about a hundred times in the last two weeks.

“He hurt you, which means he will forever be a douche in my book. It’s the best friend code.”

She dances ahead of me then, and with her new spiky green hair and matching minidress, she looks like a leprechaun. A punk rock leprechaun with piercings, tattoos and Doc Martens, but a leprechaun nonetheless.

It’s just one of the many, many reasons I adore her. Or would adore her if she would just stop trying to fix me. As it is, all this pixie dust and do-gooding is getting on my nerves. Especially since Tori has always been the prickly one in this relationship, the one who wears multi-layered damage on her sleeve—literally and figuratively, thanks to the wild tattoos she’s got. Which begs the question—in how bad shape does she think I am if she’s pulling out all the stops to make me feel better?

Maybe I’ve been wallowing more than I think I have.

Still, it’s not like it’s a conscious decision on my part. And it’s sure as hell not like I want to feel like this. Because I don’t. I hate the fact that I worked so hard to banish Brandon from my life and my thoughts, and now he’s back, lurking around every corner in my mind just waiting to jump out at me like my own personal boogeyman.

I hate even more the fact that I can’t stop thinking about Ethan. Can’t stop wondering what he’s doing or if he’s okay or if he’s thinking about me. Can’t stop remembering what it was like when we were together and I was happy, truly happy, for the first time since I was a child. Maybe for the first time in my life.

Not that that matters. Not that any of it matters. Not when everything about my life—even my work—is a shambles. Most days it’s all I can do to drag myself out of bed and to the seven building oceanfront campus that houses Frost Industries. And once I’m there, I try to focus on the research,

on my job, but everything about the place screams Ethan's name and more than once I've ended up curled up on the bathroom floor trying to get my head together. Trying to pretend that I'm all right, that any part of this is all right.

"You know shopping isn't going to fix me, right?" I hiss at Tori as she drags me toward the entrance to Nordstrom. "Besides, I can't afford to buy anything from here. I'm a lowly unpaid intern at Frost Industries, remember?"

She snorts. "Another reason to think he's a douche. He makes how much money every year and he can't send a little of it over toward his interns, who work all hours of the day and night for him? That's the mark of a total loser."

"The experience and being able to put it on our resumes is more than enough. Besides, it's only the first year interns that don't get paid. Anyone who comes back a second year gets a pretty generous stipend."

"Will you stop defending him, please?"

"I wasn't defending him."

"You so totally were." She rolls her eyes at me as she picks up a scarf that costs almost as much as my entire wardrobe and loops it several times around my shoulders. "You look beautiful, daaaaaahling."

"Anyone would look beautiful in a three thousand dollar scarf."

"You'd be surprised." She gives me a push and I spin around like a top in an effort to unwind myself from the pashmina. "If you'd seen what I've seen through the years, you would know just how false that last statement was." She mock shudders. "Some people should never be allowed out of the house without a fashion consult. Just saying."

She jumps over to the hats, which are against the wall, and picks up the biggest, most ridiculous one she can find. It's hot pink with purple flowers, and though it's almost as big as she is, Tori somehow manages to carry it off with the kind of panache I can only dream of.

"How do I look?" she demands.

"Like you should be walking the red carpet. In Ireland."

"Oh, good. That's just the look I was going for." She flips me off before picking up a black and white hat and plopping it down on my head.

"How does it look?" I ask, resigned.



She just shakes her head and laughs. Of course. Tori has a gift for carrying off hats, no matter how beautiful or bizarre they are. She even looks good in the ridiculous cardboard hats you find at party stores. I once talked her into trying on a jester's hat and I swear if she'd worn it out of the store, she would have started a new fashion trend.

I, on the other hand, am headwear challenged, to put it politely. I look absolutely ridiculous in everything from snapbacks to fedoras to the beautiful feathered and floral Easter hats that fill the stores up once a year. Which is why Tori insists on trying hats on everywhere we go. It's a quest of hers. One of these days, she swears, we're going to find a hat that looks good on me. I'm not nearly as optimistic, but with Tori, the path of least resistance is often the only one available.

Despite the laughter that signals this isn't the hat that will change my life, I turn toward the nearest mirror. And then wish I hadn't. The hat is elegant, gorgeous, really, and yet, somehow, I manage to make it look like a clown hat. And not even a very nice clown hat.

"Here, try this one instead," she says, switching the black and white one out for a wide-brimmed red one.

I do and, of course, it looks even worse than the first one did. The fact that Tori is now wearing the first hat I tried on—and looking like she belongs on the cover of British *Vogue* while she's at it—doesn't make me bitter at all. The bitch.

We spend the next hour trying on one ridiculous hat after the other, all to no avail. Tori has a pile of about twenty that look great on her, while I decide a scarf just might be the way to go, after all. Tori only laughs at my pouting, then pulls me toward the makeup counters on the other side of the store.

"What you need is a new lipstick," she tells me with all the authority of a woman who has spent her life believing in the veracity of retail therapy. "Something bright and fun and gorgeous."

"I don't need another lipstick," I tell her. "I've got like ten." Besides, I feel about as far from bright and fun and gorgeous as I can get.

Gasping, she puts a hand to her heart in her best Scarlett O'Hara impersonation. "Blasphemy," she all but shouts. "No one ever has enough lipsticks. Besides, no one can be sad at the MAC counter. It's against the rules."

“What rules?”

“All the rules. Everywhere. I think it might even be an amendment to the Constitution,” she tells me with a totally straight face. Then she reaches over and pokes at the corners of my mouth. “Smile. It’s good for you.”

“I’m smiling. See?” I give her the best I’ve got.

She looks vaguely nauseated. “If, by smiling, you mean looking like you’re about to be eaten alive by the lions in ancient Rome, then yes, you’re smiling.”

“I’m fine,” I tell her for what has to be the millionth time. I keep hoping if I say it often enough, she’ll actually believe me. Then again, if I could put even a little conviction behind the words, we’d probably both be better off. “I’m really not sad. Just tired.”

Tori doesn’t bother to answer my blatant lie. Instead she says, “Come on, slowpoke,” as she wraps a hand around my wrist and pulls me along. “Maybe we’ll get you a whole makeover. My treat.”

“I don’t need a makeover,” I tell her even as I allow her to drag me up to the MAC counter.

She snorts. “Sweetie, you need something. Might as well be this.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. I’m an absolute, total mess and I don’t have a clue what to do about it.

It’s been two weeks since I last saw Ethan. Two weeks since my heart broke wide open for the second time. He hasn’t called, hasn’t texted, hasn’t emailed. He hasn’t even sent any of the care packages I’d gotten so used to in the time we were dating—little boxes filled with seashells and tea and other myriad things that made him think of me or that he thought I’d like.

No, there’s been no contact from Ethan whatsoever. I know it’s a good thing, know he’s only respecting my wishes. I’m not one of those women who says one thing and means another. I told Ethan I couldn’t be with him and I can’t.

But that doesn’t stop me from missing him, all day, every day.

It’s only the nights that I don’t want him around, when my dreams are filled with nightmares of Brandon and the rape and the terrible months and years that came after it. Even worse are the dreams where I think it’s Brandon holding me down in the front of his car, think it’s Brandon raping me, only to find myself staring into Ethan’s face when he finally lifts his head.

I know it's not true, but each time I have that nightmare I end up a little farther away from Ethan and a little closer to crazy.

To combat it, I've pretty much given up sleeping. It's been days since I've gotten more than an hour or two of rest. I'm exhausted and miserable and jumping at nonexistent threats around every corner. Every noise behind me is an attacker conjured up by my paranoid mind, every shadow is someone just waiting to hurt me.

Add to that the fact that Ethan's absence is a gaping wound inside of me that hasn't even begun to scab over, and no wonder Tori thinks I need therapy of some kind. I really am only one small step away from being a total basket case.

"So, what can we get for you today?" asks the man behind the counter. He's wearing more makeup than I even own and to add insult to injury, he looks absolutely gorgeous. Sometimes life really is unfair.

"She needs a makeover," Tori tells him, pointing at me. "A whole new look."

"Oh, yes, she does, doesn't she?" he says, and though the words are rude, the tone and his expression are nothing but kind. "Come on over here, sweetheart, and let me get a look at you. I'm Sam, by the way."

"I'm Chloe. And my crazy friend over there is Tori." We both watch, bemused, as Tori randomly picks five or six different eye shadows off the display and starts applying them one on top of the other. She does this, of course, without taking off any of the rock star makeup she's already wearing.

"She does like color, doesn't she?" he says. It doesn't sound like a judgment, exactly, but the man is dressed from head to toe in black. Even the gauges in his ears are black.

"You have no idea."

After another minute of staring at Tori gone wild, he leads me over to a trio of makeup displays that are set up behind the counter. "What look are we going for exactly?" he asks after I'm settled in the chair.

I shrug. It's not like this is my idea.

"We're going for anything that makes her look less dead," Tori chimes in as she bounces over. I expect her to look like a clown after everything she just put on her face, but instead she manages to look better than ever. Just another reason why I should hate her.

“Hush!” Sam says. “She just looks a little tired, that’s all. We can fix that.”

“Bad breakup,” Tori whispers loudly enough to be heard in the shoe department all the way across the store.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Sam clucks sympathetically. “I’m recovering from a breakup myself. It sucks.”

“You seem to be handling it a lot better than I am,” I tell him. It’s true. He looks absolutely gorgeous.

“That’s why you need a makeover,” he says. “A good lipstick can hide a multitude of sadnesses.”

“See! I told you!” Tori crows, clapping her hands triumphantly.

And that’s how I end up spending the next ninety minutes in Sam’s beauty/therapy chair. He powders, applies, spritzes and blends until I’m certain I am wearing enough makeup to outfit an entire Cirque du Soleil production, all the while delivering little tips on how to survive a breakup.

*Set a routine for yourself every day. Don’t just lie in bed wanting to die.*

*Always wear something pretty. It’s hard to be depressed when you’re wearing a gorgeous dress.*

*Don’t let yourself fall too far off the wagon. You don’t want to be a total wreck when you’re finally ready to get back out there.*

I’m not sure if these pearls of wisdom are meant to be taken seriously or if Sam is just trying to make me laugh. Either way, by the time he holds the mirror up to my face with a theatrical, “Voila,” I’m feeling better than I have since I opened Ethan’s door to find Brandon on his front porch. And that’s before I see the absolutely astonishing job Sam has done on my makeup.

“What do you think?” he asks, as I stare at myself wide-eyed in the mirror.

“I think you’re a miracle worker.”

He preens under the praise. “I try, doll. I try.” He grabs a couple of face cards from his drawer and says, “Now, let me show you exactly what I did so you can do it at home.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” I tell him.

“Of course it is,” he answers, waving off my concerns.

I spend the next thirty minutes getting a step-by-step tutorial from Sam on how I can make myself look like this every day. I’m still not sure that he

didn't wave some kind of magic wand and do this to me, but I'm willing to take his word for it. At least until the first time I try out the look and make a total disaster of it.

Tori insists on buying me everything Sam recommends, even though I try to pay for it myself—what are credit cards for if not to splurge when your heart has been ripped out of your chest? Another pearl of wisdom from Sam, by the way. And though I still feel a long way from okay, I have to admit I feel better than I have in days.

It's a start.

\* \* \*

We spend the rest of the weekend eating ice cream and watching *Titanic* and a bunch of other love stories that don't end well. Nothing like a sinking ship and thousands of dead people to put my own life and breakup in perspective.

Or at least make it seem just a little less traumatic.

By the time Monday morning rolls around, I've actually gotten close to eight hours of sleep over the weekend—a record for me in the last couple of weeks. And if I'm not exactly feeling refreshed, at least the hour I spend on my makeup is enough to make me look like I am.

It's a big day for the legal department. We're heading over to the Trifecta building to hammer out the last major parts of the merger agreement today—parts that deal specifically with intellectual property acquisition. We've been working toward this meeting for weeks and I only hope that it goes well. Otherwise I'll be buried in patent research for the rest of the summer.

I dress carefully in the same old suit I wear for everything important. I even put on the Louboutins Tori got me that I haven't worn since they crippled my feet on my first day at Frost Industries. With my makeup done and my hair twisted up into a complicated chignon, I feel as ready for the meeting as I'm going to get. Not that I'll actually be doing anything but taking notes and looking up case law if that becomes necessary, but it's still good to look the part.

Fake it 'til you make it. My own personal motto.

And it works, too. At least better than wallowing has. Maybe Tori knew what she was talking about, after all.

I feel almost okay as I pull up to the office. Or, at least, more okay than I've felt in a while. That isn't saying much, but I'm going with it. I gain a little more confidence as I walk through the building and rack up a couple of compliments from people that I pass. And by the time we walk into the boardroom at Trifecta, I've almost managed to relegate Ethan to a sideshow in my brain instead of the main attraction. It won't last—it never does—but I'll take it as long as I can get it. Thinking about him once a minute instead of sixty times a minute is a big improvement. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

And that, of course, is when my whole carefully constructed day comes tumbling down around my ears. Because even though he's supposed to be in Paris right now in the middle of some global conference, he's here. Right here. In front of me.

Looking as tired and strung out and miserable as I feel.

I have one second to assimilate his presence before he notices me. In that moment, my heartbeat triples, I start to sweat and adrenaline races through my body. Full-on fight-or-flight response.

I'm just about to flee—the response exists for a reason—when he glances up, his gaze sweeping over the whole group of us until it finds mine and locks on.

For long seconds he doesn't blink, doesn't move, doesn't so much as breathe. And neither do I. How can I when I'm staring into his eyes—his beautiful, haunted, storm-tossed eyes—and can see everything I feel, everything I fear, reflected back at me.

“Chloe,” he whispers my name and as he does, I feel every ounce of protection I've built around myself—and my trembling, traitorous heart—collapse.

## Chapter Seven

Ethan. Ethan. Ethan.

His name is pounding in my blood, a mantra in my soul.

*Ethan. Ethan. Ethan.*

All that work. All those hours and days of trying to move on. All those assurances to myself that I had this, that I could do it. All of it blown out of the water in one fell swoop.

*Ethan. Ethan. Ethan.*

He's here, right here in front of me. And despite everything, it's all I can do not to fall straight into him.

I don't know what to do, what to say, how to act. There's a part of me that wants nothing more than to run across the room and throw myself into his lap. To bury my face in his neck and beg him to never let me go. To pretend that the last two weeks never happened and that, somehow, somehow, all the pain, all the agony, was nothing but a nightmare gone awry.

But there's another part—equally as big and equally as important—that wants to run away. Or at least dive behind the nearest chair and not come out until he's gone. Until he's no longer looking at me like he saw a ghost.

Or worse.

Of the two choices, the second is definitely the smarter one. Humiliating, yes. Unprofessional, absolutely. But still so much better than standing here remembering what it feels like to be held by him.

To be *loved* by him.

And yet, even knowing what a terrible idea it is, I can't stop myself from taking a step toward him, then another and another. In seconds, I'm standing right in front of him, close enough to touch his soft hair and smoothly shaven cheeks. Close enough to register the uneven rise and fall of his chest beneath the navy silk of his shirt. More than close enough to

feel his heartbeat if I just reach out and stroke my hands down his chest as I'm longing to do.

"Ethan." His name is a tortured sound ripped from me, half whisper, half sob, but I can see by the way his eyes narrow and his fists clench that he hears me. Can tell by the way he looks at me that he understands all the things I don't have the words to say.

He doesn't react for a long time, doesn't so much as move a muscle. Then, suddenly, he's leaning forward in his chair, and I think that he's going to be the one to do it, to break the oh-so-fragile understanding between us. To touch me the way I've been longing to be touched from the moment I left him in that parking lot.

But then his eyes go blank and he's looking through me like I'm not even here.

Or worse, like I never was.

"Lorraine," he calls quietly to one of the senior lawyers from Frost Industries who is sitting halfway down the huge table. "Do you have the documentation on the O'Riley case? I think the precedents set there are going to become important as we negotiate ..."

He continues on about the case, but I tune him out. He's not saying anything I don't already know. Hell, I'm the one who did the investigation on the O'Riley case and found the precedent he's speaking of. I've been neck-deep in research for this merger for weeks. But he's the boss. If he wants to deal with Lorraine instead of me, then who am I to get offended?

Except I am. I totally am. Because Ethan has never, not once, looked at me like he just did.

Like he's completely indifferent to me.

Like he doesn't even know me.

Like I don't matter at all.

It hurts, much more than I expected it to. Maybe because I know that no matter what happens between us, I'd never be able to look at him that same way. Never would I be able to just ... dismiss him, not after everything that he's meant to me.

"Excuse me, Chloe."

Lorraine shuffles me aside as she takes my place in front of Ethan, talking as fast as she can about the salient points of the case. Points that I



spent hours pulling out of the court documents and putting together for just this moment.

*Because it's my job*, I remind myself viciously as I step back to give her room. I'm an intern, one of the ones who do the research and the grunt work. She's one of the lawyers, the ones who interpret all that grunt work and figure out what it means—and what to do with it. I have no right to resent her this much.

And yet I do. I really do, especially when Ethan looks at her with rapt concentration. The same kind of concentration he used to give me when I spoke to him about work matters—or anything else.

Again, it's my own fault. I'm the one who has worked so hard to put distance between us these last couple of weeks. Who hasn't responded to one text or call from him since that morning at his house. I have no right to be upset about the fact that he's obviously taken my wishes to heart and moved on.

With that thought first and foremost in my mind, I move backward to give Lorraine all the room she could possibly want. It's not like I even belong up here anyway. The interns usually sit at a smaller table behind the Frost Industries lawyers, computers open and research readily available to help clarify any discussion points that might come up. I'm certain everyone else is settled in and ready to go while I've been too busy mooning over the boss to so much as put down my briefcase.

It's time for me to remedy that.

But as I take another step back, start to turn, the right heel of these ridiculous Louboutins catches on a snag in the carpet and I start to fall. Panicked, I reach for the table to catch myself, but I've stepped back too far and my fingers just miss the edge.

I brace myself for the fall—the jarring pain and subsequent humiliation of going down in the middle of a boardroom filled with my peers and superiors—but it never comes. Instead, Ethan reaches out in a flash, grabbing the front lapels of my jacket with both hands and pulling me forward. He holds me steady until I can do it myself. And then, the second I'm recovered, he lets go of me and sits back down, turning the laser beam of his attention on Lorraine like the whole thing had never happened. Like he hadn't just saved me from making a total fool of myself in front of everyone, not to mention from some very unpleasant bruises.

What I don't understand is how he can be so nonchalant about the whole thing, when I can still feel the brush of his knuckles against my breasts as he made the grab for me. Can still feel the strength and the power of his hands as he held me steady and the answering response in my body that I so don't want to give.

"Thank you," I tell him in a voice so husky I barely recognize it.

He doesn't so much as nod an acknowledgment that he's heard me.

I step back for real then, being more careful this time around in an effort to avoid any more close calls. I make it back to my table without any other mishaps and start setting up my own station.

Laptop, open and connected to Trifecta's wireless, check.

Legal pad and pens at my fingertips for note taking, check.

The fifty-five page case reminder cheat sheet that I had put together at my boss's request sitting next to me, check.

I'm as ready as I'm going to be for this meeting but instead of joining in the conversation of the other interns, I spend the few minutes before we're called to order fiddling unnecessarily with my cell phone. Playing with my pens, making sure they're all perfectly lined up. Reading over the cheat sheet with such concentration that no one would ever guess that I have the whole thing memorized.

By the time the meeting finally starts, I'm as close to a basket case as I've been in quite some time. Though I promise myself I'm not going to do it, I keep stealing glances at Ethan out of the corner of my eye. I'm not the only one doing it—he's a brilliant, charismatic guy and it's impossible not to be drawn to him, especially as he helps hammer out the last of the important points of the merger.

Another CEO might not even be in this room right now, leaving these details to his lawyers to figure out. But they're important details and he's Ethan Frost and though I thought he was going to be in Paris, now that he's here I can't imagine him being anywhere else. This merger and what it brings—not just to Frost Industries but to the injured veterans Ethan has spent so much of his professional life trying to help—is too important for him to let anyone else handle these last, intricate details.

The meeting takes all day and most of it passes in a blur. I try to concentrate on the matters at hand, but every time Ethan opens his mouth to

speak, I get lost in the sound of his voice. In the passion behind each question he asks and each answer he refuses to move on without.

There are a few times when we're asked to find specific answers to the questions being discussed, but for the most part the other interns and I are just along for the ride. Which is normally a dream come true, because getting to watch, up close and personal, as the final points get hammered out in a merger of this magnitude is the best learning experience any of us could ask for. The other three interns in the room are relishing every second of it, but for me it's more torture than adventure, more pain than pleasure.

Finally, after hours of verbal parrying and legal maneuvering, agreements are reached and the meeting draws to a close. After a brief—very brief—period of congratulatory-sounding small talk, the Trifecta people leave us to our own devices and Ethan takes a few minutes to thank everyone for their hard work. Though the job is far from finished—thousands of man hours are still necessary to ease the transition, this is it for major negotiations. The last of the big stuff has been handled and now it's just the actual road map for the blending of the two companies that needs to be worked out.

I start gathering up my things, more than ready to call it a day. But before I can do much more than shove my laptop in my briefcase, Ethan announces, "I've got reservations for all of us and the Trifecta legal team at the Marine Room this evening in celebration of a job well done. I hope each of you can join me."

The other interns—Robert and Jonah and Alyssa—start chattering excitedly, and even the lawyers seem pleased at the prospect of dinner at one of La Jolla's best restaurants. I, of course, would rather head home to a bowl of canned soup and a night in front of the TV or—I don't know, a root canal, but begging off at this point would look both churlish and unprofessional. Not to mention like I can't handle being around Ethan.

Which I can't—this morning proved it—but no need for the rest of the office to figure that out as well. My relationship with Ethan has pretty much been watercooler fodder from the very first day I started at Frost Industries. I see no need to make that any worse than it already is by deliberately snubbing an invitation that is both professional and impersonal in nature. Better to just put in an appearance and then slip out as soon as dinner is over. As long as I sit at the opposite end of the table from Ethan, everything should be fine.

\* \* \*

Everything is *not* fine. It's nowhere close to fine. Because while half of the Marine Room's private dining room has tables set up for dinner, no one is currently sitting down. Instead, we're all mingling and making small talk as white-coated waiters whisk by holding trays laden with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. The whole situation would be right up Tori's alley, but it's not something I enjoy at the best of times. And this is, very definitely, not the best of times.

To begin with, the other interns have all noticed how Ethan is treating me—or not treating me, to be more exact—and they're taking full advantage of the fact that I have obviously lost his favor.

I've been fair game to them ever since I landed the Trifecta account—and Ethan—in the same week. Egged on by Rick, one of the senior interns who also happens to be here tonight since he did a bunch of preliminary work on the merger, I've been ostracized, ridiculed and even harassed by the intern pool on a fairly regular basis. I don't exactly put up with it—if someone has something to say to my face, I definitely meet them barb for barb—but there's only so much I can do when most of the crap they pull is more subtle, less confrontational. Unless I want to look like a total diva, I have to just ignore it.

Which I normally do. But tonight it's hard to ignore when the group of them are huddled in a corner with the Trifecta interns, laughing and joking around. If Rick wasn't here, I'd probably make an attempt to join them, but he is and the last thing I need is any more social humiliation courtesy of him. Besides, it's not like I want to spend my evening hanging out with that bastard anyway.

At another party, I'd probably just go find someone else to talk to, but cocktail party or not, there is definitely a hierarchy at work here. Senior lawyers from Frost Industries are hanging with senior lawyers from Trifecta, junior lawyers are hanging with junior lawyers and the interns are definitely hanging with the other interns. Ethan and the heads of Trifecta are the only ones moving from group to group, spending a few minutes with everyone.

Well, everyone except for me, obviously. We've been here forty-five minutes and Ethan hasn't so much as looked me in the eye. Oh, he sees me

—I know that much because there is no way he could do such a good job of dancing around me if he didn't. Anytime our proximity gets too close, anytime I so much as wander over to the same side of the room he's on, he moves to another group.

I know what he's doing, even understand and agree with it. But that doesn't make it any easier to stand here in this room and experience it. Especially when I can feel the eyes of every Frost Industries employee darting back and forth between us, trying to figure out what's going on ... and what it means.

It's been going on all day, more than long enough for them to start formulating their own conclusions. And while I can handle the shade the other interns are aiming at me—I went through a lot worse with Brandon and his friends in high school—being the object of speculation from my boss and the other lawyers is making me physically ill.

Or maybe that's just my reaction to being this close to Ethan without being able to touch him.

I know it's my own fault, know that I'm the one who pushed him away and not the other way around. Just like I know it will never work between us, not when his brother is in the picture in any way. But it's still hard to move on, hard to remember that I can't love him anymore, when just being in the same room with him feels like he's got an electric conduit straight to my heart. Straight to my *soul*.

"Another glass of champagne, ma'am?" One of the waiters pauses next to me, tray extended.

I start to refuse—I've already had two—but a glance at the others assures me that this dinner is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. And if that's the case, I'll take what I can get to help me make it through.

"Yes. Thank you." I smile at him as I reach for a glass. "Have a great night."

"You, too," he answers, but he's already lost my attention.

Instead, I'm focused on Ethan, who is currently leaning indolently against one of the huge picture windows that looks out over the ocean. Though he's deep in conversation with Lorraine and one of the attorneys from Trifecta, I can tell that he's watching me. It's the first time since this morning that he has so much as glanced my way, and my heart starts beating triple time with the realization.

I raise my glass in a quiet acknowledgment, wait to see what he'll do in response. I expect a raised eyebrow at the least, maybe a quirk of his lips—something that acknowledges the fact that I caught him looking.

Instead, he stares silently for long seconds before very deliberately, very rudely, turning his back to me. Again.

It's the last straw in a day, a week, half a month of shitty happenings, and I can't take it. Not when I miss him the way that I do, like a phantom limb or an addiction I just can't shake.

Not when everything inside of me yearns for him with an intensity that keeps me up at night. That practically brings me to my knees.

An intensity that I'm terrified will never go away.

I react without thinking, barely pausing to drop my glass on the nearest flat surface before bolting for the door. I don't know where I'm going and I don't care as long as it's away from here.

## Chapter Eight

“Hey, you okay?”

I startle at the unexpected voice, turn to see who has bothered to track me down after my less-than-illustrious exit from the party. No one from Frost Industries, that’s for sure. They’re all either too angry at me for being with Ethan or they’re too wary of doing anything that might upset him.

Sure enough, the guy standing in the restaurant doorway is one of the junior lawyers from Trifecta. Jake or Jace, something like that.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Why?”

He seems to take the question as an invitation to join me on the beach where I’m watching the wind tear at the wild, rocky waves.

“You left without your champagne.” He holds a fresh glass out to me. “Thought you might be missing it?”

It’s corny and ridiculous and kind of exactly the right thing to say—so much better than pointing out the fact that I’m one step away from being a social pariah. I laugh despite myself.

“I am missing it.” I take the glass and raise it in a little toast to him. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He moves to stand next to me, his expensive dress shoes making a sucking sound with each step he takes out onto the wet sand. “Chloe, right?”

“Yes. And you’re ...” I take a guess. “Jace?”

“I am.” He glances out at the water. “The wind is really kicking it up tonight, isn’t it? It’s a mess out there.”

“I think it’s beautiful.” There’s just something about the storm-tossed water that gets to me every time. The wildness of it, maybe. Or the imperfection. Either way, I could stand here all night watching the wind whip the waves into a frenzy.

He nods, but I can tell he doesn’t agree. Or doesn’t get it—I’m not sure which. Before I can decide, a sudden gust of wind comes rushing off the

ocean and I shiver despite myself.

“You’re cold.” He shrugs out of his suit jacket and drapes it over my shoulders. I startle a little when he gets close, cast a look over his shoulder toward the restaurant. Then nearly sigh in relief when I realize that half the main dining room has a perfect view of this beach. More than two dozen people can see us out here right now. I’m as safe as I would be in any public place.

Not that Jace isn’t a perfectly nice guy, but with my history I always figure it’s better to be safe than sorry. It’s the same reason I haven’t touched the champagne he brought me. Again, I don’t think he did anything to it, but a girl can never be too careful with a guy she doesn’t know.

“Want to walk?” he asks after a minute of us standing next to each other, staring out to sea.

“Yeah, sure.” Unlike him, I was smart enough to take my shoes off *before* I came out here so I’ve got no problem walking down the beach a little, as long as we stay in sight of the restaurant. Besides, anything is better than being inside that stuffy private room with a bunch of people who hate me, wishing the whole time for something that can never be.

“You did well in there today,” he tells me. “Most interns freak out when they get put on the hot seat, but you totally took it in stride.”

“It’s not like I had to do much except pull up some research I’d already done. It wasn’t exactly brain surgery.”

“Still, it was nice to see how calm and cool you were every time your team called on you. I was impressed.”

I was calm and cool mostly because I was too out of it to care, so lost in my mixed feelings for Ethan that I was barely concentrating on where I was or what I was doing. It’s not something I’m proud of, and certainly not anything I plan on telling Jace when he’s complimenting my work ethic. But I’m not going to lie to myself, either—or him.

“You did pretty well in there yourself,” I tell him, because I want to shift the focus off me. And because he really did do well. He brought up three of the main points of contention in the proposed intellectual property merger, and fought for those points like a Doberman. In the end, the Frost Industries team had conceded two of the points, which was a huge win for him and Trifecta. By the end of the afternoon, even Ethan was watching him—more with annoyance than interest, but still.



As we walk, we follow the curve of the building which also follows the natural curve of the beach. It's beautiful, really, the way the architect designed the restaurant to be a part of the ocean instead of just an observer to it. When the tide is high, it rushes over this beach we are even now standing on and crashes up against the walls of the restaurant, right under the giant picture windows. Tori tells me that if you're sitting in the dining room, it makes you feel like you're actually floating in the middle of the ocean. That's something I'd love to see.

"So, where do you go to school?" Jace asks me as we curve around to the side of the Marine Room.

I start to answer him, but am distracted when a glance at the restaurant reveals that we are now directly in front of the private room where Ethan is hosting dinner. The whole wall we're standing in front of is made of huge picture windows that give us a perfect view of what's going on inside.

A quick double take shows me that everyone has finally settled down at the table to order and for a moment, just a moment, I think about going back in. I'm not the least bit hungry—or the least bit interested in sitting down at a table with people who would take great joy in either ignoring me or tearing me to shreds—but I can't help feeling like I'm shirking my job responsibilities by sitting out here while my boss, *her* boss and her boss's boss are all in that room.

"Do you want to go back inside?" Jace asks, seeing the direction I'm looking. "We can finish our walk later."

"No. I'm good out here. But, please, don't let me keep you if you'd like to go back in." I start to shrug out of his jacket.

He stops me with a hand on my shoulder. "I'm fine. I'd much rather be out here with you than in there listening to my colleagues try to one-up each other."

I laugh because I know exactly what he means.

I catch sight of Ethan, sitting at one of the tables. He's talking to the woman sitting to his right—one of the senior lawyers from Trifecta—but he keeps glancing at the door, like he's searching for someone.

My heart speeds up a little at the idea that it might be me he's looking for. Which is stupid, considering all the promises I've made to myself concerning him. But I can't help it. I know I can't be with him, know I can't spend the rest of my life looking into his eyes when I see Brandon staring

back at me. It's not Ethan's fault and it's not my fault, either. It's just how things are.

"So, how long have you been interning at Frost?" Jace asks me.

"I just started this summer." I deliberately pull my eyes away from Ethan, who is once again looking at the door, and focus on Jace instead. "It's been a pretty steep learning curve."

"I bet. But you must be pretty amazing if they've got you researching for this merger already. Frost has been after Trifecta for a long time. I'm not sure why, but it's important to him."

I know why—he shared the reason with me weeks ago. It's the same reason he's been such a stickler about making sure he can lay claim to all of their intellectual property. Trifecta has a revolutionary new treatment for burn victims, one that helps them heal much more quickly and with less scarring than traditional methods. Unfortunately, they don't have the capital to do what needs to be done to see the treatment gets into the hands of hospitals and the military. Ethan does, and he's determined to make it happen.

After meeting the men in the burn unit at the local VA hospital, I can understand his single-minded determination. Others might not, but I do. Ethan is a man driven to help those who can't help themselves and if he's a bit abrasive about it at times, then I figure it's well-earned.

"So, what are you doing tonight after this dinner?" Jace asks after the silence between us has lingered a little too long.

"Heading home." I take what I hope is an unobtrusive step back from him. It's not that we're standing particularly close or that he's done anything to make me feel uncomfortable ... and yet, suddenly, it just seems like a little more distance between us would be a good thing. "I've got an early morning meeting tomorrow."

"Geez, Frost is a real slave driver over there, huh? Everybody says that about him, but I didn't really believe it before now. I can't believe he isn't going to cut you guys any slack at all, even after you all but gift wrap this merger for him. What does he want, blood?"

He says it like it's a joke, but there's something else there. Something that makes me just a little bit more uncomfortable.

"It's actually the standard intern meeting. We have one every Wednesday." I shrug out of his jacket, hold it out to him. "We should

probably go back in. It looks like they'll be ordering any second."

"Aww, don't be like that. I didn't mean to offend you. After watching you today, I didn't think you had exactly parted amicably."

"I'm not offended," I answer, though it's not quite the truth. I am offended on Ethan's behalf. He's one of the most generous employers around—Frost Industries employees have access to a free, on-site clinic, free gym membership, free on-site daycare and three comped meals a day in a state-of-the-art cafeteria. Not to mention generous salary, bonus and vacation schedules. His employees are incredibly important to him and listening to this guy act like they aren't annoys me no end.

"You're acting like you're offended and I hate that I've done that." His hand drops to my lower back. "Let me take you out for a drink later. Make it up to you."

For the first time since he came out on the beach, Jace's voice sounds low, suggestive. Not necessarily in an insulting way, but still, it makes me nervous, especially since it's coming on the heels of his comments about Ethan. Suddenly, I'm not so sure which threat I'm supposed to watch out for first—the one from my peers and colleagues or the one from the guy who is currently rubbing my back and who sees nothing but Ethan's leftovers.

It's the last straw. Pulling away, I hold his jacket out to him. "Thanks for the champagne and the walk, but I'm going to go back inside now."

"Come on, Chloe. We were having a good time. Don't be like that."

"I'm not being like anything. I just—" I break off as the door leading from the private dining room to the beach suddenly slams open.

Jace and I turn at the same time to see Ethan standing there, a pleasant enough smile on his face and murder in his eyes.

"You okay, Chloe?" he asks, one eyebrow raised as he looks back and forth between us.

"I'm fine, Ethan. Thank you." Still, I take another step away from Jace. Not because I'm afraid of him—he's arrogant and insulting but I don't actually think he's dangerous—but because I'm concerned my close proximity to him might be hazardous to his health. Especially with Ethan prowling toward us like some kind of avenging angel.

"Shouldn't you be inside, Mackenzie?" he asks in a voice so low and reasonable that it's a threat all on its own. "I think your boss is looking for

you. Something about your love of free caviar, I believe.”

Jace’s cheeks burn a little at the implied insult in Ethan’s tone. But when he opens his mouth to respond, a narrow-eyed look from Ethan sends him scurrying back toward the party without another sound. He’s moving so fast that the door slams shut behind him.

For long seconds we just stand there, looking at each other. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t so much as smile at me, and I grow more and more anxious as time ticks by.

“I should go in, too,” I finally say, moving to step around Ethan. A glance over his shoulder tells me most of the room’s occupants are watching us.

“Don’t go,” he tells me, reaching out to grab my elbow in his warm, strong fingers.

They’re the first words he’s said to me all day and I have to admit, they’re doozies, especially since he’s pulled out that dark, gravelly voice I love so much.

I take a deep breath, try to force air into my suddenly too-tight lungs. It isn’t easy, not with Ethan watching me like a jungle cat watches its prey. “The party,” I tell him. “You should be in there—”

“Fuck the party!” he snarls, and his grip tightens on my elbow. “What the fuck were you doing out here with Jace Mackenzie?”

“Excuse me?” I demand as shock ricochets through me. Ethan has never spoken to me like that. Never.

“You heard me.” He uses his grip on my elbow to propel me around the corner and into the shadows, away from prying eyes. “Why would you come out here with him? The guy’s a self-important asshole.”

“I didn’t come out here with him. I came out to get away from the party and he followed me—”

“The bastard.”

“It’s fine. He didn’t do anything. He just brought me a glass of champagne and—”

“Champagne? Did you drink it?”

“Seriously? Do I look like a total idiot to you?”

“No, of course not. I’m sorry. I just worry about you. Guys like that—”

“Believe me, Ethan, I know all about guys like that. Opportunistic assholes with a sense of entitlement a mile wide. We’ve had our run-ins

before.”

It was a low blow and he flinches, just like I knew he would. He doesn't let go of my arm, though, and he doesn't step back to let me pass.

I know I should push him away, but he's so warm and his touch feels so good. It's only been two weeks since we were together, but it feels like two years. Like two decades. And though I know I'm playing with fire, I can't help wanting to melt into him, to feel his body pressed against my own one more time.

“I'm sorry about what Brandon did to you, Chloe. I'm so fucking sorry. I'd kill him if I could. I almost did that first night, after I found out. I wrapped my hands around his throat and didn't let go until—” He breaks off at my gasp, shoves a frustrated hand through his hair.

“That isn't what I wanted.” I hate Brandon, have spent years thinking about exacting revenge on him for what he did to me. But that doesn't mean I want Ethan falling victim to that same hatred, that same self-destructive need, especially when Brandon is his little brother.

“Don't you dare fucking apologize to me, Chloe. Don't you fucking dare,” he tells me, and now he's got my back pressed against the restaurant's wall, his arms on either side of me. He's caging me in, blanketing me, and if any other man tried it I'd be going for his eyes or his balls. But with Ethan it feels good, feels right, like we were meant to be like this.

I close my eyes for just a moment at the thought, rest the back of my head against the building. Because whether we were *meant* to be like this or not, we can't be. Not now, not ever again.

“Chloe.” It's a whisper, a plea, maybe even a command considering how my body responds to him. Heart racing, nipples peaking, thighs aching.

“Ethan.”

He leans forward and I know he's going to kiss me. I can see it in his eyes, feel it in the sudden tension sweeping through him. And I want him to. I really want him to. Except ... except there's so much shit between us and if I kiss him now everything will just come rushing back. Come tumbling down.

I'm not sure where I get the strength from, but I bring my hand to his face. Press two fingers against his lips.

This time, Ethan's the one who closes his eyes, and though he tries to hide it I can see the pain etched on his face as he turns his head away and rests his forehead on the wall next to me. He takes one deep, shuddering breath and then another and another, before straightening up. Stepping away.

"Tell me the truth," he says after a few seconds of awkward silence. "Why were you ducking out of the party?"

I laugh then, and it's more bitter than I intend it to be. At least until I realize he wasn't joking. He really doesn't know why I had to leave. "I couldn't stay," I tell him once I can get the words past the lump in my throat. "You may be used to this, but I'm not. I'm not any good at it."

"Good at what?" he asks, looking totally confused.

I turn my face away, refuse to answer. I've already humiliated myself enough tonight, thank you very much, especially considering I just finished all but whimpering in his arms.

"Chloe? Answer me. What aren't you good at?"

I shake my head, whisper, "Nothing."

But my non-answer isn't good enough for Ethan. He grabs my hands, squeezes them tightly. When that isn't enough to get me talking, he slides his hands slowly, softly, up my forearms to my elbows, past my elbows to my biceps, past my biceps to my shoulders. His fingers brush against the sensitive skin that stretches across my collarbone and then his fingertips are skimming up my throat to my chin.

"Ethan." His name is a strangled sigh ripped from deep inside me.

He smiles softly at the sound, brushes his thumb over my lips even as he slides his hands up to cup my jaw. And then he's slipping his thumbs under my chin, pushing gently but insistently until I lift my face to his.

Our eyes meet in the shadowy darkness and it's my turn to flinch a little. Though I'm fully dressed, I feel naked. Defenseless. Like Ethan can see deep inside me to the parts of myself I'm trying so desperately to hold away from him. The parts I'm trying so desperately to keep just for me.

His lips tighten and for a moment I think he's going to back off, to step away. But then he asks, "What. Aren't. You. Good. At?" His voice is as implacable as ever, his face set in determined lines and I know—I know—that there's no way I'm getting out of this without talking to him. Without telling him everything, even those things I don't want him to know.

The knowledge makes me reckless. Or maybe it's the pain throbbing inside of me that does that. Either way, I toss my head back and all but shout, "What do you care? Why does it matter to you if I stayed at that stupid party or not? What does it matter to you what I do?"

"It matters because you ended up out here with that asshole. If he'd done something to you—"

"We were in full view of the restaurant," I say dismissively. "What was he going to do?"

"You *were* in full view. But it only took a couple of steps for me to get you into the shadows, Chloe. Who's to say he couldn't have done the same thing?"

"Damn it, Ethan. Are we really going to do this? Nothing happened. Nothing. Happened. So can we please just forget it and go back inside?"

This time I do shove against his chest, and I keep shoving, until he finally steps away. He lets me walk past him, lets me almost make it back into the light before he grabs my hand.

"What were you doing out here, Chloe?" he asks for a third time. But there's no insistence in his voice now, no anger. Just a low, aching need that reaches deep inside of me.

"I told you, it doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

"Why?" I'm all but pleading with him now, and I can tell from the way he locks his jaw, the way he looks away, that he can hear the entreaty in my voice.

And still he doesn't let go of my hand.

"Because you ran away from a party I threw for people we both work with and I want to know why. Did someone do something to make you feel uncomfortable—"

"Are you kidding me with this?" I demand in a voice that sounds like I've been swallowing glass. "Did *somebody* make me feel uncomfortable? Did *somebody* do something to me—"

His jaw flexes. "That's what I'm asking."

"Jesus Christ, Ethan! I left because I couldn't stand to be in the same room with you for one more minute!"

He rears back like I hit him. "*I* made you feel uncomfortable?" he demands incredulously. "I didn't even look at you."

“Believe me, I am well aware of that,” I tell him harshly.

“Well aware of what? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Maybe this is normal for you. Maybe you sleep with a woman one day and then ignore her at work the next, but I don’t know how to do that. I don’t know how to do any of this—”

“Normal for me? You think any part of this situation is normal for me?” He grabs me by the upper arms then, his fingers gentle but insistent as he once again waits for me to look him in the eye.

“Isn’t it?”

“No, goddamnit, it isn’t! I don’t date women that I work with. You know that.”

“You dated me.”

“Because I couldn’t *not* date you. From the moment you walked up to me at that damn juice bar, I was completely bowled over by you. The way you stood up to me, the way you refused to cave to my demands, the way when—after you’d won—you took a sip of that stupid fucking blueberry smoothie, just to be fair. Just because I’d wanted you to. How could I not fall for you, Chloe?” He whispers the last, and now his hands are in my hair, his mouth inches from mine. “How could I not want you?”

“You ignored me. All day today. You looked through me like I wasn’t even there.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“Why would I want that?”

“You broke up with me. You told me being with me made you think of Brandon, of what he did to you. How did you think I would react to that?”

“I don’t know, but I didn’t think you’d punish me.”

“Punish you?” He tugs on my hair, pulls me even closer to him. “I’m not trying to punish you, baby. I’m trying not to hurt you anymore. If you could have seen yourself that morning ... If you could have seen what being near him did to you—”

“I’m sorry if I didn’t react the right way, Ethan. I wasn’t exactly expecting to open the door and see my rapist standing there!”

“Don’t you think I know that? Don’t you think I beat myself up every day, every night, for letting that happen to you? For letting him anywhere near you? And then you stand in that fucking parking lot and tell me that I remind you of him? That you look at me and see him?”



“What did you think I was going to do with that, baby? What did you think that was going to do to me? To us? You’ve already suffered so much in your life. If walking away from you means I could stop just a little bit of that pain, if it means I could keep you from being hurt any more, do you think I wouldn’t do it?”

“I would do *anything* for you, Chloe, even sit in a room with you all day and pretend I’m not dying to touch you.”

## Chapter Nine

Ethan's words hang in the air between us, and for long seconds I can't move, can't think, can't *breathe*. It's everything I've ever wanted to hear, everything I've *needed* to hear. That someone loves me. That they put me first. That they care about me. Just me.

The only boyfriend I ever had before Ethan tried to bet my virginity in a poker game.

My parents sold my silence after I was raped for the capital to start their business.

The people I thought were my friends turned on me the second Brandon told them to.

I've never been enough. Never been good enough, never been important enough for anyone to choose me first.

Except Ethan. Ethan chose me weeks ago and I was too hurt, too blind to see it. And he's choosing me again, right here, right now, if only I'm strong enough to let him. If only I'm strong enough to choose him back.

I want to be strong enough.

For a moment, just a moment, Brandon's face hovers in front of my vision. Eyes flashing, skin flushed, lips curled in a sneer as he calls me a slut, orders me to give it up. As he tells me I owe him for the ride home.

I can still remember the weight of his hand on my mouth, the feel of his fingers fumbling beneath my skirt, ripping my underwear, shoving inside of me.

I can still remember what song was on the radio and how heavy he was on top of me and the way his breath smelled like butterscotch and beer as he slammed his mouth down on mine.

I can still remember everything. Every moment. Every detail. I can still remember how he looked at me when he was done, like I was nothing. Less than nothing.

And when I tried to speak, my parents told me the same thing. That I was nothing compared to him, that his lawyers would annihilate me in court. That I didn't stand a chance of making him pay unless I signed the non-disclosure agreement. Unless I let them take the cash his family threw at us like confetti.

I've spent the last five years feeling like the trash he made me. Feeling like the nothing my parents told me I was. Feeling like the slut Brandon accused me of being.

Ethan is the first one to tell me that it isn't true. That I'm worth more than what his brother did to me, worth more than what his parents paid to make it all go away.

I believed him once and then that belief shattered under the weight of what I didn't know. Of what he didn't tell me. I walked away, not because I didn't love him, but because I loved him too much. Because I knew that if he treated me like his brother had, if he treated me like his parents or my parents had, that I would break forever.

And here we are, weeks later. Both miserable, both in pain, both broken. And still he's choosing me, not just over his brother, but over himself. Over his own well-being, over what he wants and needs.

If I love him, how can I do any less?

The answer is, I can't.

My resolve breaks and with it goes the last ounce of restraint I've got. I reach for him, for Ethan, my arms wrapping around his neck as I twine my hands in his hair and pull his mouth down to mine.

The moment our lips meet it's like all those jagged pieces inside of me suddenly slip back into place. Like all the tears and pain and trauma of the last two weeks just disappear.

"Chloe," he murmurs against my lips. His hands are around my waist, his fingers stroking under my suit jacket and blouse, finding the sensitive skin of my lower back. "What are you doing?"

"It's only been two weeks," I tease him softly, reveling in the feel of his warm breath mingling with mine. "Don't tell me you've forgotten how to do this already?"

"I haven't forgotten anything." He steps closer, walks me backward across the sand until I'm once again trapped between the cold, hard restaurant wall and his hot, unyielding body. But he lifts his mouth from

mine, looks straight into my eyes as he says, “Including the fact that you said you couldn’t be with me. That it hurt you too much.”

I stand on my tiptoes, then wind my arms around his neck and try to pull him in for the kiss I so desperately crave. But Ethan’s got a will of iron and despite the very impressive erection I can feel pressing against my stomach, he’s not budging until I say what he needs to hear.

Most days, I would appreciate his restraint—and his obvious concern for me. But right now, all I want is for him to kiss me, to touch me, to make love to me the way he used to, like I’m the most important thing in his world.

“Yeah, well, it turns out that it hurts way more to be without you than it does to be with you.”

He closes his eyes at that, rests his forehead against mine. We’re pressed together now from head to hip and I can’t help but feel the tremor that runs through him at my words, can’t help but feel the way his big, strong body is shaking against my own.

“Are you sure?” he asks hoarsely, his breath hot and cinnamon scented against my cheek. “You have to be sure, Chloe, because I can’t—”

“I’m sure, baby. I love you. I need you. Please—”

Before I can finish the plea, his mouth crashes down on mine, hot and hard and desperate. So desperate. He bites at my lips, thrusts his tongue into my mouth, licks at my own tongue, my teeth, the roof of my mouth.

He’s claiming me, taking me, using his lips and tongue and teeth to brand me in a way I won’t soon forget. In a way I’ll never forget.

And I let him. More, I beg him for it.

For the pleasure he gives me with each stroke of his tongue and press of his hands.

And for the peace he brings me with the strength of his body and the beauty of his soul. All around us, the wind picks up, whipping the ocean into a frenzy and sending grains of sand skittering on the breeze. It works me up, too, the cool brush of it against my skin only adding to the pleasure and the pain of being touched by Ethan again after what feels like forever.

“We should go home,” he says, without lifting his mouth from mine. “The things I want to do to you can’t be done against a dirty wall on the beach.”

“They’re going to have to be, because I can’t wait that long,” I whisper back. I shove his suit jacket off his shoulders, then tug and yank at his dress shirt until I can run my fingers along his narrow waist and flat stomach.

“Damn it, Chloe,” he growls even as he does the same to my suit, his fingers making quick work of the buttons on my blouse. “We’re in public. Anyone could walk by.”

“Then you’d better be quick,” I tell him, reaching for his belt.

“More like, you’d better be quiet,” he teases, slipping my shirt down my arms. “Because if we do this here, I’m not leaving until you come at least twice.”

“Hey, I can be quiet!” I complain, even as a heady wave of arousal skitters down my spine.

“I’ll believe that when I see it.” Then he’s pushing my bra out of the way and drawing my nipple into his mouth with a suction so strong that I feel it in my knees. With a sob, I reach for him, my fingers tangling in his dress shirt in a futile effort to keep myself from crumbling into a heap at his feet.

“Relax,” he tells me, his lower body pressing me into the wall, holding me upright even as my knees buckle. “I’ve got you, baby. I won’t let you fall.”

“Right. Like relaxing is even an option here.”

I feel him grin against my breast before his tongue darts out and circles my nipple once, twice, then again and again. I whimper despite my promise to myself to stay silent, my body spinning out of control as need rips through me, takes me over.

Above us, lightning streaks across the sky—powerful, primitive, and so, so beautiful. Seconds later, thunder booms and a warm summer rain starts slamming against the sand.

Ethan hunches into the rain as it slides over us, and then he’s licking the drops from my breast, my collarbone, the hollow of my throat. I arch my neck to give him better access, and in doing so press my sex directly against his cock.

We both moan then, and it’s my turn to rip at his shirt, to shove it down his arms and onto the sand below us. I have one moment of concern—it’s a thousand dollar dress shirt, custom-fitted for Ethan by one of the finest tailors in Europe—but then he’s running his tongue along my throat,

sucking at the sensitive spot behind my ear, and any worries I have drown in the passion and the pleasure sweeping through me.

“Ethan, please,” I plead, wrapping my legs around his waist and pressing myself against him again. I need him inside me like I’ve never needed anything in my life, and he’s too busy teasing me—torturing me—to give me what I’m all but begging for.

He laughs then, his mouth skimming back down to my breast even as he rocks against me. It’s not enough, not nearly enough, but I’m too far gone to care. Too far gone to do anything but take whatever he wants to give me.

His mouth is back on my breast and I’m moaning, panting, as he licks and bites and nuzzles at me. I tangle my fingers in his hair, press myself more firmly against his lips as heat spirals through my belly. It feels so good, *he* feels so good, that I can’t imagine how I’ve gone the last two weeks without this. Without him.

I tell him as much as his tongue circles my nipple, and he pauses for a second, presses his face against the softness of my belly. “Never again,” he tells me in a voice choked with emotion. “Promise me, Chloe. Promise me you’ll never again walk away from me like that.”

“Ethan. Oh, God, Ethan, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize,” he grates out, echoing his words from earlier. “Sweet Jesus, don’t ever fucking apologize to me for leaving. Just promise me that you won’t do it again. Promise me that you’ll give me a chance to explain, to work things out—”

His teeth sink into my breast then, not hard enough to hurt but more than hard enough to send pleasure crashing through me. I cry out, clutch at him, and he laughs—a low, rich, dark sound—even as he licks tenderly at the bite, soothing the sharp sting with the rough warmth of his tongue.

“Say it, Chloe,” he urges in between pressing hot kisses against first one of my nipples and then the other. At the same time, he shifts his hand between my thighs and starts stroking at my clit. Not hard enough to get me off, but more than hard enough to make my eyes cross and drive me absolutely crazy.

“Ethan, please,” I choke out, thrusting my hips against the too light pressure. “You’re making me crazy.”

“Good,” he mutters. “Because you’ve been making me crazy from the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

And then he's pulling my nipple into his mouth, sucking hard enough to make me scream even as he lashes his tongue back and forth across the areola, again and again and again.

"Say it, Chloe," he mutters in a voice gone deep and dark and sexy, so sexy. "Say you won't walk out like that again. Say you'll at least talk to me the next time you decide to end us."

"I promise," I choke out, my throat too tight with desire for me to even attempt to sound normal. "I'll talk to you, Ethan. I'll do whatever you want. Just please, please, fuck me!"

He growls deep in his throat, like my words have pushed him over the edge and there's a part of me that expects him to thrust into me right now. No condom, no preparation, no nothing. That's how far gone he is. Then again, the fact that I'm willing to let him shows just how far past sanity I've gone, as well.

Except that's not what he does. Instead of ripping my underwear off and shoving himself inside me, Ethan lifts his head and starts pressing soft kisses to whatever part of my body he can reach. My breasts, my shoulders, my neck, my cheeks, my lips, my forehead. Over and over he kisses me, and in between he mutters soft words of love. So many kisses, so many words that my eyes fill with tears and my body slides right over the edge into my first orgasm in two long, excruciating weeks.

And the thing is, it isn't even sexual. I mean, it is. Of course, it is. Just looking at Ethan is a sexual thing, let alone being held and touched and kissed by him. But it's also so much more than that, so much more than the way Ethan's body is moving against mine. So much more than the way his lips are pressed against my skin, the way his hot breath is caressing my ear.

Because I get it now, as I wrap myself around him here, listening to all the love words and all the promises falling from his lips. There's a desperation in Ethan, a harsh uncertainty that I've never recognized before—and that gets through the shaky barriers I've tried so hard to erect like nothing else could have.

All along, through everything that's happened, I've always believed that I love Ethan more, that I need him more than he'll ever need me. That the way I feel about him is so huge, so monumental, that there's no way he could possibly match it.

But in these moments, on this beach, with the wind crashing around us and the rain lashing at our skin, I begin to understand that our relationship is more equal than I ever could have imagined. Because as much as I need Ethan to breathe, to settle, to *function*, he needs me the exact same way.

I can feel it in the hands clutching at me, pulling at my chignon so that my hair tumbles down around my shoulders, holding me so tightly that I know I'll have bruises in the morning. I can see it in the tenseness of his shoulders, like he's just waiting for the other shoe to drop. And I can hear it in his ragged breathing, in the soft words that skim across my skin like a benediction.

Ethan loves me.

Ethan Frost loves me.

Ethan Frost loves me the same way I love him. Wildly, completely, absolutely.

It's a sobering realization, the knowledge that I hold someone else's happiness so totally in my hands. But it's comforting, too. Soothing. Because I know how I feel about him, know that I would rather cut off a limb than hurt him the way he so obviously has been hurting these last couple of weeks. Knowing that he feels the same way about me, that he'd do anything to keep me safe—keep me whole—is freeing in a way I never could have imagined before this moment.

Pleasure thrums through my body, crashing over me in messy waves not unlike the ones rolling toward the shore at this very moment. I shudder, arch against him, and somehow Ethan must know what's happening to me because the touch of his lips against my breast grows much firmer, as does the stroke of his thumb over my clit.

I ride the orgasm out, body and soul wrapped around Ethan as he pulls every ounce of ecstasy he can from me. When it's over, when I can think and breathe and maybe even stand again, I press my lips against his ear and whisper, "I love you, baby. I love you so much."

I know we have a lot of awful things to work through, know that we have a lot of history between us that can never be undone. Two weeks ago, that history seemed insurmountable, absolute. But two weeks without him in my life, two weeks without seeing him, touching him, holding him, has given me a new perspective on what I can handle.



I'm not saying it's going to be easy. I'm not saying we aren't going to have some bad moments. But are those bad moments worth giving up all the good ones, as well? Are they worth spending the rest of my life like a member of the walking dead?

I don't think so. Not after everything I've gone through these last two weeks. Not when I look into a future filled with emptiness and agony without him.

"I love you," I tell him again, because I can't not tell him. Not when I'm filled to bursting with the feelings ricocheting around inside of me.

Ethan freezes at my words, his whole body turning to stone even as his cock twitches against me. "Chloe. Baby."

His voice is choked, quiet, devastated, and it gets rid of the last of my doubts. A better woman than I might have been able to hold out, but then that woman wouldn't have Ethan and he's worth a little sacrifice, worth a lot of compromise.

Honestly, he's worth everything.

"I love you," he tells me. "I love you so much." And then he's tearing at his fly, ripping his zipper open with a desperation that could be dangerous if he isn't careful. Seconds later, he's doing the same to my pants, throwing them onto the wet sand seconds before sheathing himself in a condom. Then he's lifting me up again, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his waist before pressing slowly, steadily, inexorably inside of me.

It's only been two weeks, yet it feels like forever, and I gasp as he fills me up. Gasp again as he bottoms out and then starts to move gently, carefully, inside of me.

Despite the urgency I can see in his eyes, he starts slowly, giving me time to adjust to his body after going so many days without it. As always, I'm thankful for his care—between the physical sensations swamping me and the emotions washing over me, I'm drowning in sensation.

"You okay, baby?" he asks, pressing open-mouthed kisses against my cheek, my jaw, my lips.

"Yes. God, yes." It's only been minutes since I came and yet the need is already building inside of me again, my body starving for Ethan and the pleasure he brings me with every squeeze of his hand, every press of his

body. I skim my hands over his shoulders, down his heavily muscled back, stroke my fingers over his waist before sliding them lower to cup his ass.

Ethan groans at the contact, gasping as I yank him hard against me, inside me.

The last tenuous grip he has on control shatters and he slams into me again and again and again. I meet him thrust for thrust, my body arching against his as he devours me—hands everywhere, mouth everywhere. On my neck, my shoulders, the sensitive skin of my elbow. He skims his lips across my breasts to toy with my nipples, rubs glancing caresses against my clit before sliding his thumb between my ass cheeks and pressing it slowly, carefully, against my anus.

I gasp, eyes going wide as my body arches instinctively against him. He's never done this to me before and I don't know what to do, how to react. It makes me nervous, makes me squirm against him even as it takes my pleasure to a whole new level.

"Okay?" he murmurs against my mouth, his thumb stroking over a whole slew of nerve endings I never knew I had.

Part of me wants to say no, to tell him it's too intimate, that it's too much. But this is Ethan and with him, there's no such thing as too much. There's only more. More pleasure. More sensation. More intimacy. More and more and more until we're part of each other, until I can't tell where he begins and I leave off.

"Yes," I gasp as my body starts to go into overload at the duel sensations. I'm trembling, sobbing, my nails raking down his back as my body arches against him, desperate for more. Desperate for whatever he's going to give me.

It's almost painful, how acute the sensations are. Painful and overwhelming and terrifying. He's kissing me everywhere, touching me everywhere, and I want to live in this moment forever.

Except it really is starting to hurt, this need I have for him, the pain and pleasure mingling deep inside of me until I don't know where one ends and the other begins. I know only that if we keep going like this, I'm going to go supernova, my body exploding outward in a blinding flash of heat.

"Ethan!" I wail, clinging to him as the sensations build and build and build inside me. The storm is still raging around us, the hot slap of the wind

and rain only adding to the overload of emotion and pleasure that is swamping me, dragging me under.

“I’ve got you, Chloe,” he tells me again, right before he seizes my mouth in a kiss that takes me over completely. “Let go, baby. Just let go.”

He bites down hard on my lip at the same time he twists his thumb deep inside me. The result is a cataclysm of ecstasy sweeping through me, lighting me up from the inside and turning my whole body inside out as Ethan slams me into the most intense orgasm of my life.

“Fuck, Chloe!” he groans as my body goes haywire, vision blurring, breath stuttering, sex clenching rhythmically around him.

And then he’s coming, his face buried against my neck as he empties all that he has, all that he is, so deep inside of me that I know I’ll never, ever be the same again.

## Chapter Ten

When it's over, when my body has stopped wiggling out in twenty-seven different directions and I can almost remember what it feels like to take a full breath, Ethan slides me slowly down his body until my feet meet the hard packed sand.

My legs buckle the moment I try to actually use them for more than holding on to Ethan, and I start to crumble. He catches me, his hands warm and big against my back as he holds me up.

"You okay?" he asks for what feels like the millionth time.

"I'm fine," I tell him with an eye roll and a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "I'm better than fine. I'm really good."

He smiles then, the first real smile I've seen from him today. I can tell, because even in the shadows where we are still lurking, I can see his eyes light up like Times Square.

"Come home with me," he says as he bends down to retrieve my now ruined suit pants.

I stare at them in dismay, wondering what the hell I'm going to do now that the only power suit I have is pretty much irreparably damaged. I should be more upset by this—hard to be a legal intern without a good suit—but I've just had the most amazing orgasm of my life and Ethan is here and he's holding me, smiling at me, *loving* me. The suit seems like more than fair collateral damage.

"Chloe?" he prompts when I don't answer him right away. "Am I pushing too hard?"

He is, absolutely, but then he wouldn't be Ethan if he didn't. And while I don't know if it's a good idea for me to go home with him now, when we still have so many things to work out, saying no seems a little like closing the barn door after the horse. He's already fucked me into incoherence. What else could he possibly do, except more of the same? An outcome I'm nowhere near as opposed to as I should be, by the way.

“That depends,” I tell him, still eyeing my wet, sandy clothes with distaste.

“On what?” His eyes narrow and I can see the CEO in him gearing up for a serious negotiation. There’s wariness in his eyes, and the same leftover remnants of fear and agony that I know are in my own, as well.

“On whether or not going with you will keep me from having to put my clothes back on.”

Ethan laughs then, a low, happy sound that sends joy and heat sizzling along my nerve endings. I can’t believe this.

I just came—twice.

My knees are still so weak that I can barely stand on my own.

My body is deliciously sore and deliciously sated ... and still I want him. Still I can feel myself aching deep inside, missing the feel and the touch and the taste of him against me.

“Come with me,” he whispers in between pressing hot kisses to my temple, “and you’ll never have to wear those clothes again.”

“Sounds good to me.”

He grins as he picks up his own soggy shirt and jacket off the sand. His shirt seems to have sustained the most damage, so he just wraps me up in his suit jacket before re-fastening his pants and belt.

“Come on,” he tells me then, sweeping me into his arms and carrying me across the parking lot to the limo he has waiting at the back of it.

“The limo, huh? To what do I owe this honor?” Ethan and I have been together since the beginning of the summer and I’ve only seen him use the limo once before. And that was when he had people in town from Japan.

“I had a lot of work I wanted to cover today, and the hour I spent in traffic trying to get to the Trifecta meeting seemed like a perfect time to do it. Besides”—he grins ruefully—“I haven’t been able to sleep since you left me. It seemed safer all around to let Michael drive me for a few days.”

That sobers me up, the levity leaving as quickly as it came. “I’m s—”

“I swear to God, Chloe, if you apologize to me one more time for something that is in no way your fault I will not be responsible for my actions.” He’s glaring at me now, his mouth set in a warning scowl that tells me just how serious he is. He never looks at me like that. Or, at least, he never has before.

I slide closer to him as the limo pulls out of its parking spot, run my hand down his jaw. It's just a little bit prickly now, the stubble that has crept up there since this morning making him look sexy and dangerous. Hot.

"I was awful to you. In the parking lot that day. I could have been—"

"You were hurting. You were traumatized and you had every right to be. If you'd screamed at me, or punched me, you would have been well within your rights then, too. Telling me that being with me hurts you—" He shakes his head. "That nearly killed me. But it was no more than I deserved.

"Hurting you is the last thing I ever wanted, Chloe, and it kills me that you're suffering now because of our relationship. I'm the one who needs to apologize, baby, the one who should be groveling at your feet. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so—"

I cut him off with a kiss. Not because his apology isn't important, but because I'm not ready for it. Not here, not now, when this truce between us is still so new, so fragile. When I'm afraid that anything might come along and knock it—knock us—off our axis again.

His arms come around me instantly and then he's pulling me into his lap, my knees falling wide as I straddle him.

Ethan kisses like he does everything, with a single-minded, predatory determination that takes me over. That turns my body liquid and my brain to mush. And when his hands come up to stroke soft, insistent circles around my nipples, it's a miracle I can remember my own name.

Still, as the limo pulls into traffic, I force myself to wrench my mouth from his. He makes an unhappy sound, slides a hand around to the back of my neck and tries to pull me forward again, but I use every ounce of willpower I have to resist.

My determination gets through to Ethan pretty quickly, and he leans back, his hands dropping to the seat on either side of my legs. "What's wrong, baby?" he asks, eyes wary as he waits for me to speak.

"What about dinner?" I ask, because it has only just occurred to me that we left more than two dozen people back at the Marine Room, at a party that Ethan was supposed to be hosting.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, concerned. "I'll have Michael stop and get something. Would you like Greek food? Or Thai? We could—"

"Not for me, you idiot! For everybody else. You just walked out on the celebration dinner for the biggest merger in Frost Industries' history."

“Oh, right. That dinner.” He relaxes immediately. “It’s fine. They won’t miss us.”

“No, they won’t miss me. You, Mr. Frost, they will definitely miss.” I press kisses against his face to punctuate the point.

“There’s good food and plentiful drinks. What else could they want?”

“You, Ethan. They’ll want you.”

“Yeah, well, they can’t have me. Not tonight. Tonight I want to be with you. Only you.”

I melt. I can’t help it, my whole body going soft and gooey at the warmth in his voice and the intensity in his eyes. Though I know it’s a bad move for him not to show up—half the party probably saw Ethan come onto the beach after me, guaranteeing new office gossip in the morning—for right now, I don’t give a damn. Not about work, not about Brandon, not about anything that might take me out of Ethan’s arms.

There are a million problems lurking right below the surface, waiting to drag us under as soon as we acknowledge them. Tonight I want to pretend they don’t exist. Tonight I want it to be just the two of us and the feelings we just can’t get away from.

“That sounds really nice,” I tell him, licking my way down his neck to his still rain-slicked collarbone.

He groans, tilting his head back to give me better access. “It does, doesn’t it?”

I’m too busy kissing him to answer, trailing my lips from his broad shoulders and heavy biceps to his lean neck and well-muscled chest.

I take my time with him, tasting him, touching him, savoring every inch of his beautiful body that I can reach.

He smells like the ocean, tastes like the rain. Dark and sweet and wild, so wild. After the days and weeks I’ve spent without him, I can’t get enough.

I’ll never get enough.

If I’ve learned anything these past couple of weeks, I’ve learned that.

Ethan Frost is my addiction. He’s the itch just below my skin. The fire that skates along my every nerve ending. He’s the craving I just can’t shake.

The knowledge burns deep inside me, turns me on, takes me over until all I can smell or see or feel is him. I don’t want to shake this feeling, don’t want it to go away.

His hand comes up to cup my jaw and I turn my face into his touch, press hot, open-mouthed kisses against his palm. He growls, deep in his throat, but I just shift against him, reveling in the way he responds to me. So openly. So freely.

He's guarded with everyone else in his life. Reserved. Careful. I've watched him for weeks, have seen the way he keeps a distance between himself and everyone else—business associates, friends, staff. Everyone except me.

With me, he's always right here in the moment, his body and mind and soul mine for the taking. It's only fair, since I'm the same way for him and have been practically since the day we met. Laid open. Laid bare.

"Chloe," he whispers, his head moving back and forth against the seat. "I need—"

"I know, love. I know."

I slide off his lap slowly and he groans, his strong, calloused fingers reaching for me in an effort to keep me in place. I twist my hips, do a little shimmy that has me slipping through his hands. And then I'm kneeling in front of him, my long blond hair hiding my face while his suit jacket gapes open to reveal my naked body.

It's a strange dichotomy, to be so covered and yet so revealed at the same time. It turns me on, has my nipples peaking and my breath catching in my throat. I don't know what it is that does it for me, but Ethan notices—of course he notices—and he brings his hand up to tangle in my hair, rubbing the strands roughly over my cheeks, my eyes, my mouth.

I nip at him then, sinking my teeth into his fingertips before pulling his index finger deep into my mouth.

"Fuck, Chloe," he grinds out, free hand clenching against my scalp as I stroke my tongue down and around his finger.

I don't answer him. I'm too busy sucking his finger deep, licking and sucking and stroking it until Ethan is yanking at my hair and ordering me to "Do it!" in a voice made harsh with desire.

I'm nearly as turned on as he is now and I reach up, fumble with his belt and the fastenings on his suit pants. He's thrusting against me, lifting and lowering his hips in a desperate attempt to feel my hand against his cock.

I tease him for a few moments, lightly skimming my fingers over his flat stomach, around his belly button, down the light dusting of hair that



stretches from his navel to his groin.

“Stop playing,” he grounds out, grabbing my hand and pressing it to his dick.

“Stop?” I whisper, slowly pulling my mouth off his long, slick finger. “Baby, I’m just getting started.” I lower my mouth to his hip bone, nuzzle the sharp line of his Y-cut.

Ethan’s breath catches in his throat, his hand falls away from mine. I take advantage of his lapse of attention to take my hand away and he groans. “Chloe, fuck, you’re killing me. I need ... I need ...”

I press my mouth to him then, soft little kisses and long, leisurely licks that have his cock twitching and his hips arching off the seat in an effort to get more.

“Shit, damn, fuck!” Ethan’s hands are in my hair again, pulling, twisting, tugging hard enough to cause little frissons of pain to shoot through my scalp.

It’s the roughest he’s ever been with me and a sign of just how far gone he is at the moment. I love it. Love the little shocks of pain, love even more what they signify. That I’ve managed to drive this gorgeous, disciplined man to the brink of his control.

Usually, it’s the other way around—he’s in control and I’m the recipient of all his hot, sexy attention. I’m the one who’s begging and pleading for more as he drives me completely around the bend.

I don’t know why, but tonight I need it to be the opposite. Maybe it’s because of Brandon, and how powerless I felt when I opened the door to find him on Ethan’s doorstep. Maybe it’s because of the two weeks I spent without Ethan, feeling empty and out of control.

Or maybe it’s just because I have this beautiful, amazing man in my arms, so filled with remorse and regret that he’s willing to let me do anything I want to him.

I want to do a lot, starting with making him lose that indomitable control of his. I want to take him outside of himself, to make him forget—even for a moment—all the strikes we have against us.

With that thought in mind, I shift my hands, slide them under him to cup his ass and hold him in place. And then slowly, so slowly that I can feel every clench of his muscles, every shudder of his strong, powerful body, I take him deep.

He's huge, hot, hard, and I love it. Love the feel of his body trembling against mine, love the sound of his broken breaths as he gasps for air. Love even more the feel of his cock sliding in and out of my mouth.

I relax my throat, take him even deeper as my tongue swirls around him. He tastes like the ocean even here—sweet and salty and storm-tossed—and I can't get enough of him. Can't get enough of the sounds that he makes or the curses that he mutters.

The closer he gets to the edge, the more intense the need that thrums through me, making me hot and wet and desperate for the feel of him inside me. But for that, I'd have to let him go and I'm not ready to do that, not ready to relinquish the pleasure that comes from taking Ethan apart, one jagged piece at a time.

Desperate to give him as much pleasure as he always gives me, I move my fingers behind his balls, stroke the sweet spot there. He stiffens, gasps, calls my name as he frantically tries to pull out of my mouth.

But I don't let him go. I keep him deep, savoring the tangy drop of pre-cum he can't hold back and the response he doesn't even try to hide. He's on the brink now, about to lose control, and I can't wait to drive him over. To watch him as orgasm takes him and he's consumed by the same need, the same addiction, that has sunk its talons so deeply into me.

"Chloe, baby," he gasps out, his fingers stroking along my jaw, my neck. "Stop. Please. I want to be inside you when I come."

I shake my head just a little, then take him deeper, my tongue running up and down his cock in the rhythm he taught me weeks ago. He's thrusting frantically now, low, animalistic sounds coming from deep in his chest and I know—I know—it's only a matter of time until he shatters.

Desperate to send him careening over that edge, I lean back for a second, leave him hanging halfway between heaven and hell.

Sitting back on my heels, I lick my lips, once, twice, following his response as I do. His eyes are dark and dazed, but he watches the move like a parched man watches water. Carefully. Completely.

When I'm sure I have his attention, I stroke a finger over the tip of his cock, gather the drops of pre-cum resting there. Then I bring my finger to my mouth and suck gently, thoroughly.

Ethan makes a tortured sound deep in his throat and I lean forward then, press my breasts to his chest and my lips to his. "I love you," I whisper

against his mouth. “I love you.”

“Chloe—fuck—I love—I love you—so much—baby, please—I love you so—”

He’s all but incoherent with need now and it’s what I want, what I’ve been waiting for. Sinking back down, I run my tongue over his balls and whisper, “Come for me, Ethan. Come now.”

He groans, tries to pull away, but I hold him tight, swallow him down. Then I stroke my tongue along the underside of his cock, dig my nails into the sensitive skin of his hips. When he’s gasping for air, trembling and shaking and calling my name, I hum low in my throat.

The vibrations carry him over the edge and with a curse that is more like a prayer, he comes, emptying himself inside of me with long, pulsing jets that bring me back to myself even as he loses himself.

That ground me even as they smash through the walls I’ve tried so painstakingly to build.

## Chapter Eleven

“Can we talk?”

It’s hours later and we’re curled up in Ethan’s bed after taking a long bath and raiding his refrigerator for the makings of an omelet. The whole thing is kind of ridiculous, now that I think about it. Ethan spent at least ten grand on dinner tonight at the Marine Room and after all that, we still ended up standing in the middle of his kitchen eating a cheese omelet.

Three months ago I would have been horrified at the thought. Then again, three months ago I never would have imagined being here, with Ethan, like this.

“Do we have to?” I ask, rolling over to my stomach and burying my head in my arms. “It’s late. I’m tired.”

“I know. But I want to get this over with.” He leans over me, presses soft kisses across my shoulders and down my spine.

I shiver at the first brush of his lips, then arch up into him before I can stop myself. I know he wants to be serious, but it feels so good to be back here with him that I just want to relish it for a little while. Not forever—I understand he feels we have a lot to work out—but it can wait until tomorrow. Tonight, I just want this to be about us. About him and me and the feelings stretched taut as a circus wire between us.

I already feel like an acrobat on that wire, precariously balanced for the crowd’s amusement without so much as a net to catch me. Is it so bad that I want to spend one night—just one night—before having to worry about the fall?

But a glance at Ethan’s face shows him looking more serious than I’ve ever seen him and I know that putting this off any longer is just torturing the both of us. Maybe if we get it done tonight, quickly, we can start tomorrow with a clean slate. Or at least as clean a slate as we can manage.

“Fine,” I tell him, rolling over and wrapping my arms around his waist with a gusty sigh and a nervous smile. Though I’ve spent the better part of

the last five hours making love to Ethan, it still feels a little strange to be able to touch him again. To be in his arms again. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I figure that’s obvious.”

I shrug carelessly, find myself staring over his shoulder instead of looking him in the eye. Funny, isn’t it, that no matter how there’s five years and a ton of academic success separating me from the scared kid Brandon forced down in the front of his car, I’m still the one who’s terrified of talking about it. I’m still the one punishing herself for being raped.

He catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilts my face down until I have no choice but to meet his eyes. “What’s that shrug for?” he asks me.

“It’s nothing.”

“Chloe, this isn’t going to work if you won’t at least tell me what you’re thinking—”

“I told you what I was thinking. I told you I didn’t want to do this now. You’re the one who’s insisting on it.”

“Because it’s important. Because if we don’t talk about it now, it’s always going to be there, between us. I love you, Chloe. I don’t want anything to come between us again. I thought you’d be able to see that.” He sounds exasperated, like I’m being deliberately obtuse or difficult, and it pushes me right off that high wire I’ve been clinging to with bloody fingertips.

“I do see,” I tell him, scrambling out of bed. I yank the top sheet with me, and wrap it around my nude body. If we really are going to do this, I’m going to do it standing on my own two feet instead of lying in his bed like some kind of concubine. “Believe me, Ethan, I see more clearly than you do.

“How do you think this talk you want to have is going to end up?” I demand.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you think the end game looks like? I’m going to tell you about the rape, you’re going to tell me about your brother and how you didn’t know. I’m going to tell you about how freaked out I am that he’s related to you and that if we make a go of this, he will always be on the periphery of my life in some capacity or another. You’ll reassure me that

that isn't the case ... Do I really need to go on or have I covered everything?"

Ethan's standing now, too, though he is beautifully, gloriously naked. "Is that really how you think this discussion is going to go down?" he demands.

"Isn't it?"

"No. Of course not. It's—" He breaks off when he sees the expression on my face. "Okay, fine. Maybe it will sound something like that."

"Of course it will. That's how discussions like these go. And I don't want to do that. We just got back together." I pause, clutching the sheet more tightly around me as a horrifying thought strikes me. "We are back together, aren't we?"

His face goes from determined to thunderous in a moment. "The fact that you even have to ask that is proof of just how much we have to talk about."

"But why? If we're together, let's just be together for a while. The past doesn't matter. Let's just enjoy what we've got now."

"Enjoy what we've got? You make it sound like this is a temporary thing for you."

I flush at the accusation in his tone, and the small voice inside of me that's whispering that he's right. That I do sound like this is temporary. Even worse, that I believe it is. "I didn't say that, Ethan."

"You didn't have to say it, *Chloe*. Don't worry about the past, don't worry about the future. Just concentrate on the present. Isn't that what you're saying? I mean, who thinks like that? Not people who want to build a future together, that's for sure."

"Because that's the only way we can have a future together!" I shout at him as I lose my tenuous hold on control. "Can't you see that?"

"What I see is that the woman I love is working herself into a frenzy and I don't know why. I'm trying to tell you that I love you, that I want to be with you. That we'll find a way to get through the past together. I don't want to hurt you, baby—"

"But you're going to!" The words are out before I even realize I'm going to say them.

Ethan freezes, his blue eyes darkening to nearly black as the accusation slams through him. And then he's crossing to me, trying to take me in his arms. But I don't want him to touch me now, don't want anything from him as all the pain and damage of the past comes flooding back.

I shove at him, push him away, stumble backward in my urgency to get away. Except my heel catches in the sheets and I go down hard, on the hard maplewood floor.

“Shit.” He’s beside me in an instant, picking me up and gathering me into his arms. Then we’re sitting on the bed, with me on his lap and my head tucked underneath his chin as he rocks me back and forth soothingly.

“I’m sorry,” he says after long minutes have passed. “I’m sorry that I hurt you and I’m sorry that you think I’m going to hurt you again—”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“I think it is. And you have every right to feel that way. To be afraid of me and what’s between us.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Ethan.”

“Chloe—”

“I’m not.” I lean back so he can see my eyes, judge my sincerity. “I swear. It’s not you I’m afraid of. It’s the past.”

His face clouds over and he starts to speak, but I put two fingers on his lips to silence him. “I know they say that the past isn’t supposed to be able to hurt you unless you let it, but that’s bullshit. I mean, think about it. Even people with normal pasts are affected by them, people who have parents or spouses or children die. That hurts them years later, whether they want it to or not.”

Ethan closes his eyes, at that, bows his head, and for a second I’m confused at his reaction—until I remember his father, the special ops military man who died in combat when Ethan was just a child.

“Shit,” I tell him, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him close. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think.” It seems like we’re destined to always pick at each other’s weak spots.

“It’s fine. You just caught me off guard. But I guess that proves your point, doesn’t it?”

It kind of does, but I’m not callous enough to say that. So instead, I concentrate on my own past. On the two-ton elephant in the room that just won’t go away. “My past—the rape—” I force myself to say it. “It was bad. It was really bad, Ethan, for a really long time.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

“That’s the thing, you don’t.” I slide off of his lap, kneel next to him on the carpet. “You can’t. You weren’t there when it happened. You weren’t

there afterward when my parents made me feel like a bargaining chip. Like a—” My voice breaks, but I swallow the emotion down.

Ethan wanted to talk about this, so we’re going to talk about it. Right here, right now. And when this discussion is over, I’m going to lock this shit down deep and I am never, never, going to talk about the rape, or what came after, ever again.

I make myself the promise, hold it tight inside myself as I struggle for the control I need to get through this one last time. “You weren’t there when Brandon spent the next year making my life a living hell. When he called me a whore and talked all his friends into groping me and touching me and trying to fuck me. You weren’t there for any of that.”

Ethan looks sick. “Jesus Christ, Chloe. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry that you had to go through that.”

“But that’s the thing. Your apology doesn’t mean shit to me, Ethan. It doesn’t make what Brandon did any less awful. It doesn’t make my parents any better people. It doesn’t change a goddamned thing.

“And that’s why I don’t want to talk about it. Because when I do, I get angry.” Tears press against the backs of my eyes, but I blink them away. I’ve cried enough over this, cried enough over a monster who doesn’t deserve it. I’m done with tears and I’m done with him.

“I get so goddamned angry. And sad. And confused. And hurt. I get totally and completely fucked up. And I don’t like being like that.

“I spent years of my life like that, just going through the motions. Barely living because I was so caught up in the past that I couldn’t see the present. I don’t want to live like that anymore, Ethan. I don’t want to be that girl for one more day. For one more second.

“Because when I’m her, I’m ruined.”

“You’re not—”

“I am. And if you don’t believe me, all you have to do is see how I was after your bro—after Brandon—showed up here. It—it wasn’t a good two weeks, okay?”

Ethan’s face crumples then. His shoulders hunch and his whole body sags. For the first time since I’ve known him, he looks as ruined as I feel. “Chloe. Chloe, I’m—”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry!” I throw his words back at him, albeit louder and more shrilly than he ever said them to me. “It’s not your fault. None of



this is your fault any more than it's mine and I don't want your fucking apology. Got it?"

He looks like he wants to argue, but in the end he just shoves his hands through his hair, and nods slowly. "Yeah."

"I love you, Ethan. More than I ever thought I'd be able to love anyone."

"I love you, too, Chloe."

"I know you do. Which is why I'm doing this. There's no one else on this earth I would rip myself open like this for, not once but twice. I want to be with you. I want a real chance to make things work. But you need to understand that I can't do that if the past is constantly there between us. I can't do that if I'm constantly thinking about Brandon or my family or how many pieces inside me just don't fit together right.

"I've survived this long because I locked the past up deep inside of me. I don't think about it, I don't bring it out and poke at it when I need something to do. I don't acknowledge it at all.

"And before you say anything, I know that's not healthy. More than one shrink has told me that repression isn't acceptance. But you know what, I can't accept this. I will never accept it. And I can guarantee that if I dwell on it, if I let myself really understand what it means that Brandon is your brother, and that the woman who paid my parents all that money to get him out of trouble is your mother, then we will never be together. Never."

Ethan blanches, looks sicker than I've ever seen him. "Chloe, that's not—There's something—"

"Stop!" I shout it at him then. "Just stop. I've never been one to give ultimatums, Ethan, and I know you've never been one to follow them. But I can't see this going any other way. If you want to be with me—"

"I do."

"Then be with me. With me, how I am now, not how I used to be. I don't want to talk about the rape. I don't want to talk about Brandon. I don't want to meet your family. I can't handle that. Not now. Maybe not ever, but certainly, not right now.

"And I'm sorry that I'm so messed up. I'm sorry that I have all this baggage, and that if you take me on that it becomes your baggage, too. And I'm sorry that one day I might wake up and not be able to take any of this for one second longer. And that I will never be normal. You deserve normal.

“But I love you. I love you, Ethan, and I want to try to make it work. Because life without you ... it isn’t good. It isn’t—”

I don’t finish because Ethan’s yanking me against him then, burying his hands in my hair and devouring my mouth with his own.

I can taste the salty remnants of tears I didn’t know he was shedding, can hear the ragged exhale of a breath I didn’t know he was holding. Fine tremors wrack his long, lean surfer’s body and his arms are locked around me like he’s never, never going to let me go.

They ground me as nothing else could have, give me tangible proof that this thing between us is as important to him as it is to me.

Brandon or no Brandon, I can’t ask for more than that.

He kisses me and kisses me and kisses me and it feels so good, so right. Like the specter of the past has been banished forever. That’s all I want, all I can ever ask for.

I wrap my arms around him then, kiss him back with every ounce of love and need and strength I have inside of me. And pray that it’s enough.

“I love you,” he tells me in between long, lingering kisses. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I never doubted that, Chloe. If I had, I would have gone insane.”

He turns us around and then somehow we’re back on the bed. Only this time I’m lying facedown across it and Ethan is stretched out on top of me, his mouth at my neck and his hands ... his hands are everywhere else.

“It’s my turn to talk,” he tells me, yanking the sheet from between us. He’s licking my spine now, long, lazy forays of his tongue that send splinters of heat racing through me.

“I’m sorry that that happened to you,” he tells me in between wet, open-mouthed kisses and gentle, sharp-toothed nibbles across my back.

“I told you—”

“No.” He puts one calloused hand over my mouth. “You don’t get to contribute right now. This is my turn.”

He takes his hand away, but the warning look in his eyes remains. He’s serious about this. I had my chance to speak, now he wants his. I press my lips together, letting the protest die away. After everything I said to him, it’s only fair that he gets a shot, too.

“I’m allowed to be sorry that the woman I love has been through hell. I’m allowed to be fucking furious that my brother is the one who hurt you. And I’m damn sure allowed to want to make things better for you. Not because you need me—because you don’t. You’re the strongest woman I know, Chloe, and you would be just fine without me.”

I’m not so sure he’s right. I was fine before I knew him. But now? Now that I’ve been held and cared for and loved by Ethan? I don’t know that I’ll ever be okay without him again. On one level, the thought terrifies me. But on another, more primitive level? It soothes me, makes me feel safe. Because Ethan is here and he’s mine and when I do fall, when I do mess up, he’ll be here to catch me—just like I’ll catch him.

“But I do need you,” he continues, turning me over so that we’re face-to-face. “More than I’ve ever needed anyone in my life. I tried to let you go when you asked, but here we are, right back where we started. It’s too late now—you had your chance before. Now—now, I don’t think I could let you go if I tried.

“You’re in my blood. You’re in my heart, in my brain, in the very fabric of my soul. You’re an addiction, one I’ll never get enough of. I love you, Chloe Girard. I love you more than you could ever possibly imagine.

“And if you don’t want to talk about the past, then we won’t talk about it. At least not right now, when everything is still so raw. But you need to understand something—I have some ultimatums of my own and they all revolve around making sure that you’re okay. That you’re as healthy and happy and whole as you possibly can be.

“I respect you, as a woman and as a human being. I respect your right to handle things your own way and in your own time. It’s your body and it’s your life.

“But you also need to know that you’re mine now and I take care of what’s mine. Which means I’m not going to stand by and watch you hurting over something that I can fix. I’m not going to let you beat yourself up over the very things that you should be proudest of. And no one, no one, is going to hurt you and get away with it. Not now. Not ever again.

“You’re mine, Chloe, and you need to know that I will do whatever I have to, to keep you safe.”

His words arrow straight through me, past the hard shell of my defenses and the slightly softer layers of my hurt and resistance. They arrow straight

to the soft and secret core of me, the small, defenseless part that has always wanted someone to lean on. Someone to trust. Someone to shoulder the burden with me.

And though on the surface, the brother of the man who raped me isn't a wise choice for that role, looking into Ethan's eyes, seeing the love and devotion reflected there, I know I'll never find anyone better.

"I get it," I tell him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him down for a kiss.

"Do you?"

"Absolutely. We're both completely neurotic. It's a good thing we found each other because no one else would have us."

He does laugh then. "You're probably right. Good thing I plan on keeping you."

"Yeah. It's a good thing."

He reaches over to the bedside drawer and pulls something out even as he captures my mouth in a kiss that leaves me breathless and horny and hopeful all at the same time.

My head is still spinning from it when I feel something cool brush against my stomach. I recognize it instantly, and look down just in time to watch Ethan refasten the belly chain around my waist.

He looks at the chain in obvious satisfaction before scooting down to press kisses along its length. "Don't take it off again."

There's something about the tone of his voice that sends frissons of arousal down my spine. "Ethan—"

"Don't. Take. It. Off. Again," he repeats, and this time there's no mistaking the order in the low gravel of his voice.

There's a part of me that thinks I should argue on general principle—there's no mistaking the fact that he's giving me an order. And yet, there doesn't seem to be a point.

He wants me to wear the chain. I want to wear the chain. His sexy growl turns me on like few things ever have. That's more than good enough for now. Everything else can take care of itself.

## Chapter Twelve

“What is *that*?” I demand, staring at the huge box Ethan is carting into my apartment the following Saturday morning. He’s here early because we’re supposed to be going to the VA hospital today to visit some of the soldiers, and then on to a museum or two at Balboa Park. I thought we’d leave right after he got here, but by the look of that box, now I’m not so sure.

“It’s a Vitamix,” he says with a grin, all blinding white teeth and innocent blue eyes. “I noticed when I was here the other day that yours had gone MIA.”

“MIA. I suppose that’s one way to put it,” Tori calls from her spot on the couch.

“Stop!” I hiss at her behind Ethan’s back, but he turns at the last minute and catches me glaring at her with narrowed eyes.

“Am I missing something?” he asks, eyebrows arched.

“Just about four hundred dollars, I’d say.” Tori smirks. “Are those things insurable?”

“Umm, probably. Why?”

“No reason,” I tell him, pressing a kiss to his cheek as he plops the box down on the counter, then does the same with the three Whole Foods bags he has dangling from his wrists. “Tori’s just super clumsy, so she has an obsession with insuring everything.”

My roommate chokes on her orange juice. “Yeah, that’s what did the Vitamix in. My clumsiness. Not, say, your prowess with a hammer.”

Ethan glances at me in amusement. “Do I even want to know what happened to that poor blender?”

I think about it for a second, then shake my head. “No, probably not.”

“That’s what I figured.”

He starts unpacking the groceries, and it’s my turn to be amused as he piles fruit, vegetables and a couple of nice cheeses on the counter.

“Tori and I are capable of feeding ourselves, you know.”

“Hey, speak for yourself.” Tori wanders in and grabs an apple from one of the bags. “If a handsome man wants to bring me food, I am more than happy to let him. Oh, and, Ethan, for future reference, Gala apples are my favorite.”

He grins at her. “I’ll remember that.”

“Please do.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not going to be buying us any more groceries, Tori.”

“Why not? It makes him feel good and it saves us the trouble of going to the store and having to cart a bunch of bags up to the apartment. I say it’s a win-win situation for everyone.”

“You would.”

“So, who wants a smoothie?” Ethan asks, unpacking the new blender and rinsing it out in the sink as Tori wanders back to her spot on the couch.

“Are we seriously going to do this again?” I ask him, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing kisses between his shoulder blades.

“Do what?” he asks innocently, as if he doesn’t know.

“Fight about this totally extravagant gift that you insist on giving me a second time.”

“Tori, please explain to your roommate that a blender is not an extravagant gift. It’s actually quite practical—a good breakfast is very important.”

“I can have a good breakfast without making it in a very extravagant, four hundred dollar blender!” I tell him, completely exasperated.

“Again. Not extravagant, Chloe. A *car* is an extravagant gift. A trip to *Paris* is an extravagant gift. A—”

“Forty thousand dollar platinum and diamond belly chain from Tiffany’s is an extravagant gift,” Tori continues for him.

“But not a blender, Chloe. Geez, you need to chill out.” But the blender is now the least of my worries. “Forty thousand dollars?” I squawk, my hands going to the jewelry I haven’t taken off since the night we had our talk. “My belly chain cost forty thousand dollars?”

Ethan shoots my roommate a dirty look. “Thanks a lot, Tori.”

She shrugs, then takes a bite of her apple. “At least she’s not bitching about the blender anymore. Perspective, man. Perspective.”

“What the hell, Ethan? Are you kidding me with this?”

“I don’t see what the big deal is—”

“Forty thousand dollars is the big deal. My car didn’t cost that much.”

“Believe me, I am well aware of that fact.” His look says he’s far from being impressed by the knowledge.

“Hey! My car is fine.”

“I didn’t say otherwise.” He pulls a large basket of strawberries out of one of the bags and starts washing them carefully.

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your face.” I reach over and snatch a strawberry, biting it all the way down to the stem. “And don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, yeah? What am I supposedly doing?” He’s cleaning a pineapple now, slicing off the thick, spiky skin before cutting the fruit into cubes.

“Picking on my car to distract me from the fact that the cost of this chain is completely insane.”

“Give the guy a break,” Tori tells me from behind the fashion magazine her head has been stuck in for most of the last half an hour. “You had to know it was expensive. It came in a Tiffany’s box, for God’s sake. You can barely get a piece of glass there for under a thousand dollars, let alone what has to be easily five carats in diamonds.”

“Eight,” Ethan interjects as he chops up a couple of bananas and dumps them in the blender.

“Nice. Eight carats definitely makes a statement.”

“What statement?” I demand, my voice still much too shrill. “What statement could eight carats possibly make? Besides that the person who bought it has way too much money?”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure it says taken,” Tori tells me with an eye roll. “Not to mention *I-have-more-money-than-you-and-if-you-touch-her-I’ll-wipe-you-off-the-face-of-the-earth.*”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Actually, that’s exactly the vibe I was going for.” Ethan’s grinning widely, blue eyes sparkling and his cheeks creasing in that way they do when he’s deeply amused by something. “Nice job articulating it, Tori.”

“Yes, well, I am fluent in caveman speak. Which is good for you—think of how many misunderstandings it saves.”

I watch in openmouthed shock as Ethan nods like she’s making sense instead of just babbling nonsense. “Another good point.”

“I’m just full of them today.” She takes another bite of her apple.

“Not to break up the mutual admiration society you two have going on right now, but less than a week ago weren’t you the one telling me how much you had always hated Ethan?”

“I was. But that was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before he brought me apples, obviously.”

“Really? That’s your price? Apples?”

Tori shrugs. “I never said I wasn’t cheap.”

She says it like it’s a joke, but the words hang there between us anyway. Though Tori never talks about her family except in very superficial terms, I’ve gleaned enough in the last three years to know she means what she just said more than she’ll ever let on—which makes me crazy because there’s a lot more to my best friend than she lets people see. A lot more to her than she’s willing to acknowledge even to herself.

I want to say something to her about it, but I know from bitter experience that she won’t take kindly to me “not being able to take a joke.” So I bite my lip to force myself not to say anything, and risk a quick glance at Ethan. He’s looking between Tori and me speculatively and I know that he’s picked up on the undercurrent of angst that she’s throwing out. Or maybe he’s just picking up on how similar the two of us are on the inside. Our outsides don’t match, but our souls have recognized each other from the very beginning.

Ethan quirks a brow at me, but I just shake my head. Now’s not the time to get into it—Tori would never forgive me if I blindsided her in front of him. Hell, she probably wouldn’t forgive me if I sat down with her on my own and tried to have a heart-to-heart. But adding Ethan, or anyone else, in the mix is a surefire recipe for disaster.

I try to let it go, but I must look more upset than I think because suddenly Ethan’s hands are around my waist, tugging at the belly chain to ground me even as his fingers rub soothing circles into the sensitive skin of my lower back.

It works. His touch settles me like nothing else ever has. But it also reminds me of what started this whole conversation to begin with. “Ethan, you can’t give me a forty thousand dollar piece of jewelry,” I tell him, both exasperated and overwhelmed.

“Too late. I already did.”



“Yes, but—”

“Chloe.” He pulls me toward him, drops a slow, lingering kiss on my mouth. “Why are we arguing here?”

“We’re arguing because of the exorbitant amount of money you spent on my belly chain.”

“Yes, but, why? It’s already a done deal—I’ve already bought it, you’re already wearing it. And as we’ve already established, you’re not taking it off, so it seems pointless to argue. Besides—and I don’t normally bring this up because I know how you feel about it, but—I’ve got money, Chloe. Forty grand isn’t going to put me in the poorhouse.” He leans over and whispers the rest in my ear. “And even if it did, it would be absolutely worth it just for the chance to see you stretched across my bed wearing nothing but this.”

He kisses me then, soft and sweet and perfect. I melt before I can stop myself, not forgetting about my angst over the belly chain but tabling it because I can tell from the determined set of Ethan’s jaw that this is one fight I’m not going to win. And though my insecurities are shouting at me not to take the stupid chain, I know that the meaning my past is trying to attach to it—the idea that Ethan is buying and paying for me—is in my head, not reality.

He might be Brandon’s brother, but he’s nothing like him. Ethan does these things for me because he wants to, not because he expects something in return. I know that, can feel it every time he holds me, every time his lips brush over my hair, my skin, the spot directly over my heart.

Ethan nibbles at my lower lip and my arms go around his neck in an effort to pull him closer. Then his tongue is licking over my lips, sweeping inside to tangle with my own, and—

“Ugh, God! Get a room! Or, better yet, your room is like fifteen feet in that direction!” Tori squawks, pointing down the hallway. “Find it!”

“Good idea.” I start to pull Ethan toward my bedroom. “You might want to turn some music on in here. Or an action movie. You know, because—”

One of the throw pillows off the sofa hits me square in the back. “Nobody likes a show-off, Chloe!”

“Oh, I don’t know. Ethan has never—”

A loud, authoritative knock sounds at the door, interrupting my teasing.

“You expecting anyone?” I ask Tori as I switch direction and head for the door.

“No.”

That’s all Ethan needs to hear before he’s stepping in front of me. “Let me get it.”

“Why?” I try to bump him aside with my hip, but he’s not budging. “It’s probably just one of the neighbors stopping by to talk to Tori. Happens all the time.”

“Well, then they can meet me and then talk to Tori. Surely they’re curious about your new boyfriend.”

“I just moved in. They’re not curious about any—”

“What he actually means is he’s such a hot commodity that it could be the press on the other side of the door, in which case, he doesn’t want you to have to deal with it.”

Ethan shoots Tori an approving look. “Exactly.”

“Come on, Chloe.” She pats the spot next to her on the couch as the knock sounds again. “Let’s watch the show.”

I roll my eyes but I cross to her as Ethan unchains the door. “How exactly are you so good at knowing what he’s thinking?” I demand.

“I told you, caveman speak.”

Ethan chooses that moment to open the door and before I can even see who it is, a fist flashes over the threshold and nails my boyfriend right in the nose.

“Huh,” Tori says right before she takes another bite of her apple. “Even for one fluent in caveman speak, I didn’t see that coming.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“What the hell!” Ethan staggers under the force of the punch, but he doesn’t go down. Instead, he grabs the guy on the other side of the door and drags him inside by the neck, shoving his head down and bending him in half as he does.

I brace myself for it to be Brandon here, at my apartment—who else would just punch Ethan like that—but in the end I couldn’t be more wrong. Because it’s not his brother in the middle of our foyer, bent over at the waist and swearing like a sailor.

It’s mine.

“Miles!” I demand, leaping off the couch. “What are you doing here? Let him go, Ethan!”

“He’s the one who sucker punched me.” Ethan wipes a trickle of blood away from his nose. “How am I the one getting yelled at?”

“Believe me, I’ll yell at him, too. After I figure out what he’s doing here. But let him go, please.”

He releases my brother reluctantly, but I can tell by the way he’s holding his body that he’s ready for another attack. I know Miles, though—he’s an inventor not a fighter and unless things have changed drastically in the three years since I came to San Diego for school, that punch was pretty much all he has in him. I’m shocked my absentminded, nerdy brother had even that much, to be honest.

“Miles! What were you thinking—”

To my surprise and horror, he launches himself at Ethan a second time. And this time, Ethan shoves back, sending my brother sprawling onto the floor forcefully enough that he cracks his head on the hardwood.

“Stop it!” I’m yelling now as I get between the two of them. “Come on, Miles, please. What is wrong with you?”

“Wrong with me?” Miles climbs back to his feet. “I’m trying to defend you against this bastard. Do you even know who he is?”

“He’s my boyfriend. Of course I know who he is.”

“No! That’s why I’ve been trying to call you for the last three weeks! If you’d return my damn phone calls every once in a while, I wouldn’t have had to fly all the way out here to talk to you. Ethan Frost is Brandon Jacobs’s—”

“Brother. Yes, I know who he is.”

It’s Miles’s turn to gape. “You knew?” I don’t think he could look more shocked if I pulled out a gun and shot someone. “And you’re with him anyway?” A moment of silence, then, “Are you crazy? Or is this just another attempt to punish yourself?”

My first instinct is to jump down his throat, to tell him to mind his own business. But even though it’s been three years since I last saw him, he came out here to warn me because he was worried about me. Though I don’t want it to, that counts for something in the running tally I’m keeping in my head between my family and me.

Before I can say anything, though, Ethan jumps in. “Chloe, are you going to introduce me or am I just supposed to guess who this clown is?” His voice is low and his eyes are narrowed dangerously. That’s when it hits me that he’s flying blind here. He has no idea who Miles is, other than the guy who punched him in the face and who it appears is trying to break us up. No wonder he looks murderous.

“I’m sorry, Ethan. This is Miles Pierce. My brother.”

“Don’t apologize to this guy, Chloe. He’s scum.”

“Stop it, Miles!”

“What do you want me to say, Chloe? That I’m happy to find you here, with him? After everything his family has put you through?”

“His family,” I say angrily. “Not him.”

“Does it really matter?” my brother sneers. “When they’re that rich, they’re all the same.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Ethan demands quietly. “You, of all people, don’t get to come in here and get Chloe all upset.”

“I’m the one getting Chloe upset?”

Ethan steps in front of me, arms crossed over his chest and an implacable look that I’ve only ever seen on his face during business meetings. “That’s what it looks like to me.”

“Screw you, Frost. What are you doing fucking around with my sister anyway? She’s definitely not your usual type.”

His voice implies that I’m not hot enough—not exactly a shock considering my own thoughts on the matter—but for the first time, Ethan loses it. He puts a hand on my brother’s shoulder and squeezes hard enough to have Miles wincing. “This is Chloe’s apartment and you’re Chloe’s brother, so I’m not going to tell you to leave. But you need to watch what you say or when you finally do leave, it’s going to be in pieces.”

“God, you really are a barbarian, aren’t you? It must be nice to have so much money that nobody gives a shit how you act.”

“And here I was just thinking the same about you. All money, no conscience. Why the hell else would you be coming in here and trying to kick your sister while she’s down?” Ethan’s face is totally deadpan, but his barb slams home.

Miles blanches, stutters over his tongue and his feet, even if he is standing still.

“All right, that’s it!” I tell them. “Miles, you need to settle down—”

“I need to settle down? You’re the one sleeping with the enemy. After everything his brother did to you, after everything his parents did, why would you hook up with him? If you needed money that badly, you know you could have come to me. I’ve wanted to help—”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Ethan growls. His jaw is working at the implication, his hands clenching into fists and I know he wants to lash out. Hell, he has every right to ... After everything my brother has said and done in the last five minutes I pretty much figure it’s a miracle that he’s still able to stand, let alone talk. Ethan wouldn’t take this from anyone else and I know the only thing keeping my brother in one piece right now is the fact that Ethan doesn’t want to upset me any more.

But it’s a tenuous protection, one that I can see is wearing thin. Especially when Ethan seems to think that Miles is ignoring his warning. “Seriously, Chloe. Getting that internship isn’t worth this. Law school—”

I see the moment Ethan snaps. He steps forward, reaches for my brother again, but before he can so much as grab on to him, Tori’s voice rings through the apartment. “Get out!”

All three of us turn to stare at her incredulously. Her face is white with fury, and she’s pushed herself off the couch. The green hair and halter top

she's wearing should ruin the intimidation factor, but she's shaking with so much suppressed fury that she makes quite an impact. "Get the hell out!"

"Tori," I say, appreciating the support but wanting desperately to diffuse the situation. "He's just—"

"Calling you a whore," she finishes flatly. "He's standing in the middle of our apartment and calling you a whore. I won't have it."

"That's not what he meant—"

"Oh, I don't know. Your brother's a smart guy," Ethan tells me. "I think he knows exactly what he's saying."

"Are you kidding me?" Miles looks at me, completely exasperated. "I'm the bad guy here? He's the one sleeping with an intern, the one whose family bought off a rape victim—"

"And you're the one who sold out his baby sister for start-up capital, so excuse me if it disgusts me to watch you try to take the moral high ground here." Ethan is all but vibrating with rage at this point. From the moment he found out about my family forcing me to take money for my silence, it's been eating away at him. Now that my brother is here, making a total ass of himself, is it any wonder Ethan is more than ready to take him apart?

"Chloe." Tori whispers my name, and I turn to see her staring at me with wide and stricken eyes.

Shit. I never told her about the rape, never told her anything but the most basic stuff about my past. I wanted to reinvent myself when I got to San Diego and that included leaving all of this stuff back in Boston, where it belonged. Now it's out in the open and she's looking at me like I'm a victim, like I'm hurt and defenseless and weak.

It's that knowledge that sends me over the edge. I've dealt with everything else—learning about Ethan's connection to Brandon, finding my way back to him after I found out, my brother acting like an absolute bastard—but knowing that my secret will never be a secret again just about brings me to my knees. Because this is my life, these are the choices that I've made. I've already had my ability to choose taken away from me twice over very important things. I'll be damned if I stand by and let it happen again.

"That's it. I'm done," I tell them, walking over to the door and sliding my shoes on. "Come on, Ethan. I'll walk you to your car."

He just looks at me, brow cocked in silent inquiry.

“Obviously, I’m going to have to deal with my idiot of a brother. And since he can’t be civil, it looks like I’m going to have to do it alone.”

For a moment, I think Ethan is going to argue. Leaving me to face anything alone—unpleasant or otherwise— isn’t his typical modus operandi. But he must read something in my face because in the end, he just nods.

We don’t speak until we’re in the elevator, and then Ethan says, “I’ve got to be honest. I’m having a hard time with this one, Chloe. Leaving you with him isn’t easy for me.”

“I know.” I lean into him, rest my head on his chest. “And I appreciate you letting me handle it.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to look so grim. Miles won’t hurt me.”

“Seeing as how he gave me a bloody nose with that sucker punch of his, you’ll excuse me if I don’t have your same confidence in the matter.”

“Is your nose okay?” I ask, poking at it a little. “It doesn’t look swollen or anything.”

Ethan snorts. “That’s because you’re used to seeing it messed up from the fight with Brandon. You forget what it looks like when I haven’t been punched in the face.”

“That’s a good point,” I tell him, stretching up and pressing a soft kiss to his poor nose—which isn’t swollen but is definitely starting to bruise—before we exit the elevator.

“I’m full of good points.” He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into his side as we walk through the courtyard to the street where he parked his car. “Including the fact that Miles seems pretty volatile. I know you think he wants to help you—and maybe he does—but he’s a loose cannon. He doesn’t have control of his temper.”

“That’s just because you were there. He feels guilty because of the money my parents took and how they used it to finance his inventions.”

“He should feel guilty.”

“It isn’t his fault my father’s a con man who always has his eye on the next game. Or that my mother’s so weak that she’ll do whatever her husband tells her to.”

“Maybe not. But he could have gotten a job at a reputable corporation that would help protect his patents instead of robbing him blind. He didn’t have to let his parents use blood money to make his way in the world.” He’s

talking through gritted teeth, his voice low and deep and vicious. Looking into his blue eyes and the way they're heated from within, I can't help thinking that it's a miracle he didn't do more damage to Miles once he found out who he was. He looks at least as angry as he did that morning two and a half weeks ago when he was talking to Brandon in his driveway.

All I can say is that between his brother and mine, it should be one hell of a family reunion.

"Miles isn't like you," I say after giving Ethan a minute to reassert his iron control on himself. "He isn't strong enough to forge his own path. He's way too locked inside his own head, way too caught up in the ideas he has, to worry about anything as practical as running a company or buying groceries. Besides, my parents didn't give him a choice. They just did it—"

"Don't make excuses for him." Ethan pulls me in for a quick, hard kiss, one that has my head spinning and my heart pumping before he finally pulls away. "He's weak, Chloe. And that weakness makes him dangerous. You need to be careful."

"Miles would never hurt me. He's my brother."

He just looks at me for a minute. Then, "I used to say the same thing about Brandon."

There's nothing I can say to that, so I don't even try.

"I mean it, Chloe. I know he's your brother and I know you love him. But I don't trust him—and neither should you." He gives me another kiss, before clicking the locks on his car—the BMW this time—and opening the door. "Call me later, after he's gone. Let me know how it goes."

"It's going to go fine."

Ethan nods.

"You don't look like you believe me."

"I believe that you think it's going to go fine." One more kiss and then he's climbing in his car. "Promise you'll call me."

"I promise."

I step back, prepare to watch Ethan drive away. But he just points toward the elevator and waits. I roll my eyes, but he just shrugs and continues to wait for me to walk back to the elevator. It isn't until the elevator doors are closing and he knows that I'm safe that I see him start to back his car up.

By the time I get back to Tori's condo, I've replayed my conversations with both Miles and Ethan in my head and I'm pissed all over again. My



brother acted like a maniac—hitting first and talking later—is there any wonder Ethan thinks he’s dangerous?

I open the front door prepared to let Miles have it, but Tori already is. She’s about six inches shorter than him and a million times more colorful, but she’s going toe-to-toe with him anyway, shouting at him about what a total douche he is and why he should have more faith in my judgment.

Neither seems to even notice that I’ve come back.

I slam the door hard, watch as Miles jumps guiltily. Good. He should be feeling guilty after the crap he pulled.

“What were you thinking?” I demand, crossing the room to him.

“He wasn’t thinking!”

“I was thinking that my sister would want to know that she was dating a total sociopath.”

“Just because his brother is one doesn’t mean he is, Miles.”

“Yeah, well, as far as I could tell five years ago, the whole family had serious issues. What makes you think big brother is the only one to escape them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because I know him? And maybe because Mom and Dad have some pretty pathological behaviors, too, and somehow we managed to turn out all right.”

My brother snorts. “Yeah. We’re both the picture of mental health.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Tori grabbing her purse and slipping out the door. There are so many reasons she’s my best friend, and the fact that she’s choosing to leave *her* condo when sticking around would help her answer a lot of her questions, is just one of them.

“I’m pretty much socially paralyzed and you—you’re masochistic enough to think you’ve fallen in love with your rapist’s brother. You have to admit, Chloe, a shrink would have a field day with this one.”

“Well, then, I guess it’s a good thing I’m not going to one.”

I cross to the kitchen, start putting away the groceries that Ethan brought. I can’t believe it was only half an hour ago that the whole day stretched out so beautifully in front of me. I mean, sure, Ethan and I are still feeling our way with each other after those awful two weeks apart, but we’re both trying.

And we were getting somewhere, too, until Miles decided to show up and screw everything up.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?” I ask, pouring myself one from the pot I had made right before Ethan got here.

“I would love a cup.”

“Okay.” I fill one for him, as well, then grab a couple of bagels and slide them in the toaster.

“You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“I’m hungry. I figure you probably are, too.”

“I am. I took the red-eye in, came straight from the airport.”

I nod as I pop the bagels out of the toaster and spread cream cheese on them. “Why are you really here?”

“I told you. I’m here because you wouldn’t answer my phone calls.” He runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “I’ve been trying for weeks to get ahold of you, ever since I got the Google alert that said you were one of Frost Industries’ new interns. You never returned my calls or my texts or my emails. What was I supposed to do?”

“Figure out that I didn’t want to talk to you, maybe?”

“Believe me, I figured that out. But you used to at least return my calls.” He slumps down into one of the chairs in the breakfast nook, looking utterly defeated. “How did things go so wrong, Chloe? We used to be so close.”

*That was before you made a career for yourself out of the ashes of my suffering.* It’s what I want to say. What I’m so close to saying, but it sounds ridiculous. Totally dramatic. Besides, I’ve never blamed him. Not really. He was as much a pawn in the whole disaster as I was. Or at least, that’s what I’ve always told myself. I always thought I believed it, too. Right up until this moment.

“Can we talk about something else for a while?” I ask him, taking a bite of my bagel and pretending it doesn’t taste like cardboard in my mouth.

At first it looks like Miles is going to argue—he probably doesn’t want to waste one minute more than necessary away from his lab—but in the end he just nods. “So, tell me about school. How’s it going?”

As far as topics go, it’s a pretty generic one. And a pretty innocuous one, too. Which is why I do exactly as he asks and tell him all about my junior year, which I just finished at UCSD. Miles asks a bunch of questions, laughs at the funny stories I tell, and even reciprocates with a few stories of

his own from his lab back home. I work hard at not thinking about what money built that lab and I almost succeed.

But small talk only gets us so far and eventually he steers the conversation back around to Ethan.

“He’s not like us, Chloe. People with that much money don’t think the same way we do.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m pretty sure you have a lot of money these days, too.”

“A few million is a far cry from Frost Industries. Not to mention the kind of family wealth he comes from.”

“That’s his stepfather’s money. Ethan’s dad was a soldier. You know that.”

“Everybody knows that. Congressional Medal of Honor winner. Killed in battle. War hero. That kind of notoriety comes with its own issues. Besides, he obviously aligns himself with his mother’s new family. Even I’ve seen pictures of the two of them at various New York and Washington social functions.”

“So he loves his mother. So what?” I try to act nonchalant, but I can tell Miles sees through me. Ethan’s mother—Brandon’s mother—was horrible to me after the rape. Utterly despicable. And yes, when I think about that fact it makes me wonder how things are ever going to work out between Ethan and me. That’s why I made such a point of making sure he knows that I’m not interested in talking about the past. At all. That it’s a sticking point in our relationship.

I can love Ethan for the wonderful man he is, can accept that he had nothing to do with what happened to me when I was a freshman in high school. But I can’t deal with all the reminders of the rape that his family brings with them. So, that’s how things have to be. Our relationship has to stay firmly grounded in the present.

“So she’s a psychotic bitch who would throw you into traffic if she found even half a chance.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not planning on giving her that chance.”

Miles smiles sadly. “That’s what they all say.”

“I know you don’t trust Ethan, but I do. He won’t let anything happen to me.”

“Are you kidding me with this? He’s with you now, but what happens when his family needs him? His mother, or his baby brother? Don’t think he

won't go running the first opportunity he gets.”

“He says he's done with Brandon. That he wants to kill him. Ethan doesn't want anything to do with that bastard.”

Miles tilts his head back and forth in a maybe, maybe not motion. “You think he feels the same way about his mother?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“It does matter. We're talking really rich, really powerful people here, Chloe. Nothing is quite what it seems in their boardrooms and their politics and their lives. And you are kidding yourself if you think Ethan Frost won't sell you out the first time his family needs him to.”

“That's not true.”

“It is. Oh, he may be in love with you. He may even think he can stand up to his family for you—”

“He has stood up to them for me!”

Miles inclines his head. “Good for him. But there's going to come a time when his family needs something or his company needs something or he just wants something really bad. And you're going to be the collateral damage. How are you going to deal with that?”

“The same way I dealt with it when Mom and Dad took a bribe to cover up my rape and assault. I just will.” I take a sip of my coffee, try to pretend that my hand isn't shaking all to hell. “But it's not going to happen. Ethan won't do that to me.”

“I hope you're right. But you need to understand, he won't see it as betrayal. It'll probably be only business for him. A business deal he needs to make for Frost Industries. A business opportunity that his stepfather needs to explore. Whatever. But it will happen, Chloe. It always happens. He'll crawl back into the gutter with Brandon or with his viper of a mother, his demon of a stepfather. Either way, it will destroy you.”

“You don't know—”

“I do. I may be a scientist who spends most of his time in his lab, but I've studied history. I know how political intrigue works. I know how betrayal works. The only question is, do you?”

## Chapter Fourteen

My brother's words stay with me long after he leaves to catch his return flight to Boston. I wish they didn't, wish I could just block them out of my head, but I can't.

It's not that I think Miles is right. I don't.

I know Ethan. I love Ethan. He loves me.

He would never betray me.

Except ... except ... I've been wrong before. Really wrong. And where did it get me?

Raped and bruised and bleeding in a deserted parking lot.

Emotionally violated and devastated and broken in a soulless lawyer's office.

Terrified and vulnerable and sad, so sad, in the twisted staircases and empty halls of my school.

I survived all of that because I told myself I would get out. Told myself I would make a new life far away from what had happened to me, where I would never have to think about it again. And I have. I have. Before Ethan and now with Ethan. It's a good life. It's a life I'm proud of.

It's a life that a small part of me is still utterly terrified will be yanked away at any moment. And though I know it's wrong to place my happiness in a man's hands, there's a part of me that knows if I lose Ethan I'll never be the same again. I'm in too deep, totally addicted to the way he makes me feel, emotionally and physically.

It's a haunting thought, one that stays with me no matter how hard I try to banish it.

At three o'clock, Ethan texts me just to check in. I'm not sure why, but I don't respond.

At three-thirty, he texts again.

I still don't respond.

At four forty-five. *You ok?*

I answer with a smiley face I'm far from feeling.

*Chloe?*

I turn my phone off.

At six o'clock, a box is delivered to my apartment. It doesn't have a return address, but then, it doesn't need one. I open it right away—of course, I do—I've never been able to resist a present from Ethan, no matter how many emotions are rioting inside me.

Inside the box is a suit—black with a thin silver pinstripe—that somehow manages to be both kickass and intensely feminine all at the same time, thanks to the heavy silver accent buttons and the tiny bits of lace peeking out from the inside of the wrists and lapels and ankles.

It's Armani, of course, and the moment I lay eyes on it I know what it's for. It's a replacement for my one and only designer suit, which I lost in the rain on the beach the other night when Ethan and I made love.

The suit is gorgeous, no doubt about it. Exactly what I needed. And yet as I think of his previous gifts—strawberries and seashells and cinnamon tea—I can't help but be a little disappointed. I feel stupid and ungrateful, but I can't help it. I like the Ethan that gives me little just because gifts, little things that matter only because he was thinking of me, only because he knows me. The Ethan who understands that I can give gifts like that back to him, things that say I'm thinking of him. Things that don't cost thousands of dollars.

Still, I pick up the suit to look at it, and as I lift it from the box, my heart begins to beat faster. Because underneath it is a triangular piece of sea glass. It's blue, which is one of the more rare colors, and its edges have been worn smooth by years of being tossed between the water and the sand.

It's beautiful and perfect and the exact color of Ethan's eyes. I pick it up, hold it in my palm, close my fingers loosely, gently, over the top of it. And swear I can feel the warmth of the summer sand bleeding from the very heart of it into my hand. I don't want to let it go.

Except there's also a vintage hair comb I'm dying to check out, made up of swirling cascades of rhinestones—at least I hope they're rhinestones—in the most dramatic display I have ever seen. It's as beautiful as the sea glass, and as thoughtful. I have a small grouping of antique hair combs that I've been collecting since I was eleven. This is by far the nicest one I own—it's one of the nicest I've ever seen—and I can't resist taking it out of the tissue

paper and holding it up so that the light can make the rhinestones dance and dazzle. Then I'm loosely twisting my hair behind my head and securing it with the comb. A quick glance in the mirror tells me it looks as good as I imagined it would.

And finally, as if those gifts aren't more than enough, there's a copy of Pablo Neruda's *One Hundred Love Sonnets*. It's a garish pink book, not exactly what you would expect for sonnets filled with such warmth and emotion, but I love it anyway. I clasp it to my chest for long seconds before turning to the page marked by an exquisite bookmark in the shape of a mermaid, another gift in and of itself. The sonnet marked is seventeen and though I've never read it before my heart starts beating faster at just the sight of it. Ever since I sent Ethan that Neruda poem when we first got together, he's kind of been our thing. Back and forth we trade lines and stanzas and whole poems, images that touch us, words that Neruda wrote for his love that echo so beautifully the raw emotions we feel for each other.

Some of the sonnet's lines are highlighted, and as I read them I feel the last of the ice inside me start to melt. I've felt frozen, not quite here—not quite right—ever since the night Ethan got back from his last business trip to the East Coast. First he tried to break up with me, then Brandon showed up and I broke up with him instead, then we pretended the other didn't exist for two excruciating weeks and now we're back together, but it doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel whole.

And that's my fault, I think. My rules and my damage have made Ethan reticent, have made him as cautious as I am afraid. And I hate that I've done that to him, hate that I've turned this beautiful, powerful, *passionate* man into someone who watches and waits, who thinks before he kisses me and who makes love to me like I'm the most fragile thing in the world.

That's the last thing I want.

*I love you as one loves certain obscure things, / Secretly, between the shadow and the soul.* This poem, these words, give me hope that it won't always be like this between us. I run my fingers over the words, trace the shape of the letters, imprint the meaning of them on my soul as Ethan is imprinted there. As he always will be.

*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. / I love you directly without problems or pride.* The words echo in my head, in my heart. It's how I love Ethan. How I've always loved him even when I so

desperately didn't want to. How I will always love him no matter what happens. No matter how things end up. Together, apart, no one will ever reach inside me like he does.

I think of Brandon in these moments—which feels like a sacrilege, but it's one I can't help. I think of the emptiness, of the pain and the loneliness, the terror and the rage. And I imagine what it would feel like to live without it, to live without any of it. To just be happy and in love and *loved* like Neruda describes.

I reach for my phone and switch it back on, pull up Ethan's last text. And send him only the last two lines of the poem. *So close that your hand upon my chest is mine, / So close that your eyes close with my dreams.*

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, there's an urgent pounding on the door, one that has my heart climbing up my throat even as I walk to the door. I know who it is—of course I know—but I check the peephole anyway, do all the responsible things a single woman living in a big city should do.

It's Ethan—of course it is—so I fling the door open. And stare. I just stare.

I can't help myself. He looks hot. I mean, he looks really, really, really hot. He's wearing a pair of massively ripped jeans and a tight black T-shirt that shows off the curves of his biceps and the powerful muscles of his chest. And he's got a look on his face that I've never seen before, like a starving man ... or a dying one. Desperate, depraved, maybe even a little delusional. And I swear, my mouth actually waters.

And then, it's on.

He grabs my upper arms.

Yanks me to him.

Shoves the door shut behind him.

Slams his mouth down on mine.

Pushes me against the door.

And then, he takes. He just takes and takes and takes.

He's ravenous, his mouth skimming from my lips to my jaw to the long column of my throat. He latches on just where my neck meets my shoulder and sucks so hard that I know there will be a bruise there tomorrow.



He moves to the other side, does the same thing, before grabbing my shirt and yanking. It rips straight down the center, buttons flying in all directions.

Then he's on his knees in front of me, biting and nibbling and sucking a path straight down the center of my body. He pauses at my breasts for a few breathless seconds, shoving my bra down and sucking love bites into the soft undersides of my breasts.

"Ethan," I half-sigh, half-moan. My head is rocking back and forth against the wall, my fingers tangled in his hair and my body—God, my body feels like it's about to go supernova. Like it's going to spontaneously combust in a pillar of flames that burn so hot it just might incinerate my whole world.

"Chloe," he growls back as he undoes the button on my jeans and yanks them down and off.

His mouth is on my hip, and this time he sinks his teeth in. Hard. I yelp even as I burn hotter and then he's burying his face in the juncture of my thighs, eyes closed and hands cupping my ass.

"Ethan," I gasp again, rocking my hips against him. I'm desperate for his mouth, for his hands, for something—anything—for whatever he wants to give me.

He doesn't answer. For long seconds, he doesn't do anything—doesn't speak, doesn't bite, doesn't *move*. Instead, he just breathes me in, short, shallow, shuddering breaths that somehow only ratchet up my desire.

And then he's shredding the delicate lace of my underwear, ripping them off my body with a curse that sounds an awful lot like a prayer. He rests one hand against my stomach, pressing my ass into the wall, then grabs my right thigh and lifts my leg up until it's draped over his shoulder.

"Ethan!" This time it's a high, keening cry as my consciousness—my whole world—is reduced to those two syllables.

"I've got you, baby. I've got you." He's nibbling at my inner thighs now, swirling his tongue after each small bite to ease the sting. Again and again he nips at me, leaving a trail of love bites from my knees to my sex.

"Please!" I clench my fingers in the cool silk of his hair, pull his head up so that I can see his face. So that he can see mine, and the desperation that is slowly, steadily, eating away at my sanity. "I need you. Ethan. I need you."

“You’ve got me,” he answers, sucking hard at a spot on my mons this time, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to scream. Shocks of electricity arc straight from his mouth to my clit, drowning me in sensation. Making me crazy.

Then his tongue darts out and traces along my sex in one long, slow sweep that makes everything that came before look like nothing.

“Ethan!” The cry is low, desperate. It’s a plea for him to stop, for him to continue, for him to do something—anything—to lessen the sensual desperation sweeping through me.

But he ignores my cries, ignores my desperation, ignores everything but the wetness of my sex and the way my entire body is trembling.

“You okay?” he whispers against my clit, his tongue snaking out to circle it once, twice.

“Do something!” I whimper. “I’m begging of you, do something. Do. Anything.” Without conscious volition, I rake my nails down his scalp to his shoulders and dig in.

“Fuck!” His control breaks—finally, finally—and he clamps his hands on my thighs, spreads my legs farther apart. I’m already off-kilter, one leg draped across his shoulder and as he opens me up I lose whatever precarious balance I can claim.

I grab at him again, dig my nails in, and he curses, long and low and desperate. “I’ve got you,” he snarls. And he does, he really does. Ethan would never let me fall.

The thought rips away my last vestige of nervousness and it’s like he knows it, because suddenly he’s reaching for my second leg and draping it over his bent elbow so that I’m completely open to him, completely vulnerable. Completely dependent on him to keep me from falling. To keep me safe.

And I let him because I can’t not let him.

Because he’s Ethan and I trust him.

Because he’s Ethan and I need him more than I need my next breath.

Because he’s Ethan and I love him.

He senses my surrender—or maybe he feels it in the sudden relaxation of my body, the sudden acceptance of his control despite the need spiraling up, up, up inside of me.

“I’ve got you,” he tells me again. And then he leans forward and plunges his tongue as deeply inside of me as he can reach.

I go wild as pleasure swamps me, my body wiggling out in twenty-seven different directions and begging for more. Begging for everything. I arch against his mouth, press my sex against him as he licks and strokes all the right places deep inside of me.

“Ethan!” I’m nearly sobbing now, so close to the edge that waiting is almost more torture than pleasure. Almost.

We’ve only been together a little while, but already Ethan knows my body as well as I do. When it registers just how close I am to coming, he swirls his tongue inside me, hitting every sensitive spot I have.

And then he’s pulling out and I’m sobbing, pleading, begging him to end it. He murmurs softly to me, nonsense words I’m too far gone to even register. Slipping his hands beneath my ass, he lifts me up more, opens me wider, and closes his teeth gently around my clit.

I slam over the edge, my body arching, shaking, bucking wildly as I lose all sense of myself, all sense of everything but Ethan and the pleasure coursing through my body. It goes on and on and on, until my head is fuzzy and my body aches. And still Ethan pleasures me, still he licks and sucks, kisses and strokes.

He slides one finger inside of me, then a second and a third even as he continues to circle my clit with his tongue. He finds my G-spot, rubs softly and I bite my lip, try once again to stop the screams rising inside of me. But this time, it’s no use. I’m going insane, Ethan driving me completely crazy as he uses his fingers and tongue and body—his beautiful, strong, sturdy body—to drive me from one orgasm to the next.

It’s never-ending, the pleasure coalescing inside of me until I’ve gone beyond individual orgasms, riding one endless wave of pleasure without beginning or end.

As afraid as I am awed, I dig my fingers into Ethan’s shoulders and hold on. I just hold on as the pleasure starts to destroy me. I lose the ability to think, to talk, to breathe. Lose the ability to do anything but feel Ethan all around me and the pleasure he is wringing from me over and over again.

There’s a part of me, one small, cognizant part that’s holding on to reality even as the rest of my brain lets go. That part is screaming at me to stop, screaming at me that Ethan is wrecking me, destroying me, taking me over

completely until there will be no more Chloe without him. Until the addiction we feel for each other is no longer just a flame in our blood, but a raging forest fire that threatens to level us both.

“Ethan, I can’t take it. I can’t—”

“You can,” he snarls before circling my clit with his tongue and driving me right up the edge of another orgasm. “You’ll take everything I have to give you, give me everything in return. You’ll take until neither one of us has anything left.”

And then he bites me at the same second he pinches my nipple and my body goes spinning into oblivion, the pleasure beyond anything I could ever imagine. I hold on for dear life, some instinct I didn’t even know I had telling me that if I let go of him I’ll fly completely out of control.

Ethan must feel it, too, because he doesn’t let me go. Instead he pets and rubs and kisses me, helping me come down slowly from the physical high. He doesn’t bring me all the way down—not enough to relax—but he does give me the chance to breathe, just breathe, for long seconds.

He stays where he is, his face buried in my stomach, his body wrapped tightly around mine. Only when my breathing starts to sound more like a human and less like a freight train does he shift, gently lowering my legs from his shoulders to the floor.

My knees are shaky—big surprise—my whole body tight and aching, so Ethan keeps his hands on me as he climbs to his own feet.

“What was that for?” I ask, brushing my lips over his as aftershocks still wrack my body. I can taste myself on his mouth, and somehow that only ratchets up the pleasure zinging from my breasts to my sex and back again.

“Because I love you,” he mutters, eyes and voice darker than I’ve seen them in a long time. Maybe ever. “I thought maybe your brother had convinced you that I wasn’t worth it.”

“Ethan, baby, that wasn’t ever in the cards.”

He cups my cheeks then, tilts my face up to his. “You sure about that? I know being with me comes with an awful lot of shit.”

I press against him, the scrape of his clothes against my too-sensitive body setting off all kinds of sensory alarms, alarms that only underscore the ones going off deep inside me because of Ethan’s words.

He’s never insecure, never unsure. He might be vulnerable sometimes, might open himself up to me in a way he doesn’t anyone else, but he always

knows what he's doing. Always knows what's going to happen. The fact that he doesn't now, the fact that the two weeks we spent apart managed to shake him so completely, wound me like nothing else could have.

Yes, I have doubts. Yes, I'm concerned about this addiction we have for each other, if it's healthy and where we're going to end up when everything is said and done, but I don't want him to have the same doubts. Don't want him to hurt as I do.

"I love you," I tell him as I once again press my lips to his. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

It's what he needs to hear, I think, because suddenly he's turning me around, pressing my face and breasts and hands against the cool wall even as he cants my hips back.

He shoves a jean-covered leg between my own, spreads me open all over again. There's the rasp of his zipper, the rustle of his clothing. And then he's inside me, no condom, no prelude to make sure I'm still ready, nothing but the single, hard thrust that seats him all the way to the hilt.

His mouth is on my shoulder, sucking my bruises—more love bites—and then he's moving, each thrust rocking me up on my toes, rubbing my oversensitive nipples against the roughly textured wall until I want to scream.

There's something incredibly decadent about this moment, something incredibly powerful about being naked while Ethan is clothed, about being open and giving when he is being so forceful. When he's taking what he wants, his hips pistoning against mine again and again and again.

He murmurs nonsense as he fucks me, words of love and sex, passion and need. And while none of them make sense on their own, together they make the most beautiful cacophony. They take me higher and higher, my body spiraling out of my control yet again.

And as Ethan stiffens, emptying himself inside me with a shout and a twist of his hips that pushes me right up to the edge all over again, I realize something that I never have before.

I belong to Ethan Frost. He owns me in a way no one else ever has, in a way no one else ever will. Heart, soul and body.

With my past, it's actually the last of those that scares me the most, that has me pulling into myself, my need to come retreating under the emotional onslaught of too much. Much too much.

Except Ethan knows. He always knows, and he slips a hand between me and the wall and strokes my clit, once, twice, then again and again.

And though I'm afraid, though I'm awed and overwhelmed and absolutely terrified, I'm no match for his touch, no match for the love that I feel pouring out of him and into me. And then he's biting my shoulder, his sharp teeth pinning me in place in what is sure to leave the mother of all bruises.

And I don't even care, because he's fucking me and fucking me and fucking me. Harder and harder, his hips pounding me into the wall. Pounding me into oblivion. Until there is no Chloe. No Ethan. No past. No future. There is only us, together. There is only now.

As I go careening into climax, my body no longer—my body never again—my own, it doesn't even matter.

Nothing does but Ethan and the way he makes me feel.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Hey, what are we doing sitting way over here today?” I ask my friend Austin as I slide my tray onto the cafeteria table.

We met my first week at Frost Industries—he and my other friends, Romeo (use his full name and suffer the consequences) and Zayn, are interns over in the lab while I’m in intellectual property. They were cool enough to let me sit with them the first week when the intellectual property interns were treating me like shit—an ongoing thing courtesy of Rick and his minions—because of my relationship with Ethan. During that time, the four of us really hit it off and we’ve spent pretty much every lunch hour together since. Except we usually do it on the other side of the cafeteria, where we have some small semblance of privacy.

Sitting up front makes me feel like I’m on display. Thanks to the other intellectual property interns, especially Rick, the whole company knows I’m dating Ethan. It’s not like we were hiding it—Ethan wouldn’t put up with even the appearance of that when I suggested it—but it’s not like I’m going out of my way to flaunt our relationship, either. After all, dating the boss never won anyone good favor.

What my illicit—or at least less than fully licit—relationship means is that I get a lot more attention than I like when I’m in Frost Industries’ common areas, which in turn is also the number one reason I prefer to sit in the most secluded, out-of-the-way section of the cafeteria we can find. The guys know that, so I’m confused as to why they’ve suddenly changed the rules.

“Austin?” I ask again, because he’s always been sort of the leader of our ragtag group.

Today, he doesn’t even bother looking at me, let alone answering my question. His behavior is strange enough that I look at Ro and Zayn to fill me in.

“The TV’s over here,” Ro tells me with an exaggerated roll of his eyes. “It’s semi-finals for the World Cup today and he’s been glued to his cell phone, computer and that TV screen all day—he’s been down for like four different snacks this morning alone. It’s even why we’re eating lunch late today. He doesn’t want to miss the opening pitch.”

“It’s called a kickoff, you arsehole,” Austin tells him in his crisp British accent, eyes still glued to the large screen in the center of the cafeteria wall.

It isn’t the only TV in the cafeteria—there are twelve of them, all tuned to different news or sports stations. Right now, the same World Cup scene is playing across seven of them.

“I’ve never really understood the appeal of soccer,” I tell Ro, who nods surreptitiously. “I mean, I know the whole world loves it but I much prefer football.”

“Right? What’s the point of watching a bunch of skinny guys in short shorts chase a ball around a field?”

“Are you kidding me?” Austin finally yanks his attention away from the screen long enough to blast us with a glare so frigid I actually feel shivers sliding down my spine. “This *is* football, you wankers. And I don’t know what the hell you Yanks get from watching a bunch of fat men in skintight pants and motorcycle helmets run around after a pigskin! This is *real* football.”

“*This* is a toddler’s game. Any three-year-old could play it.” Zayn winks at me behind his hand as we all wait for the explosion.

It doesn’t take long.

“A toddler’s game? A toddler’s game? I’ll have you know this is the most sophisticated, most important, most interesting game in the whole fookin’ world!” The more indignant Austin gets, the heavier his accent becomes. “It’s not my fault that you have no appreciation for sports or sportsmanship or good, old-fashioned competition, but the rest of the world certainly does. More people watch this than the Olympics, for God’s sake!

“And not only that—”

Laughing, I reach across and put my hand over his mouth, cutting him off mid-sentence. “Not only that, soccer is super-exciting,” I tell him with mock enthusiasm. “It beats watching fishing and lawn bowling and it even beats going to the ballet if you squint at it hard enough.”



“Fishing? Lawn bowling?” He’s choking on his own indignation—or maybe that’s his tongue. Either way, it’s a sight to see. “Ballet!”

I can’t help it. No matter how hard I try to keep a straight face, it’s impossible to do it when Austin’s eyes are all but bugging out of his head. I start to laugh and seconds later Zayn and Ro join me.

“So, that’s what this is about? You guys are taking the piss out of me, then?” He watches us with narrowed eyes.

“I have no idea what that means, but it doesn’t sound like anything I’d want to be doing, so eeew, no. I am definitely not taking the piss out of you or anyone else.”

“He’s asking if you’re messing with him. It has nothing to do with what it sounds like.”

I glance behind me at the sound of Ethan’s voice, to find him standing only a few inches from my chair. “How did you get there without me noticing?”

“I believe you were too busy taking the piss out of Austin here to notice.” He grins at me, then leans down and drops a light kiss on my lips.

I freeze—I can’t help it. I feel like the whole cafeteria is staring at us, and when I go to glance around Ethan, it turns out I’m not that far off base. He’s definitely making a spectacle of the two of us.

“You want to join us, Ethan?” Ro invites, scooting over to make room on our side of the table. It’s an invitation that took some time in coming—for the first couple of weeks, the guys were so in awe of Ethan all they could do was trip over their own tongues when he showed up. Of course, it didn’t help that he spent a lot of his time glaring at them like they were competition. But eventually things smoothed out and I’m glad to see that those two weeks when we weren’t together haven’t altered the group dynamic.

“I’d like to, man, but I’ve got a meeting upstairs. Keep an eye on my girl for me, will you?”

“I’m perfectly capable of keeping an eye on myself,” I tell him, a little annoyed at the endemic sexism of his remark.

“Is that one of your party tricks?” he asks, dropping one of the strawberry smoothies he’s carrying next to my plate. “Because I’d like to see it.” He gives me another kiss, this one on my cheek, before he starts backing away.

“Don’t forget to drink that. It’s got an immunity boost in it to help with that cough you’ve got going on.”

“I don’t have a cough.”

“You had one for most of the night.” He gestures to the smoothie. “Drink it. An ounce of prevention and all that.”

Then he’s turning and walking away and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to yell “Yes, sir” after him and follow it with a smart-ass salute. But that would only call more attention to me and that’s the last thing I want.

I turn back to the table to find my friends smirking at me. Even Austin has managed to tear his eyes away from the opening kickoff of the World Cup long enough to say, “You better get to drinking that smoothie. I don’t want to have to tattle on you to your boyfriend.”

I flip him off, taking a very deliberate bite of my salad instead. He just laughs, and things quickly go back to normal—or as normal as they can be when Austin is literally spellbound by the action on the television. As for Ro and Zayn, they look pretty interested in the game, too, despite all the shit they’d given Austin.

Which leaves me to amuse myself because while I had been winding Austin up, I’d also been telling the truth when I told him I didn’t understand the point of soccer.

I eat my salad in relative silence, broken only by the curses and cheers that pay proof to the fact that it’s not just my friends—much of the still crowded cafeteria really is watching the World Cup semifinal.

On the plus side, when I start coughing about halfway through lunch, only Ro is paying enough attention to me to notice.

“Not a word!” I snap at him, reaching for the damn smoothie and downing half of it in one long sip.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he answers with a wicked grin that does nothing to set me at ease.

I’m trying to think of a suitable retort when a report on MSNBC catches my eye. It’s footage of Brandon Jacobs—Ethan’s Brandon—standing behind a podium, while being framed by both an American flag and a flag for the state of Massachusetts.

Before I recognize I’m doing it, I fumble my phone and earbuds out of my pocket. It takes me a moment to open the right app and then tune to the

frequency listed below the TV, but in under thirty seconds I'm listening to a story about Brandon Jacobs winning the Democratic primary in the fair state of Massachusetts just days after his twenty-fifth birthday. He'll be running for the seventh district seat in the U.S. House of Representatives this November and he's doing it with the full support of his old money father, socialite mother and famous, biomedical CEO and philanthropist half-brother. Or at least that's how the story goes. And judging from how friendly Brandon and Ethan look at the fund-raiser Frost Industries threw for him, I can see where the anchor is getting his story.

Brandon's victory speech is filled with political rhetoric, very rah-rah Boston and America. He talks about the importance of taking care of our new crop of veterans and the role biomedical companies play in doing that. He even goes so far as to say that funding research at innovative corporations like Frost Industries can make all the difference in saving our soldiers' lives—on the battlefield and at home.

I don't hear much more after that. Instead, I'm caught up in the fight I had with my brother the other day, his words playing over and over in my head like a CD that keeps skipping.

*He's not like us, Chloe.*

*People with that much money don't think the same way we do.*

*You're kidding yourself if you think Ethan Frost won't sell you out the first time his family needs him to.*

I hadn't believed him, had instead put all my faith in Ethan. And yet it turns out he's throwing fund-raising events for his brother's campaign. He is actively helping to get a man elected who he knows is guilty of rape and abusing power.

And for what? Government funding for Frost Industries research? A powerful ally in Congress for biomedical research and veterans' affairs?

It doesn't make sense to me. It just doesn't make sense. Brandon raped me. He raped me and God knows how many other girls he did that to and Ethan is helping him get elected? After their fight? After every terrible thing he said about his brother?

*It doesn't make sense.*

*The rich are different than us.*

*Ethan's different than us.*

Suddenly, I can't breathe. I stumble back from the table, rip my earbuds from my ears. The story is almost over but I can't stand to hear one more minute—one more second—about Brandon's run for Congress and the very promising career this young, handsome politician from Boston has in front of him.

"Hey, Chloe! You okay?" Zayn climbs to his feet as well, a concerned look on his face as he rests a supportive hand on my shoulder. "You look like you're going to pass out."

I feel like I'm going to pass out. Or, more accurately, like the top of my head is going to blow off right here in the middle of this cafeteria.

Ethan wouldn't do this, I tell myself. He wouldn't betray me like that.

But what if he doesn't consider it betrayal? What if it's just business to him? Or worse, just family?

On the screen, I watch as Brandon wraps one arm around his mother's waist and the other around Ethan's shoulders. He's beaming at the camera, they all are, and though I can't read lips, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that the joyous words pouring out of Ethan's mouth are *Victory in 2014*.

All of a sudden, the strawberry smoothie I just drank isn't sitting too happily in my stomach. I make a mad dash for the restroom, barely making it into a stall before I end up puking out every last drop of that goddamn smoothie.

## Chapter Sixteen

It takes me a while to figure out what I want to do, how I want to handle this.

There's a part of me that wants nothing more than to storm up to Ethan's office right now—I know he'll see me—and demand an explanation for the story I just saw.

Another part is screaming that this is the last straw, that I need to race back to Ethan's house and strip it of every last trace of my existence.

And still another part wants to call Ethan, to beg him to come to me and hold me and tell me that I've misunderstood ... everything. That the story isn't true. That he didn't raise money for Brandon. That he isn't backing his brother's candidacy. That he didn't sell me out because of his brother's political aspirations. Because of his father's terrible death.

In the end, though, I do none of those things. Instead, I go back to work and finish out my day, researching the newest crop of court cases on intellectual property mergers that I've been assigned to cull through.

It's a long afternoon, and an even more interminable evening as I wait for Ethan to get home from a business dinner that is running late. This morning he'd asked me if I wanted to go with him and I'd declined because I don't have anything to wear. I didn't tell him that because he would run out and buy me a whole closet full of expensive clothes, which is the last thing I want when I'm still trying to get over the cost of my belly chain.

Now I'm even more grateful that I turned him down, since the idea of sitting in a restaurant and making small talk with his business associates is the absolute last thing I want to be doing. Not when it's taking every ounce of self-control I have not to freak out, not to violate Ethan's trust and search the house for proof of his duplicity. Not to walk away and never look back.

Part of me wonders if I even could. I thought about doing it this afternoon, right after I saw the broadcast, and I'm thinking about doing it now, as I sit here on Ethan's patio, nursing a glass of wine and staring up at

the midnight sky. The wind is blowing pretty hard and I can smell just a hint of smoke in the air gusting by. It's a by-product of the forest fire that's raging about fifteen miles away from here and I can't help wondering how much worse the fire is going to get before it gets better.

Can't help wondering how much worse the mess I've made of my life is going to get before it gets better.

It would be easier—infinately easier—to cut my losses. To pack up my shit and walk away from Ethan once and for all. I've worked so hard to be strong, so hard to get my life together, that watching it fall apart all over again is the worst kind of torture.

And yet what can I do to stop it? What can I do to make it feel like everything I've worked for, everything I've tried to be, isn't crumbling down around me?

Just pretend he doesn't matter?

Just walk away and hope for the best?

I don't know that walking away from Ethan is even an option at this point. How can it be when he's a part of me? When I would just carry him with me wherever I tried to run?

The time I've known Ethan can be measured in mere days and weeks, and yet, in that time, he's somehow become so much more than I ever planned on.

He's the first thing my sluggish mind thinks of in the morning, when the early morning tide rolls across the cold and lonely beach.

He's the last thing I dream of in the dark when the sky is still and starshot.

He's everything in between. The secret that wraps itself around me like a whisper. The promise that burrows its hooks deep inside of me.

He's my obsession. My addiction.

It's a truth I couldn't begin to fight. A truth I'm paying for now as I wait and watch and count the seconds as the clock rolls itself around to another day.

It's after midnight when I hear the gate rolling open at the end of the driveway, followed by the sound of Ethan's BMW making its way up the drive. By the time I hear the garage open and close, I'm up and standing at the railing, looking out over the dark and endless ocean.

I go over and over the discussion I want to have with Ethan as I wait for him to find me. It's probably stupid, but I can't bring myself to have this fight in the house, surrounded by his things and the awkward memories of my humiliation. Better, if we need to hash things out, to do it in the open air. At least out here, the pain and anger will have someplace to go.

Except it takes longer than I thought for him to find me. By the time he does, I've already given up and started walking back toward the house, wondering what is taking so long.

I'm already to the closest patio door when it flies open, Ethan slamming out of it at close to a dead run. "Chloe! Chloe, where—"

He stops dead when he sees me in the shadows, his voice choking off, and it registers just how frantic he is. "I'm right here," I tell him. "I was looking at the ocean."

He nods jerkily, blows out a long, unsteady breath. Then braces his hands on his knees and just concentrates on breathing for long seconds.

If I didn't know better, I'd think he was afraid I had left him. Except my car is out front in the driveway, my shoes near the garage door into the house—the same door he had to have taken to get inside. He couldn't have missed them if he was looking.

"You okay?" I ask him huskily, hating myself for how much it matters. I'm the one who's shattered, the one holding on by a damn thread here, and yet I can't stop worrying about him. Can't stop wanting to take care of him.

"Yeah, of course. Sorry. I just freaked out when I couldn't find you."

I nod. "I can see that. The question is why?"

He studies me for long seconds and I get the impression that he is trying to decide what to say. Not that he doesn't have an answer for my question, only that he's trying to decide how much he wants to tell me. I don't know why I feel that way, except that he's got that face on. The one he wears when he's trying to lie to me—in reality or by omission.

The knowledge breaks something else inside of me, something tenuous and uncertain and afraid. I bite my lip to keep from screaming and this time I'm the one concentrating on my breathing.

"I was afraid you'd left," he finally says.

"Without my car? Without my shoes?"

"I didn't—I didn't see your shoes. And your car could have broken down again."

“Not after you had it fixed. The thing runs like it’s brand new.”

He smiles then. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah.”

He reaches for me, wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me against his body. I go, but I don’t relax into him like I normally would. I can’t. There’s too much inside of me right now and none of it is good.

Ethan knows right away—of course he knows. He’s so in tune with me, with my body, to every little nuance of how I hold myself that he can’t help but notice something is wrong now that he’s calming down.

“Baby?” He pulls back a little, brushes my hair out of my face so he can get a better look in the warm glow of the patio lights. “You okay?”

“I don’t know.” It might be the most honest thing I’ve said all afternoon.

“Okay.” He tugs me closer, rubs a soothing hand up and down my back like he’s trying to comfort me. Like he isn’t the reason that I’m like this. “What can I do?”

It’s a great opening, one I wouldn’t pass up even if I could. And I can’t, the words tumbling out of my mouth and over themselves in my desperation to get them out of me. To get the ugly, disgusting, painful accusations out of me.

“Brandon is running for Congress.”

Ethan freezes like a deer in the headlights, sensing danger for the first time but unable to move out of the way of the oncoming disaster. “Yes.”

“In Boston.”

He nods, his arms tightening around me even more. I can’t breathe, but I think that has more to do with the anxiety inside of me than Ethan’s grip. “Yes.”

“Where he raped me.”

“Yes. Baby—”

“Let me finish,” I snap, my voice colder than it’s ever been before—at least when I’m talking to Ethan.

“Of course.” Now he’s rubbing circles on my back, trying to soothe me when I don’t want to be soothed.

“That wasn’t me asking for your permission. I’m just trying to clarify the facts. Brandon is running for the U.S. House of Representatives for the Seventh Congressional District, the same district where he committed a violent felony. Against me.”



Ethan swallows tightly, his jaw working back and forth. But I'll give him credit. He doesn't look away from me, doesn't so much as drop his eyes. "Yes."

"And you're supporting him."

"What? No!" His hand clamps down on my shoulder. "Are you kidding me?"

"Don't lie to me! Not again! I can't take it. We can't take it."

"I'm not. Jesus, Chloe, I would never. You have to know that."

"I don't know anything."

"Fuck!" Ethan lets me go to thrust a frustrated hand through his hair. "This isn't happening. This isn't fucking happening. Chloe, I have spent the last three weeks doing everything in my power to *keep* him from being elected."

His words sweep over me and I expect to be swamped with relief. But it doesn't quite happen like that. Instead, all I can think about is the fact that he didn't tell me. Even if he is telling the truth now, which I'm not sure he is, he never told me this was happening. That this was coming. He let me be blindsided, just as I was blindsided the moment I opened that damn door and found Brandon standing on the other side of it.

"You didn't tell me."

"Fuck." He closes his eyes, rubs a tired hand over them, and I realize that outside of the night he tried to dump me, this is the most I've ever heard Ethan swear at one time. At least when he's talking to me.

It's a random thought, but right now my whole head seems to be filled with random thoughts. Small puzzle pieces whirling around in my mind without pattern, without reason, while I try to figure out how they fit together.

It seems my whole life these days is one big, unsolvable puzzle. I hate it.

"I didn't tell you because I figured you had enough to deal with right now without adding more shit about Brandon to the mix."

"That wasn't your responsibility. It wasn't your decision to make."

"Protecting you is always my responsibility." He says it flatly, like it's a foregone conclusion. Not up for discussion. "Just like choosing to take care of you will always be my decision."

"This isn't taking care of me."

He blanches, stumbles back. Looks more vulnerable than I have ever seen him. The knowledge puts a crack in the ice around my heart, starts to melt it just a little even when I want it to stay intact. To keep me safe.

“Please don’t say that,” he whispers.

But how can I not say it when things are so fucked up? “I saw the news report, Ethan. I was in the cafeteria, surrounded by hundreds of people, when I saw the damn news report. How is that taking care of me?”

For the first time, he looks confused. And angry. “What news report?”

“Don’t play stupid with me! You had to know.”

“That him making Democratic candidate for the seventh district would make local Boston news, absolutely. But national news? Already? I’ve called in every favor I have—the story shouldn’t have gone anywhere. It shouldn’t have gained any traction.”

“Because you didn’t want me to see it?”

“Because I didn’t want anybody to see it! It’s a key race in a key city and the more exposure he gets, the better his chances of winning. I wanted to cut that off at the knees. I did cut it off at the knees.” He reaches inside his pants pocket, pulls out his cell phone. “What station did the story run on?”

“MSNBC is where I saw it.”

“Fuck.” He shakes his head like he’s trying to clear it. “Chloe, baby, I’m so sorry. You never should have seen that. It never should have happened —”

“Of course it was going to happen. You’re news, he’s news. Together you’re bigger news. Why wouldn’t they run the story?”

“Because I told them not to.” He starts dialing God only knows who. “Give me a minute, baby. Let me get to the bottom of this, sweetheart—”

“Do you really think that’s what matters to me? Do you really think I give a fuck who leaked the story after you tried to shut it down? The fact that you tried to shut it down is enough for me to want to walk out the front door and never come back.”

“Hello? Ethan?” We’re close enough that I can hear the voice of his press secretary quite clearly through the phone.

“Sorry, Anthony. I’ll call you back.” He cuts the call off. “Explain,” he says to me.

“There’s nothing to explain—”

“There’s everything to explain. I told you why I didn’t tell you. I was trying to protect you—”

“You were trying to protect yourself!”

“Excuse me?”

“I saw you, Ethan. I saw you at that fund-raiser. Hell, you threw the damn thing for him, to help raise money for his campaign. You were laughing and joking with him. And you were proud, so proud. I know that look on your face. I’ve seen it dozens of times. Forget about killing the story! How could you raise money for that bastard? How could you stand next to him and celebrate his victory and then come back here and climb into bed with me?”

My skin crawls as I lay my questions out for him, as I let him see the whole picture, the whole horror, of what I’ve been carrying around since lunchtime.

For long seconds, he doesn’t move, doesn’t speak, doesn’t do anything but stare at me with his jaw moving frantically. It’s the most discombobulated I’ve ever seen him and if I wasn’t going out of my mind with grief and pain and betrayal, I might actually appreciate the fact that I’ve caught him off guard, especially considering how rare such a reaction is from the great Ethan Frost.

“The last fund-raiser I hosted for my brother was in May, before I met you. Long before I knew what kind of man he was. What he was capable of.”

“I saw you. I saw the footage with your mother and your brother. I saw it —”

“It was from May!” he tells me again, more forcefully. “Or maybe even before that. I don’t know, I didn’t see the story. But there has been no fund-raiser since I found out. There’s been nothing. I swear.”

His words echo in the fragrant air around us. They wrap themselves around me, burrow deep inside me. I believe him. I don’t think anyone looking at him now, face stoic, eyes wide and angry and alarmed, could doubt the veracity of his words.

I know I don’t. They make sense—so much more sense than the idea that he ran off and did this during the two weeks we were apart.

And still there’s something inside me that doesn’t feel quite right. Something twisting and turning and making me feel all kinds of wrong.

“Why did they run that story, then?” I demand. “How did they make it look like—”

“They spliced old footage together to make the story and didn’t bother to say when and where that footage was from. It’s not unusual. It’s unethical, but it isn’t unusual. As for why they ran that story? I don’t know. Especially when there was supposed to be a moratorium on coverage of my family. But I can assure you I’m going to find out. Tonight.”

He starts to dial the phone again and I turn away, walk into the house. This isn’t a conversation I want to hear anyway. Not when I’m still feeling so overwhelmed, so off.

I head to the bedroom, to the closet where I keep my spare set of running shoes. Ethan follows me, his hand on my lower back and I try to relax into his touch. Try to be okay. But I’m not. I’m just not.

He’s talking to Anthony about the story that MSNBC ran, wanting to know what other—if any—networks picked it up. Anthony must be Googling as they speak, because a bunch more letters start showing up in the conversation. As do a lot more curse words.

I tune them out. How this happened doesn’t matter to me. What matters is that it did. That it could, so easily.

I get my shoes on without saying anything to Ethan, without so much as looking at him. And then I walk toward the front door.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he demands, suddenly blocking my way. “Anthony,” he says into the phone. “I’ll have to call you back.” He hangs up on the poor man again.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I tell him after he disconnects.

“Now that’s where we think differently. Because I happen to be of the opinion that when my girlfriend is walking out on me, I should be emotionally present for it. Especially when she promised me less than a week ago that she wouldn’t do this.”

“I’m not walking out, Ethan. I’m going for a walk to clear my head. It’s not the same thing.”

“You sure about that?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure. I’ll be back in an hour. Maybe two.”

“It’s after midnight. Give me a minute to change and I’ll go with you.”

“I’m a big girl, Ethan, I can take care of myself. Especially in La Jolla, where the crime rate isn’t exactly skyrocketing.”

“I’d still feel more comfortable if you let me come with you.”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t. I need to think, Ethan.”

“And you can’t think with me there.”

“No! I can’t. Not when it’s you I need to think about.”

“What’s there to think about, Chloe? I didn’t do what you thought I did. I would never hurt you like that! I would never—”

“But you did! You did hurt me like that when you didn’t tell me about Brandon. And now you’re doing it again, keeping secrets from me for what you think is my own good.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you any more. You’ve been through enough.”

And there it is, the reason I still feel so icky. The reason everything feels just a little bit off. The reason I’m finding it so hard to trust Ethan even now that he’s saying and doing all the right things.

“You know, that’s exactly what my parents said to me before they forced me to sign that NDA. Before they forced me to recant my statement to the police. That I’d been through enough and they didn’t want to see me hurt any more.”

“Chloe. You know this isn’t the same thing.”

The thing is, I do know. It just doesn’t seem to matter right now. Nothing does but getting the hell out of here before the walls close in around me.

“I’m going for a run,” I tell him, walking through the house to the front door. “Don’t follow me.”

“Chloe, goddamnit! It’s not safe!”

“There are some things you don’t get to decide, Ethan. I’m a grown woman. I get to make my own decisions and you don’t always get a say in them. This is one of those times.”

Grabbing my phone out of my purse, which I left on a table near the front door, I put in my earbuds, turn on the 1975 playlist as loudly as I can handle it, walk out the front door. And then I run. I run as fast and as hard as I ever have in my life.

Ethan doesn’t follow me.

## Chapter Seventeen

How the hell has everything gotten so messed up again?

It's the question that haunts me as I run along the nearly deserted beach. I'm down close to the ocean, because the wet, hard sand is so much easier to run on. And tonight I want to keep up my energy. I want to run far.

Maybe, if I run long enough, I'll be able to leave behind the whole screwed up mess that is my life.

I don't know what to do.

I don't know what to think.

It's not that I don't believe Ethan—I do. His explanation of events makes so much more sense than the idea that we broke up over Brandon and he ran off to host a fund-raiser for him. My brother's words may haunt me, may run through my head when I least expect and least want them—but that's all they are. Only words. Just because he believes them doesn't mean I have to. It doesn't mean they're true.

But he also has a point. I saw Ethan with his mother at that fund-raiser, saw how happy they were together, saw how much he loves her. This is the same woman who haunts my nightmares, with her bright red lipstick and strident voice and insistence on protecting her son no matter the cost. For me, she'll always be the wicked witch, my own personal Maleficent just waiting to tear me apart with her vicious nature and too-sharp claws.

When we got back together, I told him I didn't want to talk about his family. I didn't want to know them, didn't want to hear about them, didn't want to have anything to do with them. I thought that would be enough. That if I put up a wall between us then I would be able to live with who they are and what they'd done to me.

Because they don't matter. I won't let them matter. It's Ethan I love, Ethan I want to be with.

The only problem, the only flaw in my logic, is that they do matter ... to him. As they should. I wouldn't wish my relationship with my parents on

anyone. The disdain, the distrust, the out-and-out dislike. The betrayal. No, I don't want that for Ethan. But at the same time, I'm not sure I can take anything less than his total repudiation of them.

It's not fair, maybe it's not even right, but it's how I feel.

Because I was good. For so long, I was doing okay. I had a life—maybe not a great, exciting life—but a good life. A steady life. One that made me feel strong and secure and healthy.

And now—now I have a great life. I have Ethan's love for me, a job I adore, and I have my feelings for Ethan. Feelings that the word love doesn't come close to touching. I don't think there's a word in the entire English language that encompasses the depths of emotion I have for that man.

And yet my life has gone to hell. I don't feel safe, I don't feel steady and I sure as hell don't feel healthy. How can I when every day is a new roller-coaster ride? When every moment is a terrifying journey into one more unknown?

I've survived this long because I made a plan and I stuck to it. It gave me something to focus on, something to aim for when everything else in my life had gone to hell. Now, it feels like my only goal is to get through the day without an emotional breakdown.

It's not enough. Not nearly enough—especially when I so rarely even make that goal.

Is this what my life with Ethan is destined to be? Great passion, towering emotions, but rudderless? Directionless? A joyride without the joy? The thought terrifies me as nothing else could.

And so I run. I run and run and run. I run until my back aches, until my lungs feel like they're going to burst, until my legs are nothing but limp noodles beneath me. And then I run some more. For miles, for hours.

I'm way down the beach when my headlong flight catches up to me and I collapse on the sand, my trembling legs refusing to take me one step farther. It's a long time since I've run like this, since I've used physical exertion as an exorcist as much as an exercise.

I look around me, try to figure out where I am. Try to figure out how far I've run. But none of the houses look the least bit familiar and I'm too tired to walk up to the street and try to find a sign.

Besides, I just don't care enough. There's a part of me that would be more than happy to lay here forever—or at least until the lifeguards come

upon me in the morning.

With that thought in mind, I turn my music off—it's Imagine Dragons now, as I've long since exhausted my 1975 playlist—and toss the phone next to me on the sand. And then I listen—to the sound of the ocean rolling in, to the water lapping at the shore, to the far-off sound of a car making its way through the dark and empty streets.

It's peaceful, in a way nothing in my life has been peaceful in so long. Even as the cramps set in—partly from the running, partly from stopping without stretching out, and partly from lying here on this cold, wet sand—I find myself loathe to move. Loathe to do anything but take these moments as they come.

But it can't last. Nothing does. And only a few minutes go by before my phone starts to buzz. There's a part of me that wants to ignore it, to just let it go, to stay in the moment—and the headspace—that I am currently occupying. But there's only one person who would be calling me now and he doesn't deserve to be ignored.

I pick up the phone, am shocked to realize that it's nearly three-thirty in the morning. That I really have been running for hours. And that I have already missed three calls from Ethan. Shit.

"I'm okay," I tell him the second I pick up the phone.

There's a couple of beats of silence, as if he's trying to get a grip on his temper and himself. Then, "Where are you?" It's clipped and stilted and calm, so calm that I know he's absolutely furious.

"I've been running on the beach. I'm fine," I tell him again.

"I'm on the beach and I don't see you. Where. Are. You?"

"I don't know. I ran pretty far."

"I am aware of that—I've been looking for you for the last hour."

Shit. His tone is perfectly modulated, perfectly polite—and lacking any and all warmth. He really is furious. I sit up, glance around the shadowed beach looking for something that will tell me where I am.

There are a couple of signs farther up the beach and I walk toward them, ignoring the cramps in my legs. One of the signs reads *Coastal Preservation Project* and suddenly I know exactly where I am.

"I'm over past Coastal Park," I tell him. "Probably a couple of miles."

He bites off a particularly vicious curse. "Are you telling me you ran over twenty miles tonight? Straight down the beach?"



“I guess. I wasn’t—”

“Is there anyone around you? Anyone hassling you?”

“No, it’s completely deserted. I’m the only one out here.”

He curses again. “I’m not sure if I should be grateful for that fact or upset. Look, don’t move, okay. Stay on the beach, preferably in the shadows, and answer your goddamned phone when I call. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He clicks off without saying good-bye—more proof of how angry he is at me—and it’s not like I can really blame him. In my headlong flight I’ve gone well beyond the safe boundaries of La Jolla and while this area isn’t bad, it isn’t great, either.

Ethan really is going to kill me when he gets here.

I try to do what he asked, I really do, but after a few minutes of just waiting here I start to get antsy. And cold. Now that I’ve cooled down from the run, the cool breeze off the ocean is striking right through my thin tank top and yoga pants.

So I get up and start to walk back up the beach, the way I came. I don’t go up on the street—I’m not totally stupid—but I do try to walk the two miles to Coastal Park, so I have an actual landmark for Ethan to meet me at when he calls again.

I’ve just stepped foot in the parking lot when Ethan calls again to try to get a better location. I tell him where I am and he’s there in under three minutes. He jumps out of the car the second he sees me, and then he’s wrapping his arms around me, pulling me against his body.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, struggling against him.

“Can you just let me hold you for a minute, please? Let it sink in that you really are okay?” His voice is hoarse, the strain of the last few hours evident in it. The strain is also evident in the way he holds me so tightly and the fact that he’s in no rush, at all, to let me go.

“Look, I know it was stupid and I’m sorry. I meant to just run a couple of miles, but then I was in my head and I went a lot farther than I intended. I’m sorry. But nothing happened. I didn’t even see another person the whole time I was running.”

His grip finally loosens as he pulls back to look me in the face. “That’s because whole areas of San Diego are under curfew and other areas are

being forced to evacuate. With the wind tonight, the forest fires have gotten much worse. You picked pretty much the worst possible time to disappear.”

“Oh, shit.” No wonder he was so worried. He wasn’t just being his normal overprotective self. He’d been worried about me running straight into a wildfire, something I could have done if I hadn’t made the unconscious decision to stay on the beach.

“Yeah, my sentiments exactly.” He ushers me into the car, and then we’re speeding through the streets as Ethan aims to get us back to his house—and to safety—as quickly as he possibly can.

“How close is the nearest fire?” I ask a few minutes later as we drive past La Jolla Cove.

“About four miles. They think we’ll be fine down here, but they’re evacuating Miramar all the way down to UTC and Torrey Pines all the way up to Del Mar.”

“God. That’s half the coast. How many fires are there?”

“Seven right now, but with this wind, they think there are going to be more before too long.”

“I need to call Tori.”

“I already have. She’s fine. Her father is sending a plane for her tomorrow morning. She decided now was the perfect time to go to Vegas for a few days.”

Of course he’d checked on Tori. It’s the kind of guy Ethan is, the kind of guy he’s always been. Who his family is doesn’t change his basic decency.

“Maybe we should go to Vegas,” I joke. “I just turned twenty-one, after all.”

Ethan glances at me. “Believe me, I’ve thought about it.”

“Oh, yeah? Vacation?”

“Honeymoon. I could get you drunk and married before you knew what hit you.”

“Yeah, right,” I tell him even as my stomach gives a funny little jump. “You shouldn’t joke about that. I might take you up on it.”

“If only.” He doesn’t glance at me as he negotiates the winding street up to his house, but somehow that only makes our current conversation seem more surreal.

“Stop teasing,” I tell him as he finally pulls the car into the driveway.

He jerks the car to a stop and then he reaches for me, pulling me out of my seat and onto his lap in one swift movement. It's a small space and the steering wheel is cutting into my back but I barely notice it. How can I when Ethan is all but devouring me with his eyes.

“What makes you think, even for a second, that I'm joking? I would marry you tomorrow if you'd agree. Vegas. A justice of the peace. An impromptu beach wedding in Tahiti. I don't actually give a shit. I love you, Chloe, and the second you are ready to marry me, I promise we'll get it done.”

His mouth crashes down on mine then, and I'm so out of it—so completely astonished—that I can't do anything but sit there clinging to him as he ravishes me.

His mouth is everywhere, his hands everywhere, and I don't know what to think, what to say. All I can do is feel. And I do, God, I do.

I feel the press of his lips against my collarbone as his tongue dances lightly over the pulse point in my neck.

I feel the rough caress of his hands as they slide under my tank top to stroke their way over my ribs, up my spine.

I feel the hard thrust of his cock against my sex, my clit, as he rocks against me in a slow, gentle rhythm that brings me right to the brink of orgasm.

“I want to wake up with you in my arms every morning,” he murmurs as he nips softly at my throat. “I want to hold you when you cry, to taste your joy when you laugh.

“I want to shelter you, to hold you so deeply inside me that no one will ever hurt you again.” His hands move around to my front, and his thumbs hook around my belly chain, tug lightly at the platinum links. It's a reminder that he's already claimed me, already branded me.

“I want to love you, Chloe. I just want to love you.”

His words take me higher, stoking the flames inside of me until all I can feel, all I can see, all I can *breathe* is him.

“I know you're young. I know you're not ready to talk about forever with me—especially with everything that's happened—but I want you to know that that's where we're headed. That's what I want from you. That's what I want to give *to* you.” It's what I want, too. What I've wanted since he made love to me so tenderly, so honestly, after I told him about the rape. What

I've felt from the moment he slid this belly chain around my waist and claimed me so completely. It's why our breakup devastated me so completely, why it ripped my heart out and left me a trembling, self-destructive mess. Why what I feel for him is so much more than need, so much more than addiction.

"Ethan, I—" There's so much I want to say to him, so much I want him to know about how I feel and what I want, but the words are stuck in my throat. They're stuck deep inside of me, and I can't force them out.

I don't know why. It's not like I'm not committed. It's not like I don't love him. I do, God, I do. It's only ... what? I don't know. I spent that whole run trying to figure it out and I'm no closer to knowing now than I was when I took off, hours ago.

All I know is that finding out about Brandon broke something inside of me. Seeing Ethan standing next to him, laughing and joking and celebrating with him, cracked me wide open and ripped me apart all over again. It destroyed something I'm not sure can ever be put back together again.

And I know, Ethan didn't know. I believe him when he says that fundraiser took place before he realized who Brandon was to me. And it should matter—it does matter—and yet there's this lump of ice inside of me that I'm terrified will never melt. It's like this is just one thing too many. One kick too many. One strike too many.

One betrayal too many.

Of all the men out there in the world, I had to fall in love with this one.

It doesn't make sense. Am I really that ruined, that addicted, that I can't find my way clear? Of him. Of this. Of the dangerous emotions battering me from every side.

Or is it that I'm not ruined at all? Damaged, yes. Hurt, absolutely. But loving Ethan—being loved by him—feels like the cleanest, purest thing that's ever happened to me in my life.

"It's okay, baby," he tells me as he brushes, soft silky kisses against my throat, down my shoulder, over the slopes of my breasts. "I know it's too soon. I know you don't trust me anymore."

"It's not—"

He kisses me then, soft and sweet and gentle. So gentle. "It is. And that's okay. I get it."

But it isn't okay. Even in the dark, I can see the look in his eyes. Can see the way I've hurt him. The way I'm breaking him even now.

The knowledge does something to me on a visceral level. It turns me inside out, makes me hurt in a way nothing ever has before and that I pray never will again. I love this man, I love him even through the pain, even through the fear, even through the betrayal, and the idea that I'm wrecking him as I've been wrecked—it shatters me.

“I love you,” I tell him, grabbing his face in my hands and pulling his mouth back to mine. Only this kiss isn't soft and it sure as hell isn't sweet. It's deep and dark and damaged, so damaged. It's tongues and teeth, pleasure and pain, heaven and hell. It's everything Ethan and I are laid bare between us and nothing has ever felt so right.

“Fuck, Chloe!” Ethan rips his mouth from mine even as he throws open the car door. Then he's levering his hands under my ass and climbing out of the car with me still in his arms.

I expect him to carry me into the house, but he doesn't get any farther than the front porch before slowly sliding me down his body. And then he's turning me so that I'm facing the porch railing, my hands planted firmly on the wrought iron.

“What are you doing? We're on the front por—” I break off when he snaps his teeth against the nape of my neck hard enough to leave a bruise.

Heat courses through me and I gasp, tremble. Then he's between my legs, pushing down my yoga pants with one hand while his other hand fumbles his jeans out of the way.

He presses me forward, grazes his teeth along my neck one more time, even as he reaches between my thighs to test my readiness. I'm hot and wet, my body aching and clenching with the need to feel him inside me.

“Ethan, please. I need—” My words turn to dust in my mouth as he bends me over the railing and surges inside of me with one powerful thrust of his hips.

I whimper deep in my throat, probably would have screamed if I wasn't worried about alerting the whole neighborhood to what we're doing. It's been less than twenty-four hours since he was inside of me, but that's too long. Far too long. I need this. I need him, Ethan, inside of me, loving me, all the time. I need the power and the softness, the passion and the sweetness that is him. Again and again and again.

I try to speak, but my mouth is desert dry. There's only enough thought, enough sanity left for the high, hungry sounds clawing their way out of my throat with each heavy slam of Ethan's hips against my ass.

I reach behind him, rake my nails down his bare ass as I try to pull him even closer. "Harder," I finally manage to form the word that's been throbbing inside of me since the moment I first felt his fingers rubbing against my sex. "Please. Harder."

Ethan responds with more pressure, with harder thrusts until it almost feels like he's ripping me apart. But it's good, so good, and I don't want him to stop. Not now. Not ever.

His left hand moves between my legs while his right one remains at the small of my back, pressing me forward for the best angle. He spreads me open, strokes the spot where we're joined. Fireworks go off inside of me and I climb higher and higher, the need to orgasm growing with every second that passes.

"Come on, baby," he murmurs, breath hot and heavy against my ear. "Come for me. Let me feel you." He reaches for my clit then, strokes his thumb over it once, twice, a third time. That's all it takes to break me open, to shatter me. I come, sobbing his name.

And still Ethan doesn't stop. He rides me through the orgasm, his heavy body pounding into mine even as he continues to stroke my clit. Wave after wave of sensation crashes through me, weakening my knees and sending slivers of electricity to every part of me.

And then he's sliding a hand under my tank top, rubbing my nipples through my bra. I'm so sensitive that it almost hurts even as it causes another wave of pleasure to crash through me. "I can't," I gasp, pushing at his hand. "No more."

"There's always more," he tells me, squeezing my nipple between his thumb and index finger. "There has to be. You're mine, Chloe. You're mine and I'm never letting you go."

He continues thrusting into me, even as he licks his tongue down the side of my neck. One of his hands is on my breast, the other is on my clit and I can feel another orgasm building inside me. This one is immense, terrifying, nearly painful in its intensity and there's a part of me that doesn't want to let go. That wants to stay right here, where it's safe. Where I'm grounded

and don't have to worry about being adrift in the ocean of emotions Ethan calls forth from me.

But Ethan won't have it. "Come on, Chloe. Give it to me. I've got you, baby. I've got you, love. One more time. I swear, I've got you."

He strokes my clit harder, faster, determined to bring me over. "I love it when you come. I love being inside of you when your muscles clench around me again and again."

He bends his head to my shoulder, licks at the line of sweat that's rolling down my shoulder blade. "I love the way your skin flushes and your mouth falls open. I love the way your nipples peak and your hips jerk against mine." He skims his lips over my lobe, his tongue sweeping against the sensitive spot behind my ear as he continues to whisper to me, continues to drive me higher with his words and his body and his love. Always his love.

Tears are streaming down my face now, my body so far out of my control that I can't imagine ever belonging to myself again. And in this moment, at this time, I can't bring myself to care. Not with Ethan's body moving feverishly inside mine. Not with his words ripping through me like lightning, inflaming me, taking me higher and higher with every breath that passes between us.

"I love the way you take me," he tells me. "I love the way you give yourself to me so completely, the way you give and give and give. I love how you take all of me. How you tremble against me and beg for more." His mouth fastens on the spot between my neck and shoulder, sucking ravenously.

"I love the way you look at me, like you don't quite get me but are determined to figure me out. I love how brave you are. I love how strong you are, how you always get back up. I love how honest and open you are, with your body and your heart."

He sucks hard against my neck, leaves another bruise, then soothes it with his tongue. His wicked, wonderful tongue.

"I love your body." He thrusts into me again and again. "I love the softness of your skin, how it glows in the moonlight. I love connecting the dots of your freckles, making pictures on your thighs and stomach and shoulders.

"I love your breasts. I love the way they feel in my hands, round and soft and heavy." His fingers move to my other breast, play with it, as well. "I

love how hard your nipples get for me, love the way you always taste like sweet cream and honey. I love your eyes and how they always tell me what you're thinking. I love the way you look at me. I love the way you're always so open and honest, how you never try to hide yourself away from me.

“I love being inside you—” He gives an extra hard thrust for emphasis and it's all I can do to breathe. “And I absolutely adore your ass.” One of his hands drifts between the globes of my ass, pressing against my anus until I'm seeing stars. And then he's thrusting one long finger inside of me, slowly, carefully pressing deeper and deeper until I forget all the reasons I can't scream and just let go.

He laughs at the sound, a low, deep chuckle against my ear that sends heat spiraling through me. I'm so close now, teetering on the edge, but for all his big words earlier, he refuses to send me over again. Refuses to let me come even as I twist and plead against him. “I love everything about you, Chloe.” He slides that insidious finger inside me again, strokes deep inside me even as he pulls his cock out and slams home, again and again and again. “I just love you, baby. I just love you.”

That's what does it, what finally sends me soaring over the edge into an orgasm so powerful that it feels a little bit like death itself. There's a roaring in my ears, a blackness in front of my eyes. And a supernova inside of me burning brighter and brighter and brighter until I fall straight through the wide, dark center of it.

Ethan comes then, too, calling my name as his powerful body spills and spills and spills inside of me.

I keep coming and so does he, for long, interminable seconds that tie us together like nothing else ever has.

And when it's over, when he's emptied himself so completely into me that he can barely lift his head from where it rests between my shoulder blades, I know the truth.

That he has wrecked me, just as surely as he's wrecked himself. And in doing so, he's filled me up completely. With his love, with himself, with everything I never knew I needed. And I'll love him for it forever.



## Chapter Eighteen

My alarm goes off at six-thirty, barely an hour after Ethan and I finally stumbled into the house and down the hall to bed. I groan as I reach for my phone to shut it off, telling myself as I do that I shouldn't throw the stupid thing across the room. After all, it isn't my phone's fault that I'm a total idiot.

It's a close call, though, and might have ended badly except Ethan fumbles it out of my hand and drops it gently to the floor before pulling me into him, my back to his chest.

"We have to get up." I groan, the idea of actually prying my eyes open leaves me feeling sick and dizzy. I'm exhausted, not to mention sore as hell from my blind flight down the beach last night. A flight that seems stupid in light of how it all ended up, with Ethan and me joined so closely that for long moments I couldn't tell where I ended and he began. "I have a meeting today. And you probably have to buy a small country."

"Two small countries, actually," he says, pressing soft, warm kisses against my shoulder. "But alas, Frost Industries is closed because of the fires, so there will be no takeovers today."

"Closed?" I ask him, somehow finding the strength to both open my eyes and turn my head so that I can see his face. "Are you just screwing with me?" I demand. "As punishment for what happened last night?"

He licks his way slowly down my spinal cord. "I thought I'd already exacted revenge for you running away last night. Remember, on the porch, when you went a little crazy? But if you'd like me to try again ..." He rolls us over so that I'm facedown against the bed and he's on top of me, all long, lean, powerful muscles. "I'm sure I can be persuaded."

I arch my back a little, rub my naked ass against his already very aroused cock. He groans a little even as he slides an arm under me to cant my hips up higher. And then he's sliding against me, sliding into me, with long, lazy strokes that have my breath catching in my throat.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Chloe,” he murmurs against my ear as his thumb moves to circle my clit.

“Me? I was just lying here minding my own business when—” I break off, gasping, as his cock nudges against my G-spot.

“Like that, huh?” he asks, rolling his hips so that he hits it again and then again.

“What’s not ... what’s not to like?” I squirm against him a little, trying to get my arm out from under me, and he groans.

“Fuck, baby. Do that again.”

So I do, wiggling even as I tighten my internal muscles so that I’m clamping down around him.

“Fuck,” he says again, in a voice gone low and dark.

The sound of his arousal stokes my own and in an instant our early-morning lovemaking session goes from lazy to urgent. Heat slams through me and I reach back, dig my nails into his ass as I pull him into me.

Ethan growls at the quick prick of pain, and then he’s rocking into me so hard that the headboard slams against the wall.

It’s quick and intense and powerful, so powerful. We’ve never done it like this before with Ethan completely on top of me, covering every inch of me with his strong, muscular body. I don’t know why we haven’t, except that he’s always been very careful not to put me in a position where I feel helpless, overwhelmed. Where I feel powerless.

But this, this isn’t about being powerless.

Yes, I’m trapped beneath him. Yes, he’s definitely controlling the fast, hard rhythm of our lovemaking. And still, I’ve never felt more powerful.

How could I not when Ethan is murmuring wicked, dirty things in my ear? When he’s making low, desperate sounds in the back of his throat? When he’s making love to me like I’m the most important person in his world.

“Chloe, fuck, baby. I’m so close. I’m so—”

I turn my head then, grab hold of Ethan’s hair and pull his mouth down to mine. It’s a wild, depraved thing, this kiss, filled with tongue and teeth and desperate curses. And it goes on and on and on as Ethan continues to pound me into the bed.

“I love you,” he tells me as he yanks his mouth from mine. “I love you, Chloe. I love you, I love you, I love you.”

And then it's his turn to shove his hands through my hair, his turn to pull my head back. He fastens his mouth to my neck, to my throat, and ecstasy wells up within me.

"Ethan!" I cry his name as my body hurtles over the edge. And then he's with me, holding me, loving me, as we splinter into a thousand pieces that somehow fit together just perfectly.

\* \* \*

Hours later, I awaken to Ethan's hand on my shoulder, his concerned face inches from mine.

"What's wrong?" I ask, trying to gather my still-scattered wits.

"You need to get dressed. We have to go."

"Go?" I'm still groggy, still out of it from the crazy late night run and too-intense early morning lovemaking.

"The fires are getting bad. We're going to Napa for a couple of days."

"Napa? We can't just go to Napa."

"Well, we can't stay here. There's a total of fifteen fires burning around the city, the air quality is shit and everything is shut down. It'll be days before they get things under control."

"Oh my God. All those people—"

"I know," he tells me grimly, even as he helps me out of bed. "Frost Industries is running buses in the poorest area of towns, where public transportation is overloaded and people don't have the means to get away."

"Where are you taking them?"

"We're working with the city on getting shelters set up in Temecula and Lake Elsinore. At this point the wind is blowing toward the south, and they don't anticipate any changes for a while. Which means we're in trouble down here, but people up north should be safe."

"You're amazing," I tell him, pressing a hard kiss to his mouth. "You know that, right?"

"It's nothing. Anyone who has the means would do it."

"No," I tell him, looking him straight in the eye. "That's what makes you different than so many others."

It's what I should have told Miles when he came here bitching about Ethan, what I should have reminded myself of when I started to have

doubts. Ethan is, no doubt, the most decent guy I know. He helps people for no other reason than because he can. A guy like that doesn't throw in with scum, even if they are his family. A guy like that would never betray me.

"Do I have time for a shower?" I ask as I cross to the closet, suddenly realizing how sticky and gross I feel.

"If you hurry. No more than five minutes. Michael is already outside."

"Michael. You're not leaving him here, are you?" I demand.

"No, Chloe. He's flying the helicopter that's taking us out of here. And I've hired a large plane to take any Frost Industries employees and their families to Vegas who want to evacuate there. Good enough, Your Highness?"

"Perfect. Better than perfect."

"Now move," he says, with a quick swat to my bottom. "Your shower's down to four minutes."

It takes me six, but Ethan doesn't complain. And then we're making a mad dash for the helipad. My hair is soaking wet and I'm shoving a haphazard assortment of clothes into my backpack as he shoves me toward the back door.

But the second we step outside, I can see why he's so concerned. The sky is nearly black with smoke, the air quality so terrible I can barely catch my breath. And as we run toward the helipad, ash actually falls on us, coating our skin and clothes and hair.

"My God," I tell him, looking around with wide eyes. "It's like hell out here. Why didn't you wake me sooner?"

"I woke you as soon as everything was arranged. Waking you up earlier wouldn't have done anything but given you more time to worry."

"No offense, but it looks like there's a lot to worry about."

He presses a kiss to my temple. "We'll be fine. Now move." He points to the helicopter that's waiting on the helipad, rotors whirring. "Michael will have trouble flying that thing if the smoke gets any thicker."

That's all it takes to get me moving, running full out toward the chopper despite my sore muscles and aching lungs.

Within minutes we're airborne, flying straight up through the smoke to where the air is a little clearer. "Why Napa?" I ask Ethan, after we're out of the worst of it.

"Because I have a vineyard there I thought you might like to see."

“A vineyard? You own a vineyard?” I don’t know why that shocks me so much. The man owns a lot, after all. But still. A vineyard? It sounds so decadent and lovely, all at the same time.

Ethan laughs and pulls me into his side. “I own several vineyards, actually. But only one in Napa.”

“Several. Where are the others?”

“Italy. France. Mexico.”

“Of course. Because why wouldn’t you have vineyards all over the world?”

He laughs. “Exactly. Why wouldn’t I?”

I shoot him a dirty look. “You don’t actually want me to answer that, do you?”

“Not even a little bit. This one is my favorite, though.”

That gets my attention. From the beginning, things have been so intense between Ethan and me that I forget there’s still so much I don’t know about him. So much that I want to know. “Why is this one your favorite?”

“Because it makes my favorite pinot noir. And because it was my first.”

“Ahhh, you never forget your first.”

Ethan’s face goes dark and sensual at that, and I can’t stop my breath from hitching in my throat. “What—” My voice cracks, so I clear my throat, try again. It’s hard, though, when Ethan’s looking at me like he wants to devour me right here in the helicopter. “What’s that look for?”

He runs a rough thumb back and forth over my lips. “I like that I was your first. It wouldn’t matter if I wasn’t, wouldn’t make what I feel for you any less overwhelming. But still, I like knowing that I’m your first ... and I plan to be your last, as well.”

My stomach jumps unpleasantly. “Technically, you weren’t—”

He stops me with a look. “I was your first in any way that matters. Brandon is a fucking animal and he got nothing of you. What he took—” He breaks off, shakes his head. “What he took has nothing to do with what we have, with what we are to each other.”

Tears bloom in my eyes at the sweetness—and the intensity—of his words. “I love you,” I tell him when I can finally find my voice again.

“I love you more.”

## Chapter Nineteen

“It’s a vineyard. A real, honest to God vineyard.”

“That’s what I told you.”

We’ve just landed at Ethan’s place at Napa and I’m standing behind the main house, on top of a huge hill that looks down upon acres and acres of grapevines.

“Yeah, but I thought you meant you had a few grapes.”

He shrugs, raises his hands in a self-deprecating gesture as he nods toward the grapevines. “I have more than a few grapes.”

“I can see that now. You also have trucks and grape pickers and a tasting room. And wine-making ... stuff. You have a *vineyard*.”

“Which is exactly what I told you I had.”

“Yeah, but ...”

“But what?”

“But it’s a vineyard!”

He’s full-on grinning now, like I’m the craziest thing he’s ever seen. “You already said that.”

“I know, but it’s—”

“A vineyard,” he finishes for me. “Yes. It is. And not that I’m not having a good time, but are we really going to do this all day?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. What else is there to do?”

“I could show you around, show you all the ‘wine-making stuff’ you were speaking of so eloquently. Or we could go into town, get some lunch. Maybe pick up some groceries.”

“What?” I ask him in mock outrage. “You don’t have a cook? Or someone to stock the house for you? I’m very disappointed in your king of the manor persona.”

“I do, actually, have someone to do all of that, but I was afraid you’d rag me about it if I asked her to do it. I wonder where I could possibly have gotten that idea?”

“I can’t imagine.” I stand on my tiptoes and give him a loud, smacking kiss on the mouth. “But I’m hungry, so food sounds like a good plan. Give me a minute to run a brush through my hair and maybe put on some lip gloss and I’ll be good to go.”

“Do you want me to show you to our room? I can give you a quick tour of the house.”

“I would love a tour. But my stomach’s growling and from out here the thing looks like an only slightly smaller version of the Palace of Versailles, so maybe we’ll wait on the tour until later. I’m not adverse to you pointing me toward the nearest restroom, though, if you don’t mind.”

“Your disdain for my wealth is truly impressive, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Almost as impressive as the wealth itself, huh?” I answer with a roll of my eyes.

“Oh, more so. Definitely more so.” Ethan’s laughing now, his blue eyes glowing as brightly as the low-hanging sun right above our heads. It’s exactly the reaction I’m going for with my banter, considering I’m filled with guilt after the stunt I pulled last night. Not that I don’t think I had a right—have a right, because I’m still not over it if I’m being honest—to be upset, but I can’t stand the fact that I hurt Ethan. That my own issues made me lash out and damage him, when he’s done nothing but love me. Nothing but care for me to the best of his ability.

I’m still not sure how I’m going to get past the news that the man who raped me is one small step away from being a United States Congressman. Any more than I know how I’m going to live with the fact that—if he wins—the man I love helped put him there.

Oh, Ethan says it’s not going to happen. He says he’s working hard to ensure that Brandon never gets the chance to abuse his power again. But Ethan told me he did a lot of work for him before the last few weeks. He’s given him a lot of his own money, since family money doesn’t count as a campaign donation. He’s held a dozen fund-raisers for Brandon as he ran—and won—a seat on the state senate two years ago, almost straight out of college.

So even though he’s withdrawing his support now, much of the damage is already done. Or much of the success, depending how you look at it.

Maybe it'd be smarter to walk away. Actually, there's no maybe about it. It would definitely be smarter. But not easier. And not better.

Not when I love Ethan the way that I do.

Not when I need him just to breathe.

He leads me through the house to the nearest bathroom, and though I'm intent on freshening up and getting out the door to eat, I can't help being awed by the parts of the house I'm seeing. I thought nothing could be as perfect as Ethan's La Jolla house, all high ceilings and huge picture windows in every room that make the most of the ocean views. But this place is just as beautiful, in a different way.

Whereas his La Jolla house is light and modern, this one is warmer, more ornate. With its antiques and elaborate furnishings and warm, cherrywood in every room, it should be a little over the top. But the decorator was brilliant and somehow knew exactly what he or she was doing so that each room seems elegant and warm instead of cold and overdone.

I can't wait to explore—and maybe even match the La Jolla House for number of rooms we've made love in—but right now I'm definitely more interested in eating than I am anything else. Even sex with Ethan. And I never thought I'd say that. But I was too upset to eat lunch or dinner yesterday and since today started with a helicopter ride, after a twenty mile run, I think I've got a right to be famished.

A quick look in the mirror tells me that my six minute shower did me no favors this morning. My hair has dried in frizzy waves that make me look a little like a crazy person—okay, a lot—and my super late night followed by no makeup routine has left me with circles dark enough to look like actual bruises.

I've got to give Ethan credit that he even suggested taking me into town looking like this. I'm seriously one minuscule step away from scaring small children with a single glance.

After digging in my purse, I come up with a banana clip and a small bag of makeup. It's more than I expected to find, to be honest, so I twist my hair up and then do the best that I can with some BB cream, lip gloss and mascara.

I'm certainly not going to win any beauty contests but maybe the small children won't scream quite so loudly ...



Our trip into town is quiet. This is my first time in Napa and I'm kind of overwhelmed at how gorgeous it is. All rolling vineyards and warm sunshine and flowers as far as the eye can see. And while it's horrible what's happening in San Diego right now, I can't help being grateful that I have these few days with Ethan in this beautiful place. Just the two of us, trying to reconnect after all the crap that's been thrown at us these last few weeks.

He takes me to a charming little bistro with rock walls and striped awnings and a truly astonishing menu, which Ethan seems to know quite well. He offers to order for me and does a really nice job of it, considering we've only been on a few real dates.

We dine on rustic French soups, followed by a gorgeous beet salad and the most delicious coq au vin I've ever tasted. It's a lot of food, but I'm hungry enough to do it justice—even with the different wines Ethan insists on ordering to accompany each course. I do draw the line at dessert, so Ethan has a couple packed up for us to eat later, and then we're on our way.

We spend a couple of hours walking around the Historic Napa Mill, a shopping center filled with quaint little boutiques and gourmet food stores. It's a lot of fun strolling hand in hand with Ethan, who knows more about the area than I had ever imagined. He regales me with story after story about Napa Valley and the only moment of discord we have is when he wants to buy me a silk scarf I admire.

It's hand-painted by a local artist and absolutely gorgeous—very impressionistic in style and even the color scheme reminds me a lot of Monet's *The Rose Walk*. And while I like it very much, I'm not inclined to let Ethan spend close to two thousand dollars on it. Not after everything else he's bought me. And not when the lavender bath oil from the shop across the way is just as charming of a souvenir for literally one percent of the cost of the scarf.

On the way to the car, I can tell Ethan's a little annoyed by my refusal to let him buy me the scarf—which in turn makes me anxious. Not anxious enough to change my mind, but more than anxious enough to talk to him about why I refused.

"I'm really not trying to be difficult," I tell him after he pulls into traffic.

"Yeah, well, you're doing a pretty good job of it for not trying." His tone is crisp, acerbic even, but a glance at his face shows me that the right corner

of his mouth is twitching just a little—the way it always does when he’s struggling not to smile.

“Look, I know you have money. I know you have a lot of money and that buying that scarf would mean less than nothing to you—”

“Of course it would.” He looks surprised that I would think otherwise. “Everything I buy for you means something.”

I nearly melt, which I’m pretty sure is not what needs to be going on here. But it happens anyway and by the time I have my emotions under control, he’s pulling the car into the parking lot of a local market. “Can I buy the food?” he asks after he comes around and opens my car door for me. “Or do we need to go dutch on that? I don’t want to step on your toes.”

“Really?” I ask him, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at him.

He holds his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I’m just asking. Want to make sure I’ve got the rules clear.”

“I don’t know. If you intend to be this big of an asshole, then I think I’ll be paying for my own food, thank you very much.”

“I’m the asshole?” He slams the car door, then leans back against it like he has no intention of going anywhere until we have this sorted out. Which is more than fine with me, since it’s a fight that’s been brewing for a while between us. “Do you ever think how it makes me feel that every time I try to give you something, it’s a fight?”

“That’s not fair.”

“No, it isn’t fair, to either of us. But it is true. So why don’t we get to the bottom of this once and for all so we can go back to enjoying the day. What is it about me buying you presents that makes you so goddamn uncomfortable?”

“First of all, when I said it wasn’t fair, I meant that it’s not all your presents that make me uncomfortable,” I tell him. When he looks at me like I’m not being honest, I insist, “It isn’t. I love the things you send me—the seashells, the tea, the books, the hair combs. I even kept the suit without a hassle, though I have to admit that grated on me a little bit. But I needed it and I knew it was your way of making up for what happened on the beach.”

“Just to be clear, there’s nothing I regret about what happened on the beach that night. And nothing that I want to make amends for.”

“You know what I mean. The rain ruined my suit which probably wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t ...”

“If I hadn’t ... Oh, right. If I hadn’t ripped your clothes off and fucked you up against a building?”

I roll my eyes, try to pretend I’m not blushing. “Yes. Exactly. That.”

“So you took the suit because I was at least as responsible for ruining its predecessor as you were.”

“Uh, no. You were way more responsible for it. You ripped every button off my blouse. And broke the zipper on my pants.”

He smiles reminiscently. “I was in a hurry.”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that.”

“So, you took the suit. But the blender, the scarf, the belly chain—they don’t sit well with you.”

“They don’t. No. I mean, I love the belly chain and if you want it back at this point you’ll probably have to pry it out of my cold, dead hand. But if I’d had any idea what it cost when you first gave it to me, I never would have accepted it.”

“Why not?” Ethan demands, and for the first time since we started the discussion he seems truly frustrated. “That chain is more than just a piece of jewelry and we both know it. So why would you object to something that’s a symbol of the commitment we have to each other? Something that helps ground you and makes you feel more secure in yourself and in our relationship?”

“Don’t talk about it like it’s a collar,” I tell him.

“That’s exactly what it is and you and I both know it. And I don’t appreciate you pretending otherwise. You want to talk, we’ll talk. But I’m not up for bullshit right now.”

It’s probably the toughest Ethan has ever talked to me and it gets my back up a little. Then again, a look into his stubborn blue eyes tells me that that’s exactly what he’s going for. He’s trying to piss me off. Trying to get me to react when I’m trying so hard to be calm about this.

But even knowing what he’s doing doesn’t stop me from reacting to it. “And I’m not up for this macho act you’ve got going on, either, so you might want to reconsider it,” I say with a definite bite.

“If you don’t like it, then tell me what’s really going on. Don’t hand me some bullshit line about liking sea glass but not being able to accept anything that costs over twenty bucks.”

“It’s not bullshit!” I tell him, and for the first time, I’m getting angry.

“It kind of is,” he answers. “And I’m getting damn sick of it. So tell me the truth. What do you have against my money?”

“Nothing!” I assure him. “I know how hard you’ve worked for everything you have. You deserve everything you’ve got.”

“Okay, then.” He eyes me skeptically. “If it’s not the money you’re upset about, then what do you have against me personally?”

“Seriously? Now you’re just being stupid.”

“Am I? I don’t think so. Because it has to be one or the other—you don’t like my money or you don’t like me. Nothing else makes sense.”

“I’m completely in love with you, Ethan. You know that.”

“Then I don’t get it, Chloe. If it’s not the money and it’s not me, what is it?”

“Your family bought my silence for three million dollars.” The words come out before I even know I’m going to say them. But it’s the truth and if we’re going to make this thing work, Ethan might as well know exactly what it is he’s dealing with. Exactly what it is he’s up against.

“They threw their money at me to get Brandon off the hook and it worked, just like they knew it would. I mean, I took it, right?”

“Your parents took it—”

“Yeah, but they weren’t the ones who had to go to the police station and recant their statement, were they? No, that was me. I’m the one who had to walk in there all alone and tell them I’d made the whole thing up. I’m the one who had to sit there and be threatened with being charged with filing a fake police report while your brother just walked away. And I’m the one who had to sign the non-disclosure agreement, promising that upon payment I would never speak of the rape in association with Brandon’s name again. And I never did, not until he showed up on your doorstep three weeks ago. But you already knew, so I guess it didn’t count.”

Ethan looks stricken when he reaches for me. “Baby, I’m sorry. I swear, I’ve never thought about it like that. If I had—”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about.” But still I shrug him off. I can’t stand the idea of him touching me while I tell him just how low I sunk. Just how pathetic I was. “You’re not the one who sat there watching them hand your father a check for three million dollars. And you’re not the one who went home, climbed in the bathtub and tried so hard, so hard, to work up the nerve to slice your wrists wide open.”

“Jesus Christ. Chloe. Jesus Christ.” He reaches for me again and again I shrug him off. “You can’t tell me and then not let me hold you.”

“I’m okay.”

“I know you are. But I’m not. Baby, I’m not.” He looks like he’s going to try to touch me again, try to hold me, but at the last second he lifts his hand to the back of his neck and rubs at it instead. I’m not sure whether I’m grateful or devastated.

In the end, I figure it doesn’t really matter either way. I just want to finish this story. Just want to get it over with. “I was never strong enough to do it. I’d go to school every day, listen to your brother and his friends call me a whore and a slut. I’d fight them off in the stairwell when they groped my breasts or tried to shove a hand up my skirt. When they pushed me onto my knees and told me how much I wanted it. When they unzipped their pants and tried to make me—”

My voice breaks and I realize it’s because I’m crying. Again. Damn it. Why is there always more? More pain. More tears. More stupid, psychotic shit I’ve got to wade through because I was once an idiotic fifteen-year-old girl who made a lot of idiotic mistakes.

After I fell for Ethan, I thought it was over. Thought I’d moved past it, gotten over it. And now, here I am in the middle of a goddamn parking lot in fucking Napa Valley and it’s all right here between us again. Where it always is.

Where I’m desperately afraid it always will be.

I look down at the ground now, because I can’t tell the rest of the story if I’m looking at Ethan. Not this, after everything else. Not when I still don’t know which part I’m most ashamed of. The fact that I wanted to kill myself or the fact that I was too chicken to go through with it.

“Every day for a year, I tried. I got home, went upstairs to the bathroom, got out the straight edged razor I’d bought for just that purpose. And I’d try. I’d try and try and try until my arms were covered with shallow little cuts. Hesitation wounds, the shrinks call them. That was me, always hesitating. Never able to get the job done, no matter how hard I tried.”

I brush impatiently at the last stray tears sliding down my face as I wait for Ethan to say something, anything. He hasn’t said a word since that muttered, Jesus Christ, when I first started talking. I’m not sure what his silence means but I figure it’s probably not good.

## Chapter Twenty

I'm not sure how long we stand there. Long enough for people to load a cart full of groceries into the SUV next to us and pull away. Long enough for the little girl sitting on the bench in front of the store to finish her ice cream cone. More than long enough for me to feel it as those pieces that had lined up so well last night get all mixed up again.

We wait and wait and wait.

I keep expecting Ethan to say something. For him to tell me that he understands, that it's okay—or that he doesn't and we've made a gigantic mistake. At this point, I'm not sure which of those would be worse. I just know that I can't stand the waiting much longer. Not if I have any hope of staying sane.

He won't even look at me, hasn't let his eyes meet mine once since I told him I'd tried to kill myself.

Finally, I can't take the silence any longer. "Ethan."

His eyes jump to mine. They're blurry and out of focus and goddamnit I must be crying again. Except when I scrub a hand across my cheek, it's dry. That's when it hits me. I'm not crying. Ethan is.

"Oh, baby, please. Don't. Don't do that." This time I reach for him and he's the one who flinches away. It slices deep. Not just the rejection but the knowledge that once again I've inadvertently hurt him. Rejected him.

"If you would let me, I would give you every penny that I have and every penny that I'll ever make."

"Is that what you think I want? Your money?" It's like he hasn't heard anything that I said.

"Not even a little bit. But it's what I think you deserve." He wraps one big, calloused hand around my neck and pulls me gently toward him. "It doesn't matter how many times those little bastards called you a whore. It doesn't make you one. And it doesn't matter how many times you told

yourself you were weak. You will never be anything but the strongest woman I have ever met.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t put me on some kind of pedestal—”

“I wish. I wish I could put you on a pedestal. I wish I could put you somewhere under glass, where I could keep you safe from all this shit you never should have had to deal with. I wish I would have known what Brandon was like a long time ago, wish I could have kept you out of his hands that night and every other one you had to put up with his bullshit.

“And I want you to know—I need you to know—that when I buy you a present, it’s not because I think that you expect it. Or that I feel like I have to do it to make you happy. Because that’s not it at all, Chloe.” He leans over, presses his forehead to mine. “It’s only that I love you and I want to give you the world.”

My throat is tight before he’s even half done with his speech and it takes everything I’ve got to keep from breaking down all over again. But he’s still sounding pretty shaken and I figure in any couple, at any one time, there’s only room for one of them to be losing their shit. And right now, that one appears to be Ethan.

And so I swallow a few times, wait it out. And only when I’m certain that I can sound normal do I say, “You know, right, that I feel the same way about you? I think you deserve everything and it bothers me that you’re stuck with me. I’m neurotic and broken and so far from normal that I probably wouldn’t recognize it if it hit me over the head.”

“Stuck with you? Jesus, Chloe, I’m not stuck with you. I’m blessed with you.”

“Oh, Ethan, love, I think you’ve got that backward.”

“No. No, I don’t.”

He brushes his lips over mine and this kiss, our first kiss in what seems like forever ... it’s a tapestry. A thousand stories and a thousand mistakes and a thousand glittering strands of light all threaded together to make something beautiful. To make something real.

“I love you,” he whispers against my mouth.

I laugh and if it’s a little soggy, there’s no one around but us to notice. “I don’t know why. I’m crazy.”

“Yeah, but you’re my kind of crazy, so ...” He steps back then, starts to open the car door back up.

“I thought we were going grocery shopping?”

“Fuck grocery shopping. I’m taking you home.”

“Why? I mean, I’m still full from lunch, but presumably at some point we will want to eat again.”

“Yeah, well, this is where being rich comes in handy. Because I actually do have someone who’s job it is to stock up my kitchen.”

“But we’re already here. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, and this time it sounds like he thinks I really might be crazy.

“Please. I just want to do something normal for a little while. Something every other couple in America has to do.”

That sucks the argument out of him, just as I knew it would.

In minutes, we’re pushing a cart around the supermarket, picking up whatever strikes our fancy. Cherry Garcia ice cream. Brie cheese. Organic eggs. French bread. Cinnamon rolls. Tortellini salad. All in all, it takes about half an hour and goes very smoothly. At least until we get up to the cash register and I find myself staring at the tabloids as we wait our turn in line.

There’s a part of me that’s still locked in my head after our conversation in the parking lot and so it takes me a couple of minutes to actually read the lurid headlines I’m staring at. When I do, I have to grab on to Ethan to keep from falling as the whole world turns to quicksand around me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks even as he wraps a steadying arm around my waist.

I can’t speak so instead I just point at the magazines.

One of the headlines reads “Ethan Frost’s New Girlfriend: Portrait of a Gold Digger” while another takes the more subtle route: “Millionaire Playboy Ethan Frost Robs the Cradle ... Or Is It the Other Way Around?” And if all that’s not horrifying enough, sitting right in the middle of all the magazines is one of the most popular gossip rags. It’s cover is a picture of Brandon, with the headline, “America’s New Sweetheart?” It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to vomit right in the middle of the conveyer belt.

\* \* \*



Ethan gets us out of there within minutes. He bags the groceries for the checker and then all but throws his cash at her before sweeping me into the crook of his arm and bustling me out to the car. I'm so out of it at this point that I don't even remind him to get his change.

Most of the ride home is a blur. I don't notice any of the gorgeous scenery I waxed so poetic over during our ride to town. Don't pay attention to the traffic that has gone from light to horrific in the space of a few hours. Don't see or hear anything, really, except Ethan telling me over and over again how sorry he is that this is happening.

"It's not your fault," I tell him each time he says it. But it's just lip service. I'm not even sure what he's saying, let alone how I'm responding.

Eventually the shock wears off, is replaced by anger. I know Ethan's a famous guy and I know him having a girlfriend is news. But the endemic sexism of the headlines. The idea that Ethan is only with me for my looks and I'm only with him for his money is insulting as hell—to both of us. Not to mention pretty much the opposite of how things really are. I'd be a hell of a lot happier if Ethan had less money. If he was just an ordinary guy—and he knows it.

Who the hell are these tabloids to judge me based on the fact that I'm a student and an intern? I work for one of the most prestigious corporations in America and I'm applying to law school in less than six months. Surely that should count for something?

It doesn't, of course it doesn't. The truth rarely matters unless it can sell magazines. Nothing proves that more than a magazine calling Brandon Jacobs "America's Sweetheart."

We finally—finally—make it back to the house and Ethan parks the car before running around to my side to help me out. "I'm not an invalid," I tell him as I get myself out of the car and up to the front door. "I really am fine, you know. It was just the shock of it, after everything we had just been talking about."

"I know. And I'm so—"

"If you tell me you're sorry one more time, I'm really not going to be responsible for my actions. But if it makes you feel better, you can carry in the groceries while I languish on the couch like a damsel in distress."

"I'm good with that."

I roll my eyes at him. "Somehow I knew you would be."

I, however, have never been much for languishing, so as Ethan carries the bags in, I make quick work of putting them away in his state-of-the-art kitchen. I thought the kitchen in the La Jolla house was fancy, but this one is something else. Two stoves, a built-in grill, refrigerator and warming drawers not to mention huge double ovens. Napa is known as one of the food capitals of the world and I can't help wondering if that's why this kitchen is such a chef's paradise. If it's just part of the culture here.

And yes, I am well aware that I'm focusing on things like Ethan's Sub-Zero refrigerator and state-of-the-art range because it keeps me from thinking about those tabloids. And about the fact that I'm once again being called a whore—only this time it's not just my classmates who get to hear the insults. It's the whole damn world.

When I'm done putting away the last of the groceries, I wander through the huge family room and down the hall, looking for Ethan. I find him in the back of the house, in the master suite. He's running a bubble bath with my new lavender bath oils and the entire bathroom smells like a summer meadow.

"Careful," I tell him, sliding my arms around his waist from behind. "You keep smelling this good, with your pretty face, someone's going to think you're a girl."

"Nothing wrong with that," he tells me, tossing a quick grin over his shoulder. "I like girls."

"I think I've heard that about you somewhere." I press a few kisses between his shoulder blades, reveling in the way his whole body just melts at my ministrations.

"You okay?" he asks after a minute. He's careful to keep his gaze focused on the running water while he waits for my reply.

"I'm fine." And if it's not quite the truth, well then no one needs to know that but me. "Besides, if I'm going to be your girlfriend, I'm going to have to get used to the barbs. There're a lot of women who would give their favorite pair of Louboutins to be in my position."

"Don't you mean your shoes?" Ethan says with a quiet smirk.

"Oh, absolutely. My bargain flip-flops really are all the rage right now."

He finally turns then with a laugh and wraps me up in a huge bear hug. And maybe it's weak of me, but I can't help burrowing in. Can't help clinging for a couple of long, quiet moments.

“Why don’t you take a bath?” he suggests when I finally let go. “After that run last night, you’ve got to be sore.”

I am. And it’s that soreness that keeps reminding me that my headlong flight into the darkness really did happen just last night. With everything that’s happened since—good and bad—the argument that caused me to run in the first place seems like it happened such a long, long time ago.

“I plan on it.” I start unbuttoning his shirt slowly, carefully. “Why don’t you join me?”

A quick hand on mine stays my fingers before they can take care of more than the first two. “I’d love to, but I have a couple of business calls to make. I want to make sure the buses got everyone evacuated and ensure that the plane landed safely in Vegas. But the calls shouldn’t take too long. When I’m done, I’ll make us a light dinner. Sound good?”

“It sounds very good. Though I’ll miss you when I’m soaking in this big tub all by myself.”

Ethan grins. “Yes, well, we’ll definitely have to remedy that before we head back to San Diego. I wouldn’t want you to be lonely.”

I laugh, as he intends me to, and then watch him walk away before slipping out of my clothes and sinking into the fragrant, steaming water. About a million different thoughts bombard me the second I start to relax, but I just let them flow over me, refusing to focus on anything more strenuous than trying to decide what wines I want to try out at the vineyard tomorrow. Definitely the pinot noir, since Ethan says it’s his favorite. But I’m a sparkly girl myself and I can’t help hoping he’s got a nice moscato for me to try, as well.

Exhausted after the events of the last two days, I lounge in the bathtub for nearly an hour, slipping in and out of a light doze. When the water finally cools, I reluctantly drag myself out of the tub and go in search of my hastily packed backpack.

I find it next to the bed, and a quick rummage through proves that I really was half asleep when I packed the thing. There are no pajamas, nothing at all for me to lounge around the house in. Instead, I’ve got a pair of jeans and a couple of blouses. A bright pink halter top rounds out my abysmally bad wardrobe choices.

After studying my severely limited options for a few seconds, I decide screw it. I’m exhausted and the last thing I want is to squeeze myself back

into a pair of skinny jeans for the rest of the night. Instead, I rummage through Ethan's drawers until I come across an extra-large T-shirt that's been worn so much that most of the lettering on the back has come off. It feels incredibly soft to the touch and at the moment, I couldn't ask for more than that. I slide it over my head, add a pair of underwear and consider myself dressed.

I head down the hall to the kitchen, figuring I can help Ethan put the finishing touches on dinner. But when I get there, the kitchen is empty and it's obvious Ethan hasn't been in here since he carried the groceries in well over an hour ago.

Figuring he's hung up on one of the numerous business calls he had to make, I rummage in the fridge, trying to decide what to make for dinner.

Since I'm still not that hungry, despite the fact that it's after eight, I decide on a cheese plate. That way I can still have room for some of the bread pudding with rum sauce that's been calling my name since I turned it down at lunch.

Humming softly to myself—another trick I've picked up that helps keep my mind busy so I don't dwell on stuff I don't want to think about—I pull out some grapes and strawberries to go on the cheese plate. I wash them thoroughly, still humming, which is probably why I don't hear Ethan yelling until I actually turn the water off.

It's an unusual sound for him—Ethan's such an even-keeled guy that I've only really heard him yell once in the whole time I've known him—that I'm out of the kitchen and halfway down the hall before I register what it is he's yelling about. Which, in this case, is me.

"I don't want excuses, Anthony. I want to know what the fuck is going on. This whole thing has been a clusterfuck from the very beginning and I'm getting damn fucking sick of it!"

At first, I'm kind of shocked by the language alone—Ethan's no angel, but he doesn't normally swear in a repeated pattern like that unless he's pissed about something. Really pissed. And definitely not at his employees.

But it doesn't take long for my sluggish brain to catch on. This call is about me. About the stories in the tabloids.

"I understand that you've spoken with the media sources. But I also understand that you had an arrangement with them. What happened

yesterday with MSNBC and what I saw today in that supermarket aisle are not reflecting that agreement.”

He’s silent for a moment, obviously listening to whatever Anthony has to say. And then he’s yelling again. “Something’s fishy here, and I want to know what it is. Media—especially media like those rags—don’t circumvent current media agreements unless they’ve got a bigger fish on the line. Someone is throwing their weight around over this and I want to know who it is. And I want it made explicitly clear that Chloe is off-limits. If they run another uncorroborated story about her again, we’re going after them. They can fuck with me but I’ll be goddamned if they fuck with her.

“And find out who’s bankrolling these fluff pieces about my brother. Someone’s got to have the deep pockets and I want to know who it is.”

Another pause, and then, “Yeah, damn right. Whoever it is has thrown in on the wrong side of this argument. They’ll get one warning and then I’m taking them apart, too. My brother’s political campaign isn’t going to last the month. Not if I have anything to say about it and I do.

“Yeah, okay, Anthony, thanks for your help. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, see where we stand. Yeah, okay. Get some—”

He turns in the middle of the sentence, freezes as he sees me standing there watching him with what I’m sure are wide eyes.

“Look, I’ve got to go,” he says, clicking off even though it sounds like Anthony is in mid-sentence.

For long seconds, neither of us move. We just stand there staring at each other across the empty expanse of hallway. Then Ethan slips his cell phone into his back pocket and walks toward me, arms outstretched in obvious entreaty. “I can explain that call—”

“You don’t need to,” I tell him, crossing the last few feet of distance between us. And then I’m wrapping my arms around his neck, pressing my lips to his. And thanking God that I had the good fortune and even better sense to fall in love with Ethan Frost.

I intend it to be a soft kiss, a sweet one.

A kiss where I thank him for the way he’s fighting for me and show him that I’m moving past every thing that’s come before.

A kiss where I show him I’m sorry for the role I’ve played in hurting us and that I’m fighting for him just as hard.

He seems okay with the sweetness—more than okay as I can feel him soaking it up like a desert soaks up rain—but the moment his lips meet mine, it’s like something spontaneously combusts deep inside of me.

Need licks through my veins, taking me over, taking me deep, so that all I can think of is Ethan. All I want and need and feel is Ethan.

I pull him more tightly against me, run my tongue over the seam of his lips in a desperate bid to taste him. To take him.

He groans deep in his throat, parts his lips, and then I’m in. Biting, sucking, licking my way deep inside him. He tastes salty like the ocean, dark like the pinot noir he’s such a fan of. Sweet like those damn blueberries that I just can’t get away from.

But on him, they taste good. *He* tastes good, this man who has so many sides, so many facets, so many puzzle pieces that I’m just now learning how to put together.

“Chloe, baby,” he breathes into my mouth even as I delve in for another taste. “Are you sure? Are you okay?”

“I love you,” I tell him. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

It’s obviously all the reassurance he needs, his hands slipping down to cup my ass and lift me so that I’m twined around him—my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist, my body wrapped as completely around him as I can get without actually crawling inside of him.

And then he’s carrying me, moving down the hall as fast as he can considering the fact that my mouth is still frantically devouring his.

We crash into the wall a couple of times, barely make it around a sharp corner. Stumble over an antique cabinet in the hallway. Ethan stops there for a second, balancing me on top of it as he rips my underwear down my thighs. I expect him to fumble with his pants and slam into me, brace myself for heady pleasure-pain of having him so abruptly inside of me.

But it doesn’t happen. Instead, he drops to his knees in front of me, buries his face between my thighs as—no preamble, no warning—he thrusts his tongue deep inside me.

I’m so on edge that I go off like a rocket, slamming straight into climax at the first stroke of his tongue against my inner walls. He makes an encouraging sound deep in his throat, the vibrations of it only making the sudden, riotous pleasure more intense.

“Ethan!” I gasp out, clutching at his hair, twining my legs around his shoulders, lifting my sex up to his mouth like some kind of ancient pagan offering. He takes me through the climax, his mouth and hands and body wringing every ounce of sensation out of me, before he once again climbs to his feet.

I spread my knees, pull his hips flush against me. He’s long and hard and feels so good that I can’t help rocking against him even though my whole body is still lit up from that last orgasm.

I reach between us, try to fumble open Ethan’s zipper—I want him inside me, need to make him feel as good as he just made me feel—but he just scoops me up again and continues down the hall to the master bedroom.

Admittedly, this time it’s with even less finesse—he’s rushing and stumbling over thin air, his fingers clutching my ass so tightly that I’m sure I’ll have bruises before this is all over.

Thank God.

It’s a strange reaction to have to being black and blue, but it’s also an honest one. I love being marked by him, love being able to see the signs of his possession long after we’ve made love. Like the belly chain that I never take off, they make me feel secure in a way that nothing else does. They ground me in my body, in my love for him and his for me.

“Please,” I start chanting as Ethan gets to the end of the hallway and—instead of making the turn—presses me against the wall, his cock hitting my clit at just the right angle despite the jeans he’s still wearing. “Please, please, please.”

“Fuck,” he groans into my mouth, thrusting against me in a way that makes my head spin and my body start to ache all over again. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

He’s thrusting against me in earnest now, his powerful hips and thighs slamming me back into the wall again and again and again. “I want you in my bed. In our bed,” he gasps out, ripping his mouth from mine even as he continues to rock against me. “I’ve dreamed of seeing you there. Your hair spread over the pillows, your skin pink and rosy against the sheets.”

“Oh, God.” Just the words—uttered in that deep, gravelly voice that means he’s reaching his limits—take me higher until another orgasm beckons just out of reach. “Next time. Please, next time.”

Shoving my hands into his hair, I grab on hard and pull his mouth back down to mine.

“Fuck,” Ethan curses again, turning me away from the wall and walking me back toward the bed.

He lays me down. Yanks my nightshirt over my head. Strips off his own clothes. And then he’s falling on me, throwing my legs over his shoulders as he thrusts deep. Thrusts home.

It’s fast and mind-numbing and hot, so hot. I come twice more while he moves inside me, his body pounding into mine. His hands touching me everywhere—everywhere.

Just when I think I’m finished, that I can’t take any more pleasure—any more sensation at all—Ethan cants my hips up even higher. Slips a hand between us. Strokes my clit. And sends me straight into the most powerful orgasm yet.

This time he comes, too, emptying himself inside me even as he calls my name over and over again like a mantra. Or a prayer.

When it’s over, when Ethan is asleep and I almost am, all the events of the day come crashing back at me. And I can’t help wondering when enough is going to be enough.

Enough pain.

Enough trauma.

Enough confusion and rage and fear.

I want normal and this ... none of this is normal. Neither the bad nor the good.

Ethan moves against me in his sleep, his hand curving around my waist, pulling me into his body, into his heart. And I forget for a little while what it is I *want* and concentrate instead on what I *have*.

Because Ethan is enough. Ethan is more than enough. As long as I concentrate on that, the rest of this stuff can take care of itself.



## Chapter Twenty-one

“Thanks again, Rodrigo!” I say as I climb a little unsteadily out of the passenger side of one of the vineyard trucks.

“No problem, *Senorita Chloe*. Call me if you need anything else.”

“I will. But I think I’m good. You have a good night! Give that beautiful toddler of yours a kiss for me.”

He laughs, blushes a little. “*Si*. I will, I will. My little *Padma* will love it! Her mother says she’s talked about nothing but you since she met you this morning.”

“Well, that’s only fair, since I’ve spent a good part of the day talking about her, as well. She’s such a lovely child.”

“*Si, si*. I definitely think there is a mutual admiration society going on between the two of you.”

“There is at that,” I tell him with another wave as I stumble toward the front steps.

“Are you okay, *Senorita Chloe*?” Rodrigo calls. “Do you need help into the house?”

“No, I’m good. I’m good.” I wave him away. “Just a little tipsy.”

Then again, tipsy might be an understatement. I have a sneaking suspicion that I might actually be really, really drunk. Though I swear, I’m not exactly sure how it happened. One minute I was having a good time at the wine tasting, listening to Lucia expound with enthusiasm on the various types of red wines Ethan’s vineyard is known for.

She was very excited about a full-bodied cabernet, which was a little too dry for me. But the pinot noir she poured for me was as fantastic as Ethan promised. As was the house blend of reds and a couple of others that I lost track of somewhere along the line.

The typical wine tasting consists of four small glasses of wine, but being the vineyard owner’s girlfriend comes with some perks, I guess, because it seems like I had at least double that. Maybe more. All I know is I tried a lot

of wine today, including a delicious moscato. I bought several bottles of it—or should I say, accepted them as a gift, take that Ethan Frost—and can't wait to show them to Tori. If there's anyone who likes sparkling wines more than I do, it's that girl.

Drunk, happy, more than a little in love, I all but float into the house determined to find Ethan—and maybe convince him to have a short middle-of-the-afternoon nap with me. After a not-so-short middle-of-the-afternoon lovemaking session ...

I have to admit, just the thought of finding Ethan in the middle of some boring business call and dragging him off to bed makes me more than a little horny. Then again, it could be the wine. Or the fact that I am totally relaxed for the first time in longer than I can remember. Whatever it is, it feels good and I plan on going with it. The real world will intrude soon enough.

It's our fourth day in Napa and while the forest fires are finally getting contained in San Diego—after burning hundreds of thousands of acres that included businesses, homes and even part of the famous Safari Park—Ethan has decreed that we don't have to leave until Sunday. Which means we've got two more glorious days up here. Two days that I plan on taking full advantage of.

Humming, this time out of happiness rather than a determination not to think, I make my way down the front hall to Ethan's office. He's spent pretty much every minute with me since we got here, but this afternoon he had some calls to take care of—Trifecta merger type calls—so he got Rodrigo to babysit me. He called it showing me around the vineyard, but I know a babysitter when I see one.

I probably would have been insulted if Rodrigo, his wife, Lucia, and their daughter, Padma, hadn't been such delightful company. But they were—so happy and charming and nice, so nice—that I couldn't do anything but enjoy spending time with them.

And now I'm back and tipsy—or drunk, depending on how you want to look at it—and horny. If I'm very lucky, Ethan will be willing to take advantage of the second in order to do something about the third.

Except when I get to Ethan's office, he's not there. He's not in our bedroom, either, or out on the patio taking a call as he often likes to do. He's not in the kitchen or the family room or the upstairs media room. In

fact, he's not in any of the places I've seen him frequent since we got here and I'm beginning to think I missed my chance. That he's gone on some business errand and I'll have to spend the rest of the afternoon amusing myself.

Suddenly, everything seems just a little dimmer, a little less sparkly.

I want Ethan.

Pulling out my phone, I text him a quick, *Where are you*, then wait impatiently for an answer that doesn't come. Which is strange—unless he's in the middle of something really, really important, Ethan never ignores a text from me.

I'm not too alarmed yet—how can I be when we're in Napa and everything is beautiful? He's probably just on a business call that he can't break away from. Or in a meeting where it would be rude to pull out his phone to check it.

That's all it is, I assure myself as I make my way back to the kitchen. While I'm enjoying the wine buzz, I should probably have a little food to help soak it up. Especially if Ethan's not around to put the buzz to good use.

So that's where I am when it happens. In the kitchen, bent over and rummaging in the refrigerator for the last of the tortellini salad. I'm humming at the top of my lungs and composing a law school application essay in my head when a cultured, well-modulated voice sounds from behind me.

"Well, well, nice to know nothing has changed. You're still a low-class little thing, aren't you?"

I whirl around at the voice—I've only heard it once before but I know exactly who it belongs to. Aural memories are powerful things and the last time I heard it was the most miserable day of my life. I've never forgotten it. Never forgotten the woman it belongs to. And never forgotten the emotions I was feeling the last time I heard it.

Sure enough, Vanessa Frost Jacobs is standing at the doorway into the kitchen. Ethan's mother. Brandon's mother.

She's dressed in a pale pink suit that costs more than my entire wardrobe—the Armani suit Ethan just bought me notwithstanding—and she looks like a beautiful, blond viper. It's truth in advertising, if you ask me. I've never met a more cold-blooded, scaly and poisonous woman in my life. Not

to mention the fact that she's more than willing to take a bite out of anyone who gets in her way.

Judging from the narrow-eyed look she's giving me at the moment, I'm the latest offender—and more than likely her latest victim. But I've already been one of her victims, and I swore to myself when it happened that I would never let it happen again. No matter how much she scares me, no matter how intimidated I am by her frigid, frankly terrifying confidence, I'm not going to back down to her. Not here. Not now. Not this time. I'm a far cry from the fifteen-year-old girl I was when she last tangled with me.

The thought gives me comfort, or it would if I wasn't so damn drunk. As it is, I stand frozen to the spot, swaying and seeing two of her as I try desperately to sober up.

"Chloe, isn't it?" she says as if we're at an afternoon garden party. As if she has no idea who I am. As if she isn't here specifically to see me.

I know it's all part of a plan—she can't make it seem like she actually cares enough to remember my name. But she does, oh she does. I wonder how much it must be grating on her that I'm with Ethan now. A hell of a lot, judging from the fact that she's here. And looking like she swallowed a lemon.

"It is," I tell her after a long minute of trying to decide how I want to play this. Besides plucking her bald-headed and then rolling her and her pretty pink suit down the huge hill at the back of the house, I mean. "And you're Vanessa."

I didn't think it was possible, but her eyes narrow even more at that. Ethan's mother definitely doesn't like being on a first name basis with me. It's a feeling that is completely mutual. But no way does she get the advantage here. No freaking way.

"It is. Nice to see that you have no problem making yourself at home in my son's house."

"Yes, well, he's a generous guy. And since we're practically living together anyway ..."

"Are you, now?" She looks past me and for the first time I realize I'm still standing in front of the fridge, the door wide open. Damn it. Stupid wine tasting. Faced with this—with her—it doesn't seem nearly as fun as it did just a few minutes ago. Not when I know I'll need every last one of my wits about me to deal with her.

I move to close the fridge, but my balance isn't quite right and I end up stumbling backward with the door, bumping my hip on the handle.

"Good Lord, you're drunk. And it's only two-thirty in the afternoon." For the first time, she doesn't bother with the mask and simply lets her disgust shine through.

It's a lot of disgust and I can feel myself wilting under her disdain. The knowledge infuriates me and I straighten my spine. Force myself to maintain eye contact. Keep at bay the memories of that long ago day in the lawyer's office when she was so icily polite and horrendously rude all at the same time. She has no right to judge me. Not this woman who has done so many truly awful things.

"Look, Vanessa," I say, forcing myself to put my big girl panties on and deal with the situation at hand instead of lingering in the past that seems to be closing in on me from every side. "Ethan isn't here right now. But when he gets back, I'll be sure to let him know you sto—"

"Are you kicking me out of my son's house?" she interrupts and for the first time I see a flicker of surprise on her overly Botoxed face. It actually looks more like incredulity, but I'll take what I can get.

"Don't think of it as me kicking you out. Think of it as me uninviting you until a later date."

"Oh, Chloe. What makes you think you have the right to uninvite me from anything in my son's life? Ever?"

Even as recently as a couple of weeks ago, my resolve would have faltered in the face of all that disdain. All that superiority. But that was before I'd faced Ethan's secrets, before I'd had to learn what I could live with and what I couldn't. And while I can live with a lot for Ethan, this woman isn't one of those things—and she never will be.

"Because Ethan's with me now. And if I don't want you here, I promise you, you won't be here." They're brave words, though I don't know how true they actually are. It doesn't matter, though. Nothing does at this moment but getting her out of here before I lose it completely. I thought I could handle it, thought I could handle her, but already the panic is crawling up the back of my throat. If I was sober I could do this. But drunk, I'm no match for her and I'm smart enough to know it.

Amazingly, my little display of bravado works. I can tell that I've scored by the way her shoulders straighten and the way her spine gets even more

stiff. Well, that and the way her lips twist together like she's been sucking on a particularly sour lemon.

"You don't actually think I'm going to let you get your hooks into another one of my sons, do you?"

"My hooks?" It's my turn to stare at her incredulously. "I'm not a fisherman. And for the record, I never had my hooks—or anything else of mine—into Brandon."

"But you don't deny that you have them in Ethan."

"I wouldn't put it quite that way, Vanessa." She almost flinches at my use of her given name this time and it gives me an unspeakable amount of joy. "Ethan and I are together and we're going to stay together."

"I know you're playing for keeps this time, but let me assure you, Chloe, my son will never marry the likes of you. You may think that you're going to end up with access to all of his money and property, but I can promise you that that's never going to happen."

I don't want access to his money, never have, never will. But I don't feel like telling her that. Besides, it's not like she'll believe me. The tabloids might call *me* a gold digger, but Vanessa Frost Jacobs has trophy wife written all over her too-smooth baby face.

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see what I have access to in six months," I tell her smoothly. "And what you no longer have access to." It's a bluff, pure and simple, but there must be something in my demeanor that convinces her because the cool façade crumbles right in front of my eyes. What's left is a fire-breathing dragon that I'm not sure won't go for my eyes at the first opportunity.

"How much?" she asks after several interminable seconds drag by.

"For what?"

"You know very well for what."

"I don't, actually. You're going to have to spell it out for me."

Her jaw clenches and unclenches then, much like Ethan's does when he's annoyed with me. Or worried. I don't like knowing that about her, don't like anything that connects her to him at all. Somehow it makes all of this just seem all the more real.

"Very well, then. How much is my son going to have to pay to get rid of you this time?"

“Your son? This time?” I ask, confused by her wording. “I don’t want a penny from Brandon. I never have.”

“We’re not talking about Brandon.” I see it then, the triumph in her eyes. And for the first time, I realize that I haven’t been holding my own against her at all. She’s just been drawing me in, playing with me, like a spider with a fly, and now I’m caught in her web just as she always intended. “We’re talking about Ethan.”

And though I know it’s a bad idea, though every instinct I have is screaming at me to walk away, to not fall into the trap, I can’t help myself. Can’t stop myself from clarifying even though I know no good will come of it. “I’ve never taken a cent from Ethan and I never will.”

She laughs then, actually laughs. “Some might call you naïve, but I prefer to call things like they are. You’re stupid, Chloe. Stupid and ignorant and weak. If you weren’t so determined to land one of my sons, I might even feel bad for you. But you are and I don’t.”

She crosses the kitchen then, until her bloodless, smiling face is only a few inches from mine. And that’s when she says it. That’s when she blows my whole world apart.

“Five years ago, Brandon’s father was in the middle of a cash crunch. It happens sometimes, when most of your wealth is tied up in real estate and industry. Be that as it may, we didn’t have three million dollars to spend on a little slut who thought it would be a good idea to accuse our son of rape.”

*I’m not a slut.* The words are right there, on my tongue, but instinct has me holding them back. Has me keeping quiet because I know something worse is coming. Something terrible.

“That’s when we turned to my genius son from my first marriage. Ethan had just patented blueprints for a couple of very important biomedical machines and then sold them to established companies for enough capital to start Frost Industries. His baby brother had a problem that we needed cash to make disappear. He had the ready cash at his disposal. Do you need a road map, dear, or are you finally clueing in?”

Oh, I’m clueing in, all right. The money that bought my silence. The money that bought my parents out of institutional poverty and my brother into his lab. The money that took my soul and with it, my will to live. It hadn’t come from Brandon’s parents at all. It had come from his brother.

It had come from Ethan.

## Chapter Twenty-two

“Well,” Vanessa says after several long seconds. “It appears you aren’t quite as stupid as I thought you were. You’re at least capable of putting the puzzle pieces together.”

I nearly laugh at her wording, at the mere idea that I could put a puzzle—any puzzle—together. I, who have spent the last five years trying to put *myself* back together only to fall apart every damn time.

I thought this time was the charm. I thought, after finding out about Brandon’s connection with Ethan, after breaking up with Ethan and then getting back together with him, after finally accepting what had happened to me and moving past it, I thought after all that, I had finally figured things out. Thought I had finally found a way to put the pieces of myself back together again. By combining them with Ethan’s. By making something new and dazzling and whole out of the remnants of the past.

It should have worked. It really should have worked.

Except it turns out, it was all an illusion brought on by one indisputable fact. I can’t be fixed. I can’t be made unbroken. Not then. Not now. Not ever. I’m as jumbled of a mess as I ever was, the pieces of me too cracked and torn up and jagged to ever, ever, *ever* fit together again.

I don’t know how I could ever have thought differently—even for a moment. Or how I could have believed that Ethan—Ethan—would be the one to help me hold the pieces together. Not when, at every turn, I find out another way he’s been the one tearing me apart.

A laugh wells up inside me, loud and powerful and real. It batters against me from the inside, strikes out at me with clenched fists and sharpened claws, desperate to get out.

Desperate to be free.

I hold it in with sheer will alone. Sheer will and fear, because I know—I know—that once I start laughing, I’ll never stop. The edges of madness that I’ve been skating around for so long are right there, beckoning for me to



step over the edge into oblivion. And if I do, this time if I do, I'm smart enough to know I'll never find my way back.

And yet, there's a part of me that wants that. That wants to let go and give up. That wants to stop fighting, stop trying, stop *trusting*, because it hurts too goddamned much. It rips you open, tears you up, leaves you bleeding out from a wound you never saw coming until it's far too late to stop it.

Far too late to save yourself.

That's me, now. Ripped open. Bleeding. Unsalvageable.

And then there's Ethan. Beautiful, brilliant, duplicitous Ethan. My obsession. My addiction. Until this moment, my everything.

But not anymore. Not now. Not ever again.

The knowledge grounds me, helps keep the pain at bay. At least until my phone starts buzzing, letting me know I have a text. I don't need to look at the screen to know it's from Ethan. Just like the one that comes in next. And the one after that. And the one after that.

Suddenly I can't handle it. Can't stand this connection between us, no matter how tenuous, for one second more. I yank my phone out of my back pocket, carry it over to the garbage disposal. Drop it in. And then turn the thing on.

Like everything else in this kitchen, the garbage disposal is heavy duty, industrial grade. Though it makes a terrible noise, it only takes seconds for it to break my phone to pieces. To break it down to its most basic, rudimentary form.

Like me. Always like me.

I pause at the thought, at the knowledge that every broken thing has something in common with another broken thing. Here, now, I am that broken thing, the pieces of me as ill-equipped to deal with my environment as the remnants of my phone now are to deal with theirs.

Ethan's mom watches the drama and its aftermath with raised brows and pursed lips and a hint of glee in the depth of her eyes. Just a hint. It's enough to make me stop, enough to make me stand perfectly still in the middle of the kitchen and pretend for a moment that my world hasn't come crashing down around my ears.

She waits it out, trying to decide—I think—what crazy stunt I'm going to pull next. When I give her nothing, when I hold myself together with a very

short shoestring and an even shorter prayer, she shrugs, seems to give up. And then she's shaking her head, walking out of the kitchen. "Stupid, ignorant, pathetic girl," she says as she heads down the hall. "You never even stood a chance."

I should probably be offended, but I'm not. Because she's right. I didn't. The odds were stacked against me from the very beginning and I never even had a clue. I almost leave. I almost pack my one, measly pathetic bag and walk out of Ethan's house, and his life, forever. I could do it. I should do it. There's enough cash on Ethan's dresser to pay for a cab to the airport. And if I feel icky about taking that—which I tell myself I don't, but it's just another lie—there's always Rodrigo and Lucia. If I ask them for a ride, I'm positive they'll take me.

I almost do it. I plan on doing it. I walk out of the house and even make it halfway down the hill to the wine-making barns where Rodrigo normally works, when I can't go any farther.

I'm stuck, filled with a crippling sense of sadness and an even more crippling sense of what could have been. What should have been if this was a different life, if I was a different person, if Ethan ... if Ethan wasn't such a goddamn fucking liar.

It kills me that I can't leave. Kills me that I still care, that I can't treat him as callously as he's treated me over and over and over again.

Oh, I know there's a lot of good in him. Just like I know he's treated me right in almost every way a man can treat a woman. But the ways that he's treated me wrong—the ways he's *been* wrong—they're just too big. Just too much. I can't live like this, knowing what he's done. And I sure as hell can't stick around and wait for the other shoe to drop. I already feel like a whole store filled with steel-toed boots has fallen on me. I'm not waiting around to see what else falls down. I may be stupid and naive, but nobody ever said I was a masochist.

And yet, here I sit on the family room couch watching the second hand spin the clock around. Watching the minute hand creep farther and farther around the face of the clock, until it, too, spins itself around. There's a startling feeling of *déjà vu*, of having done this before.

Because I have. Less than a week ago. I waited and watched, watched and waited, as Ethan wined and dined clients of some sort. Today, I'm doing the same thing—only this time, there's no hope left inside me. No

fear that things won't turn out all right. Because I already know they won't, already know it's over. I just need to give Ethan the courtesy of saying so face-to-face.

Finally, after what feels like days but is really a little less than two hours, the front door opens and shuts. "Chloe!" It's Ethan, back from wherever he was. Ethan, calling my name like a crazy man as he comes charging through the house. "Chloe!"

Again, *déjà vu*.

"I'm right here," I tell him from my spot in the shadows.

"Thank God. When you didn't answer the texts I sent you and then didn't pick up the phone, I thought something had happened to you."

Oh, something happened to me all right. But I'm not ready to share it with him yet. There's a part of me that wonders if I'll ever be ready or if I'll just tell him off and then walk away without ever letting him know that I know.

Except, it turns out, I don't have that kind of restraint. The first words out of my mouth are, "Your mother stopped by."

"My mother?" He looks at me like I'm crazy. "My mother lives in Boston."

"Be that as it may, she was here about two hours ago."

"Was here? As in not here now? She left without seeing me?"

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure she did what she came to do."

I can see the moment he figures it out, the moment he realizes just what went down here when he was out doing God knows what.

"Chloe."

I can't even look at him. All those minutes wasted waiting for him, planning what I was going to say and how I was going to say it, and I can't even look at him. Can't even open my mouth.

"Chloe, baby, please, it's not like it seems."

"Oh, yeah?" The anger breaks through and I finally manage to get some words out. They aren't much, but they're better than nothing. "Please, feel free, tell me all the ways it's not like it seems. Because the way it seems is pretty goddamn awful, Ethan. I'm just telling you that. I just want you to know. It seems pretty goddamn awful from where I'm sitting."

"It is. I know it is, baby," he tells me, dropping onto his knees in front of me. I'm still sitting on the couch, so we're pretty much eye to eye, but it

still feels weird to have him kneeling in front of me. Ethan's never been the type to kneel for anyone and the fact that he's doing it here, now ... I don't know what it means. I don't know if it means anything. But it throws me just a little more than I already am.

"I have no excuse for what I did," he tells me frantically. "No excuse for the part I played in hurting you. If I could go back and do it over, I would in a second. In a heartbeat."

"Why did you do it? Why did you give them the money? You didn't know me then, but no girl deserves to be treated like—" My voice breaks and I don't even try to continue. He doesn't need me to say it. He knows.

*He knows.*

"My mother told me your father was blackmailing them. That he was a con artist and he'd set his sights on them and was using you to extort the money."

"And you just believed them? How is that possible? You're a brilliant guy. How could you just take their word for it, especially considering what a douche your brother really is? How could you just decide that they were telling the truth and I was lying?"

"Because I didn't trust them at first. Because I did research. Because I found out your father really was a con artist. That he really did spend his life bilking money out of people he considered his marks. And that you were just another tool for him. Just another way to get that money."

"You thought I was like him. You thought that made it okay."

"I thought it was okay because I thought you were lying. I thought you were accusing Brandon of something he didn't do."

"You threw me under the bus."

"I did. Yes. And I'm so sorry for it. I'm so sorry. I believed them because I wanted to. Because he was my little brother and I couldn't imagine, couldn't believe, that he would do something like that."

"But he did, Ethan. He did."

"I know that now. I didn't want to believe it then."

"But you had no problem believing that I would do something like lie about being raped."

"I didn't know you then."

"Would it matter if you had?"

“Is that even a question?” he demands, his blue eyes glistening with a thousand hints of madness.

“Did it sound like a question?”

“Of course it would matter! Of course it *does* matter!

“Don’t you think I know the mistake I made? Don’t you think it’s killing me that the little brother I always protected had a part in destroying the only woman I’ve ever loved? The only woman I will ever love? And that through him, I had a part in it, too?”

“So, why did you lie about it? If you’re so sorry, why did you never tell me what happened? Why did you leave me to find out from your mother of all people? You’ve had the time and the opportunity over and over again these last few weeks. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I tried. You have no idea how many times in the last three weeks I tried to tell you, Chloe. And then you instituted that no discussion policy and I thought, maybe, just maybe, I could catch a break.”

I think back to that night, to the way he kept trying to say something over and over again. To the way I kept shutting him down. The memory makes me sick, especially when it registers that I might have been able to stop this. If only I’d listened. If only I hadn’t tried to hide.

Things get a little gray and fuzzy around the edges and for a moment, just a moment, I think I might pass out. But then reason comes to the rescue. Reason and rage and a sad kind of righteousness as his words finally sink in. “You really thought you wouldn’t have to tell me? That I wouldn’t find out? Ever?” I demand incredulously.

“No, of course not. You’re too smart not to have found out everything eventually—even without my mother’s interference.”

“Then why?”

“I wanted to fix it. I wanted to right the wrong, fix the mistake. I thought if I did it right, no one would have to know about your past, about what happened to you. But I could still make sure that Brandon never had the chance to hurt another girl or abuse his power ever again.

“Don’t you see? I can’t make it better for you, Chloe. There’s nothing I can do to undo the terrible, disgusting things that happened to you. But I’ve spent the last three weeks trying to figure out how to get you some kind of justice. I’ve hired private detectives to try and pick up the trail, to see if there was a witness to what happened that night. Or some other night, with

some other girl. Someone who hasn't signed an NDA. Someone whose testimony won't put her in contempt of court.

"I've gone out of my way to sabotage Brandon's chances of running for office. That's why my mother showed up. And that's why you were on the covers of those magazines yesterday. She's fighting back, fighting dirty—the only way she knows how. She's bent on destroying you one way or another and it's my fault. I tried to protect you, tried to make things better for you and all I ended up doing was making them worse.

"I just spent the entire day with a team of private detectives, combing through evidence I can use to make Brandon step down from the race. And I'm still looking. I'm still determined to make him pay for what he did to you. If I could do that, if I could make him suffer as you did, I was hoping you'd be able to forgive my part in what happened to you."

He stops then, his breathing coming in uneven pants as he waits for me to speak. As he waits for me to tell him that I understand what he's doing and why he's doing it. But the truth is, I don't understand. I never asked him to avenge me, never asked him to do anything but love me. To let me love him.

And yet, here we are. Bruised and bloody and broken, our relationship shot to hell and with no one to blame but ourselves. Me for instituting that ridiculous no talking about the past policy and him for actually listening to it when he had a secret this big, this powerful, this formidable.

Because I can't not do it, I reach for Ethan's hand, stroke my thumb over the palm before I start to talk. "I can't do this anymore."

For the first time Ethan looks panicked. "Don't say that."

"I have to say it."

"You don't."

"I do." I reach inside me, looking for the rage that was there just a few short minutes ago. I can't find it. I can't find anything but the hurt and the sorrow that well up from deep inside me, that fill up every crevice of space inside of me. "I love you. And I know that you love me. But sometimes that isn't enough. This thing we have between us, this addiction fed by the drama of the past and the need of the present ... it's destroying us."

"No." Ethan shakes his head, his hand grasping at mine like it's a lifeline. Like he's drowning and it's the only thing keeping him afloat. "What we have is the only good thing in my life."

“Then why do you keep screwing it up?” The anger’s back as readily as it had left. “Why do you keep pushing me away? Again and again and again? Why do you keep making me have to leave you?”

“I don’t mean to.”

“That’s not good enough. I trust you. After everything that I’ve found out, after everything that’s happened, I still find a way to trust you. And every time, you betray that trust. Every time you find a way not to trust me.”

“I do trust you! Chloe, I trust you with my life.”

“Maybe you do, maybe you don’t. But you sure as hell don’t trust me with your heart.”

“How can you say that? I’d do anything for you. I know I’ve made mistakes. I know I haven’t told you things you needed to know—”

“It’s not that you haven’t told me that bothers me at this point, Ethan. It’s why you haven’t told me. And why we keep doing this same thing again and again and again?”

“When you first found out about Brandon and me, your first instinct was to break up with me.”

“You were so vulnerable. I didn’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“And when I told you I couldn’t live with the lies, you let me walk away. You left me to suffer alone for two weeks. And if I hadn’t made a move toward you outside that restaurant, we’d probably be alone still.”

“I’d already hurt you so much. How could I hurt you anymore?”

“And now this. You knew all along that you were the one who paid that money and you didn’t tell me. You let me be blindsided by your mother rather than trust me to understand. Rather than trust me to be able to look beyond what happened five years ago to what we have today.”

“How could I ask that of you? How could I tell you about how I betrayed you and then expect you to just live with it?”

“Because that’s what trust is! Telling the other person the hard shit and knowing that they’ll be there anyway. Knowing that they won’t give up, won’t walk away, no matter what mistake you’ve made.

“You haven’t done that. Not once.” I pause, take a breath. “How do you see that working in the future? You just omit things? You just don’t tell me stuff that might hurt us? You just let me find out in the hardest, most painful ways possible? And then tell me you love me and beg me to stay?”

Ethan starts to say something, to answer that, but in the end there's nothing for him to say and he knows it. Instead, he just closes his mouth, shakes his head. Looks away.

"How many strikes do you think you deserve? How many chances am I supposed to give you?"

He shakes his head, still refuses to meet my eyes. "I don't know."

"That's it? That's all you've got to say? After all this? That's how you want to leave it? With you don't know?"

He doesn't answer, doesn't even look at me. And that's when *I* know. I can stay here forever, giving him chance after chance after chance, and it will never be enough.

"Good-bye, Ethan." I lean forward and brush a soft kiss across his cheek. Then I pick up my backpack and walk down the hall and straight out the front door. Then I keep walking down the hill, praying with each step that Ethan will come after me. That he won't let me go.

But he does, without so much as a whimper of protest. When I get to the wine-making facility, I ask for Rodrigo. It takes a couple of minutes for him to come around to me, and when he sees my backpack his eyes widen.

"You're leaving already, Chloe?"

"I am. I was hoping you could give me a ride to the airport."

"Of course I can. But where's Ethan?"

I don't know how to answer that, so I don't. I just shrug a little and pretend that it's an actual answer. Rodrigo doesn't ask again.



## Chapter Twenty-three

“I’m thinking of calling the doctor. Seeing if I can get one of those collar things for my neck.” Tori sits down slowly at the kitchen table, rubbing the back of her neck as she does.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, eyeing her with concern. “Did you sleep wrong?”

“No. I’m just afraid I have whiplash.”

“From what? You weren’t—” I break off as it registers what she’s talking about. “Seriously? I was worried about you.”

“And I’m worried about you. This back and forth with Ethan is so crazy and convoluted that I’m seriously beginning to get whiplash. You keep pushing and pulling me in different directions. You love him, you hate him. You love him, you hate him. I never know which side of the fence I’m supposed to be on at any given moment.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. Besides, I’ve never said I hated Ethan and I never said you had to be angry at him with me. Don’t be throwing your own issues back on me.”

“I wish I could give you my issues and take yours for a while.” She pours milk into the cup of coffee I slam down beside her on the table. “Because, believe me, no matter how screwed up I am, I’m smart enough to see a good thing when it comes along.”

“A good thing? Now I’m the one with whiplash. You’ve gone back and forth between loving and hating Ethan ever since I met him.”

“That’s because I’m being yanked around by your yo-yoing emotions. But come on, Chloe, he’s a decent guy. More decent than most. The least you can do is see what he’s sent you this time.” She gestures to the unopened box sitting next to the door. It’s another present—one of six that has come since I got back from Napa. Or, it could just be the same present. I don’t know. I didn’t open the others and I don’t plan on opening this one.

I mean, why torture myself? Whatever’s in there can’t solve the problems Ethan and I have, so why bother with it when I’m sure I’ll like it? Why

torture myself when I have no plans to accept another gift from Ethan, ever?

Once the post office opens, I'll send it back to him just like I have all the others. I should probably just start refusing them—this mailing them back is wreaking havoc on my budget. But Tori keeps beating me to the door and she's always "very happy to accept a package."

"I need to get dressed," I tell her, finishing my scalding coffee in one long, painful sip. "I have an interview in an hour." For a waitressing job at a place that requires the skimpiest uniforms ever. Not that I've told Tori that. She'd have a fit, demand that I stay and worry about paying the rent later. But I've been mooching long enough, and now that I've walked away from my internship with Frost Industries, I need to do something. Not just for the paycheck, but for my own peace of mind. Sitting around here and staring at the walls for the last six days has made me more than a little stir-crazy.

"And that's another thing! Giving up this internship when you worked so hard to get it? What about law school? What about your future?"

"Now I'm the one getting whiplash. Aren't you the one who told me to just quit, that this internship wasn't important?"

"That was before you convinced me otherwise. A girl is entitled to change her mind."

"Exactly." I send her the best fake smile I can muster. "Which is exactly what I've done. Waitressing job, not internship."

"You're an idiot," Tori tells me, leaving her coffee untouched as she shoves back from the table.

"No. I was an idiot. This time I'm being a realist."

"Don't you think there's enough realism in the world? Ethan was giving you the fairy tale, Chlo. You should have grabbed on with both hands—it's what any Disney princess would have done."

"And look where it gets them."

"Happily ever after?"

"More like being chased by the big, bad wolf. Or the sea witch. Or—"

"God, you're so depressing!"

"That's because I'm depressed." I start down the hall toward my bedroom.

"Exactly! And if being with Ethan will make you less depressed, I think you should go for it!"

“Being with Ethan is what made me depressed in the first place.” I ignore the fact that she’s followed me to my bedroom, and start pulling clothes out of my closet, trying to figure out what one is supposed to wear to an interview at a place that is one step up from a titty bar. I can’t believe they’re the only place around that’s hiring.

“You’re impossible!” she says, throwing her hands up in the air.

“Impossible. An idiot. Wow, Tor, tell me how you really feel.”

“Believe me, I will.” She snatches my one and only mini-skirt out of my hand, tosses it on the ground. “You don’t want to do this.”

I deliberately misunderstand her. “I don’t want to interview for a job?”

She just rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean. Why don’t you take Miles up on his invitation to come visit him? He seemed sincere when he called to check on you yesterday.”

“Why would I want to go back there? Going to see Miles means going to see my parents and I’m so not up for that.”

“So just see your brother, then. Surely he doesn’t still live at home.”

“No, but my parents will find out and I just can’t face them.” Not now. Not after the huge mess I’ve made of everything.

“Well, then, I’ll come with you. I can be your bodyguard, keep them away.” She flexes her tiny arms. “I can take them.”

“I have no doubt that you could. But I don’t have any desire to see that.”

“You don’t have any desire to do anything these days, Chloe. That’s the point.”

“And you suddenly are full of ideas of what I should do and where I should do it! For someone who almost never goes home herself, you’re suddenly full of reasons as to why I should go back to Boston for a visit.”

To my surprise, Tori hems and haws, stumbles and stutters, all while turning a truly interesting shade of pink. She finally settles on, “That’s not true. I just know you’re hurting here and I don’t want to see it get worse.”

“I’m not sure it could get any worse,” I tell her honestly, sliding into a little sundress that makes my shoulders look good. I figure it can’t hurt at a job interview like this one.

“Oh, Chloe, sweetheart, things can always get worse.”

“There’s the pessimist I know and love!” I pat her cheek with mock enthusiasm. “I was afraid I’d lost you forever.”

She turns her head, tries to bite my fingers, but before I can do much more than dodge her snapping teeth, there's a knock on the door.

"I've got it!" she yells, all but tearing down the hallway.

I think about following her, about fighting her for it, but it takes too much effort. Everything takes too much effort these days. It's not a good sign.

Maybe I really am depressed.

When Tori doesn't come find me again, I figure one of the neighbors has stopped by to see her. It happens a lot. But after I finish getting dressed—which only takes a couple of minutes since I'm not trying that hard to get this job, though I should be—I wander down to the kitchen and find Tori sitting there with a large knife posed over a package.

"What'd you order?" I ask as I debate whether I want to eat anything before the interview or not.

"Nothing. It's for you. From Ethan."

And then, under my horrified eyes, she plunges the knife straight through the packing tape.

"What'd you do that for?" I demand, rushing toward her and trying to take the knife. She refuses to yield.

"No, damn it. You act like you're the only one affected by this whole thing and you're not. One, because you're so damned depressed I'm afraid you're going to walk into traffic one day and not even pay attention to where you're going. And two, I'm human and if I don't get to see what's in at least one of these boxes you keep getting, I'm going to lose my mind. I signed for this one, so I say this is it."

"I don't want to know."

She shrugs, but doesn't stop hacking away at the box. "Fine. But I do."

I turn around, head back to my room like it doesn't bother me that she's opening my present. But within five minutes I'm back, desperate to see what's in the package—I only have willpower with closed packages from him, I see.

By the time I get back to the kitchen, I expect to see packing paper everywhere—Tori's a little bit of a freak when it comes to presents—but instead the box is sitting neatly on the counter. Open, but undisturbed.

Fuck.

I want to walk away. I need to walk away, for my own sanity.

Instead I find myself walking toward the box, my fingers actually itching with the need to open it. Just like they've been itching to open the others that have come.

I've managed to resist all six of those—one for every day since I walked away from Ethan in Napa—but here, now, with the box open and Tori's words ringing in my ears, I can't resist this present, too.

Despite all my convictions circling my head, I open the flaps and peer inside. And once I do, there really is nothing else to say. Because in the box is just one present instead of the bunch of little ones Ethan usually sends me.

With trembling hands, I reach inside and pull out the small jeweler's box that is nestled directly in the center of the larger box. I pull it out with shaking hands, then open it, because I can't *not* open it.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting. A necklace, a pair of earrings, a diamond ring, maybe—although I won't admit that last one, even to myself. It's none of those things, though. Instead, it's a thick platinum bracelet in a chain design, made with links as heavy as those on my belly chain are delicate.

"What the hell?" Tori asks, staring at the thing in disappointment. "I thought for sure it'd be a ring. She reaches for it, but I snatch the box away, holding it to my chest in what I figure must be a pretty good Gollum impression. All that's missing is me whispering, "My precious" in a creepy voice.

Because I know exactly what this is, and for the first time since I walked out on Ethan, a little spark of hope ignites deep in my belly. It's just a spark, mind you, but it's more than I had before. More than I've had in six long days. Maybe more than I've had in forever.

And when the doorbell rings a minute later, I feel that spark grow into a tiny flame. One that maybe, just maybe, can burn the chill away.

## Chapter Twenty-four

“I’ve got it,” Tori says, and it’s a good thing, because I think I’m frozen in place. She grabs her shoes and Louis Vuitton bag on the way, then flings the front door open with great pomp and circumstance.

Sure enough, Ethan is standing on the other side of the door, looking paler and thinner than I have ever seen him. Tori looks him up and down, and doesn’t for a second betray that she’s been lobbying for him for days now. “Fuck up again and I’ll chop your balls off myself,” she says with a sniff. And then she’s gone, slipping out the door and down the hall before I can even figure out how to say hello.

Then again, I don’t have to. Because suddenly Ethan is standing in my kitchen, a huge bouquet of flowers in one hand and his heart in the other.

“You were right,” he says.

“About what?” I ask, because there’s a voice inside my head screaming that this is the most important moment of my life and I need to be very clear about it. It’s good advice, smart advice. Too bad my heart is pounding so hard that I’m afraid I won’t hear one word that he says.

Which is a problem. But one I’m willing to work around if it means I get to listen to Ethan’s beautiful voice. And if I get to stare at his beautiful face. Somehow, he’s more gorgeous than ever, despite the dark circles under his eyes and the sudden sharpness of his cheek and wrist and collarbones.

“About everything.” He sits down at the table without touching me, gestures for me to do the same. “Will you sit? Let me tell you a story?”

“Of course.” I nearly break a leg in my eagerness to comply with his request.

I expect him to start the story once I’m settled, but he doesn’t. Instead, he reaches for my hand and long minutes tick by with Ethan doing nothing more than running his thumb back and forth against the back of my hand. I wait him out, wondering even as I do if it’s the right thing to do. Should I prompt him, try to figure out what he wants to say? Should I—

“You know my dad was a soldier, right?”

I nod. “Of course.” The whole world knows that.

“And you know he died in a military operation when I was little.”

I nod again. “He got the Congressional Medal of Honor.”

It’s Ethan’s turn to nod. “He did.”

“That’s why you went into biomedical research, right? To help develop treatments to prolong life and better quality of life for injured soldiers.”

“Yes.”

Again I wait for more and again it takes him forever to speak. But when he does, it’s worth all the things he’s never said before, all the trust he’s never given me. “The day he left for that last mission, I begged him not to go. He was always gone, you know, always missing out on things that other kids’ dads were around for, and I was sick of it. My first baseball game was that Saturday and I wanted him to come to it. I wanted him home.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Yeah. I know. I was just a kid who wanted his dad. But when it came time for him to leave two days later, I wouldn’t come out of my room. I wouldn’t say good-bye to him. And when he came to me and tried to hug me, I told him not to bother coming back. I told him if he couldn’t be the kind of dad that my friends had, then I didn’t want him at all.

“Those are the last words I ever said to him.”

“Oh, God. Oh, Ethan.” I reach for him then, wrap my arms around him. He doesn’t fight me, doesn’t get me to try to let go, but he doesn’t really yield, either. He just sits there, like telling the story has made him numb.

“I’ve never told anybody that before.”

“I know. Thank you for telling me.”

He nods. “I do love you, Chloe.”

“I know.”

“And it’s not you that I don’t trust. It’s me.”

I rest my hands on his cheeks, turn his face to mine so that I can see his eyes and his expression. “I don’t understand.”

“My whole life, I’ve let people down.”

“That’s not true—”

“It is. My father wanted me to take his absences like a man. He wanted me to be the man of the house while he was gone. Instead I told him that I hated him and I cried every night.

“My mother wanted me to follow her family into politics. She wanted me to capitalize on my father’s service record and turn that into a political career for me that would hopefully culminate in the presidency. Instead, I went into biomedical engineering and she pretty much forgot I existed unless she wanted something from me.

“Same story with my brother and my grandparents. Same story with the various girlfriends I’ve had through the years. I was always good enough to fuck, always good enough to hang out with for a while, but never good enough to stay for.”

“You’re the most eligible bachelor in California.”

“That’s because of the money, not because of me.” He says it so matter-of-factly that I know he believes it’s true. “And then you came along and I fell for you the day I met you. And I wanted to do everything right. Instead, it couldn’t have been more fucked up if I deliberately tried.

“I kept thinking, if I could just make you love me enough. If I could just make you forget about Brandon and my mother and all the shit that came before—if I could do that, then maybe you would stay. And instead, I just kept driving you away.”

“But I always came back.”

He smiles a little. “Yeah. I don’t know why you did that.”

“Are you kidding me? The most eligible bachelor in California doesn’t know what I see in him?”

“That’s stupid. It’s just a ridiculous title some magazine thought up—”

“Maybe. But it’s also true.”

He shakes his head like he wants to be talking about anything but that article, anything but that title. “Chloe, I’m sorry. I fucked up.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I don’t know what else there is to say—”

“There’s not much else to say, is there? You did fuck up, royally.”

He looks shattered at the admission, broken all to hell and back. I know what that feels like—God, do I ever—and my conscience kicks in. Because he isn’t the only one who made mistakes here and he isn’t the only one who needs to make amends.

“You fucked up and I gave up. I walked away when I told you I wouldn’t do that again.”

“You had every right to walk away,” he tells me. “I don’t blame y—”



“Yeah, well, I blame myself. You hurt me, badly.”

“I know. I wish I could take it back, Chloe. I wish I could take it all back, baby. I love you so much it makes me stupid and afraid and weak. I love you so, was so desperate to keep you, that I ended up driving you away. I hurt you and that is something I never wanted to do, something I will regret for the rest of my life.”

It’s everything I wanted to hear, everything I needed to hear. Combined with the bracelet, and with the promise shining from his storm-tossed eyes, it’s more than enough for me. Except ... it’s not enough. Not for him. Not from me.

Ethan has done his mea culpa, beautifully. He’s let me inside himself for the first time, shown me pieces of him that I didn’t even know existed.

From the moment I first met Ethan, he’s been so sure of himself, so confident, so absolutely perfect, that I’ve never imagined him as anything else. Never imagined that he could screw up this badly.

To the rest of the world, Ethan Frost is this perfect, unattainable, superhero of a man, who can leap buildings in a single bound and save the world from whatever threatens it. But here, now, in front of me? He’s just a man. Humble, beaten, terrified that he screwed up so badly that he can’t fix it.

And I love him for it. I love him for his vulnerability, which caused this whole mess, and I love him for his strength, which is going to fix it. But only if I’m strong enough to meet him half way.

And I am. Oh, God, I am. Because life without Ethan isn’t worth living. He’s my addiction, my obsession, my love. And I am his. As long as I remember that, somehow I know that everything is going to be okay.

“Do you know what I see when I look at you?” I ask.

“An asshole who’s fucked you over?” He finally looks at me, and his blue eyes are so sad that they send another crack right through my heart.

“Not even close.” I kiss him before I start to talk, let my mouth linger against his until I feel him shudder in relief before pulling away. “I see the most honorable man I know. I see a man who sees something wrong and tries to fix it. A man who works tirelessly to make lives better for people he doesn’t know. A man who gives so much of himself—to his work, to his causes, to me. A man who, despite all the bad stuff in his past, is determined to save the world one person, one cause, at a time.”

I kiss him again, because I can't not kiss him. Because I want to spend the rest of my life kissing him. "I see a man who took my fear of intimacy and turned me into a raging sex addict with his tenderness and his love and his promises. A man who fought for me when I didn't know how to fight for myself. A man who told me he loved me before I was even brave enough to say I liked him—and who told me he was going to marry me one day. A man who loved me that much. Who loved me more."

"I do love you," he tells me, hands and voice shaking. "And I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I'm sorry you had to find out the way you did. I'm sorry that you thought that meant I didn't trust you. I'm sorry that maybe, a little bit, that's exactly what it meant. And most of all I'm sorry that my family has—"

I cut him off with one last kiss. "New rule," I tell him when he finally lifts his head.

"What's that?"

"You can apologize for things that you've done, but you can't apologize for what your family has done ever again."

"They hurt you."

"They did. But it was a long time ago. And yeah, it ruined me for a long time. But then I met you and what happened before didn't matter so much. Until ... you know."

"I know. It kills me that I can never make what happened up to you, and that I can never erase the part I played in it." Ethan closes his eyes, presses his forehead against mine. "But I promise you, Brandon won't have the chance to hurt another woman the way he hurt you. I've got private detectives looking for any other woman he might have raped. I've exerted every ounce of political clout I've got to keep his campaign from gaining ground. And my mother and I have come to an understanding about her interference—in our life and his campaign."

"You don't have to do that."

He opens his eyes then, and they are blazing with anger and regret. "It's the least I have to do. When I think of all the years you've suffered, all the years he's had to hurt other women ... It's the very least I have to do. And the way my mother deliberately tried to hurt you—"

So many reasons why I love this man. "Your mother doesn't matter," I tell him. "The only thing that matters now is you and me and the future

we're going to make together.”

He nods, looking more intense than I have ever seen him. “I can live with that. On one condition.”

“What’s the condition?” I know what he’s going to say even as I ask.

“That you marry me.”

“I already told you that I’d marry you eventually.”

He grins. “Then let me rephrase that. Marry me today.”

“Today? We haven’t even known each other two months yet!”

“So? Are you planning on changing your mind?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why does it matter if we get married today or next year?”

He’s grinning but I can see the insecurity peeking through, and suddenly I can’t think of a reason in the world that we should wait another day, let alone another year. I reach into the jewelry box and pull out the bracelet under Ethan’s watchful eye.

I unclasp it, then stretch it out in front of him. “You know what this means to me, right?”

He looks at it, swallows tightly. “I know exactly what it means.” He holds his hand out and we both watch, silent and solemn, as I fasten the bracelet around his wrist.

When it’s done, I pull his mouth down to mine and kiss him, hard. “You’re mine,” I tell him.

He wraps a hand around my waist, his fingers burrowing under my clothes to stroke the platinum links of the belly chain. Links that match those of his bracelet exactly. “I always was, Chloe. I always will be.”

It’s exactly the right answer. But then again, this is Ethan Frost. He always has the right answers—except, of course, when he doesn’t. But I’m okay with that. More than okay. Because he’s mine and I’m his and everything else can take care of itself.

Suddenly, his idea doesn’t seem like such a bad one, after all. “You know, Vegas is only an hour plane ride away,” I tell him. “Do you think you can find us tickets on such short notice?”

Ethan’s mouth drops open and for long seconds he just stares at me. And then he smiles, so wide that I swear I can see forever. “Maybe, maybe not. But I know where I can find us a helicopter.”

## Epilogue

At this moment, she truly is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. And that's saying something considering how many times I've thought that very same thing.

We're at my vineyard in Tuscany, where the grapevines go on as far as the eye can see.

Where the sky turns burnished orange and gold and red in the early evenings.

Where there is beauty—rich, powerful, unforgettable beauty—in every inch of land, in every particle of air.

And still Chloe Girard Frost is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

At this moment, she's standing barefoot in the middle of an old-fashioned grape press, head down, long blond hair blowing in the wind, skirt tucked between her thighs. Her feet are dyed a deep maroon as she stomps, stomps, stomps at the grapes and her hands are curved over her gently rounded belly.

One of the vintner's says something to her and she throws her head back and laughs and laughs and laughs. It's a gorgeous sound. A magical one. And one that I will never take for granted.

It's been a year since she walked into my life, a year since she turned it upside down and inside out. A year since she burrowed inside of me, laid me open. Laid me bare. And I don't regret one moment of it.

How can I when she's given me everything I didn't know I was missing? Everything I didn't know I needed?

I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes, heart pounding, chest heaving, body so tense that I feel like I'm going to break in half. Terrified that she's gone. Terrified that I've lost her.

But she's always there, her hand finding mine in the darkness, her body curving itself so perfectly around my own. In those moments I know that I would die for her, would kill her for.

She says I'm her addiction, her obsession. It only seems fair since she's that and so much more to me. She's my heart, my soul, my everything and she has been almost from the moment we met.

I don't know how I got so blessed, but I thank the universe every day. And every day I vow to take care of her and our unborn child. To make her happy. To make her smile.

Because she is beautiful, inside and out. Beautiful and perfect and mine.

To Jenn

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BY TRACY WOLFF

Addicted

Ruined

Tie Me Down

Full Exposure

Extreme Risk Novels:

Shredded

Shattered





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## The Editor's Corner

July is a month of celebration—Independence Day is a holiday we remember with picnics, parades, and fireworks. I feel like celebrating this month's Loveswept releases in the same way; they make me want to shout in jubilation to let the world know about all our fantastic summer reads.

Coinciding with the heat of the summer we begin with Shelley Ann Clark's Loveswept debut, *Have Mercy*, where two damaged souls discover that when they're together, their bodies hit all the right notes. Following that is *USA Today* bestselling author Stacey Kennedy's next installment in her successful Club Sin BDSM series, *Desired*, featuring the hotly anticipated Kyler. Continuing with the warmth of the season comes *New York Times* bestselling author Tracy Wolff's long-awaited sequel in her Ethan Frost series, *Addicted*. Then more love on the lam with Juliet Rosetti's *The Sexiest Man Alive*, continuing Mazie's on-again-off-again relationship with certified hottie Ben Labeck. Jennifer Chance's *Fake It* then sparks some serious combustion between a sexy biker and a corporate go-getter who's ready to let her hair down. And finishing up the month is Lavinia Kent's sumptuous novel of sensual discovery, *Mastering the Marquess*.

Classic Loveswept relaunches another of our favorites, *A Tough Man to Tame*, by *New York Times* bestselling author Iris Johansen—the unforgettable story of a brilliant young woman and the sexy financial wizard with the power to make her dreams come true.

And ladies, don't miss Flirt's release of *Awaken*, book two in Lori Adams's Soulkeepers series, featuring the hottest love triangle in this life—or the next.

See, I told you July deserves a great celebration!

~Happy Romance!

*gina*

Gina Wachtel

Associate Publisher

Read on for an excerpt from

## **Have Mercy**

**by Shelley Ann Clark**

**Available from Loveswept**

The first time Tom heard Emme's voice, he dropped a bottle of gin.

Having heard and played with a lot of bands over the years, he'd never seen anything quite as entrancing as Emme. She looked like she'd walked out of a 1960s wet dream, all teased blond hair and dark eyeliner and curves. The bass groove of her first song had Tom ignoring his customers even before she opened her mouth.

Her voice damn near melted his spine. It was big and dark, full of longing so fierce it brought tears to his eyes. Her phrasing was meticulous. He heard desire in her voice, and he longed to give her whatever she wanted. By the time the first song was over, he ached to play in her band. More than that, he halfway wanted to crawl inside her songs and live there.

Once the first song ended, he pulled himself together enough to pay attention to his bar, but he still found himself staring at her every moment he had the chance. His fingers absently shaped chords and played notes against the polished wood of the bar, and he hummed harmonies as he poured drinks for his customers.

At the break, all Tom wanted was a cigarette and a chance to talk to Emme, but the rush never slowed. He did talk to Andy, the bassist and a

friend he'd played with a few times.

"She's good, huh?" Andy grinned. "Told you."

"I believed you or I wouldn't have booked you without hearing her first. I trust you." Tom poured a vodka tonic for a thin brunette as he talked. "But damn."

"Yeah. She gets that reaction a lot. Writes all the songs, too."

Tom shook his head in disbelief before he made change for a guy in a non-ironic trucker cap. "I'd love to sit in sometime."

Andy raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? You may get your chance. They're going on tour in two months and there's no way I can keep my day job and go. They'll need a bassist. Want me to recommend you?"

"How long?"

"Two months. Mostly through the Southeast. College towns."

*Two months away from the bar. Ouch.* Tom opened a Sam Adams for Andy. *Two months away from Katie.* "I don't know, man. I'll have to think about it."

"It's a good gig. She pays well. Dave and Guillermo are pretty cool, too."

For the rest of the set, that was all Tom thought about. That, and how to get a chance to talk to Emme, even though he suspected he'd sound like some high school kid asking the prettiest girl in school to the prom. He was considering bringing her a glass of the two hundred and fifty dollar scotch that had been gathering dust under the bar as a tribute when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket.

COME GET ME, the text message read.

Tom sighed and rubbed his temples. He'd offered to pick up his sister if she ever had too much to drink, but that had been when she was sixteen. She was twenty-five now. She knew Tom was working.

CALL A CAB, he texted back. He slid his phone back into his pocket and closed out the tab of a couple who were pulling on their coats. They'd barely signed their credit card slip when his jeans vibrated again.

NO MONEY. WILL JUST DRIVE.

*Shit.* Up onstage, Emme was making magic with the piano. Drink orders had slowed a little and the crowd had thinned as the night grew later, but there were still all the closing duties to complete.

WAIT FOR ME, he texted back. WHERE ARE YOU?

He motioned for the bar-back to take over. There was nothing else he could do. He shrugged on his jacket and slipped out the back, the music cut off abruptly as the door shut behind him.

\* \* \*

Emily Hayes was nothing like Emme.

That was Tom's first thought when he walked into the audition. He wasn't sure what he had expected when he walked into the living room of the unassuming ranch house in one of Louisville's older subdivisions. Mirrors, gilt, marble, and velvet fainting couches, maybe, or fluffy white cats and champagne fountains everywhere, Emme lounging in a silk-and-marabou dressing gown. Instead, he walked in the open front door and found amps, guitars, a couple of keyboards, a tangle of wires spread out over the carpet, a case of microphones open in one corner, contents spilling over the floor, and a giant, incredibly ugly green couch that looked like it had been picked up off the curb.

The diva was sitting on the floor wearing yoga pants and a hoodie and untangling a cord of some kind. She stood up when she saw him, brushed dust off her butt, and held out her hand. "Tom! Nice to meet you," she said with a smile.

Onstage, she'd been all teased hair and false eyelashes and voluptuous curves. She definitely had those; even the baggy hoodie couldn't hide her shape, and those yoga pants were downright obscene on her, but her brown eyes were friendly and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. As he took her much-smaller hand in his, she said, "Call me Emily." The girl-next-door name didn't match her, somehow. He couldn't shake the image of her onstage, hair haloed by the lighting, holding the crowd mesmerized in the palm of her hand. And even here, sitting on the floor, when she looked at him, she radiated authority. Like when he'd had a pretty, smart teacher he wanted to impress, he nearly called her "ma'am."

She introduced him to the drummer, Guillermo, a big guy with an even bigger beard, and Dave, the lead guitarist, who barely looked up from tuning his guitar when Tom greeted him. "How familiar are you with our music?" she asked.

*I've been listening to your album over and over again every night since you played in my bar. Wait. That sounds creepy.* “I’m pretty familiar. I’ve worked out most of the bass lines, and there are a few that I might want to try tweaking just a bit.”

Emme nodded. “Good to hear. Any particular musical influences?”

Tom thought for a moment. “I’d say I’m mostly a fan of blues and soul,” he said finally. “More modern stuff I like—I’m pretty into that dirty Southern sound in alt country. My dad owned McKinney’s, and I grew up there, hearing blues bands play. J. R. Wilbur used to play on Wednesday nights, and he felt sorry for this kid who was always in, you know, a bar. So he’s the guy who taught me how to play.”

Emme whistled. “Learned to play guitar from J. R. Wilbur? Those are some credentials. Let’s hear it.”

Tom got out his bass. They worked through the tune-up as a group, Dave fiddling with knobs on the soundboard, Emme alternating between keyboards, checking microphones. The level of professionalism and comfort both of them seemed to have around what had to be tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment made Tom’s heart beat a little faster. This was serious. He’d known when he heard them play, had known from the quality of the album, that this wouldn’t be like hopping onstage at the bar after the musician had too many free beers. If they let him join, going on this tour wasn’t the only thing that would change for him. Doors would open.

He’d sat in with so many bands, had played on so many friends’ albums, but touring had never, ever been an option. His dad had been too sick. Katie had needed too much. The bar had to be rescued from the brink of bankruptcy. But he’d gotten the bar under control, his dad had been gone for over a year, and Katie was doing so much better, and if this audition went well, maybe his life could look the way he’d always wanted it to. Tom’s hands shook, palms sweaty. He felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket, but he ignored it. *Please wait. Just give me an hour.*

“We’ll start with ‘Walking Away,’ since that’s the one everyone knows,” Emme said.

Tom nodded and swallowed hard. *You’ve got this. You listened to it a million times before now.*

The song was one part mournful breakup croon and one part ditch-the-bastard anthem, a little bit Diana Ross, a little bit Stevie Wonder in the instrumentation, and a whole lot of retro Motown bass. It wasn't easy to play, but it was a hell of a lot of fun.

Tom's nerves coalesced into adrenaline as he played, the sheer joy of making music with a talented group of people. He could hear their playing through the monitors, and god *damn*, they sounded good. Emme's voice soared over the bass groove, while Guillermo kept the beat without overwhelming the tune. Dave was seriously talented at guitar, adding blues licks that Tom hadn't heard in the studio version and improvising without needlessly showing off. By the time the song ended, the notes had wound around them all, the tiny communications coming as second nature; slowing the tempo when Emme nodded, holding a note a little longer with a look from Dave.

They played together for two hours, long enough for Tom's phone to buzz at least five times, but his high of belonging glowed warmly around him as he packed up his instrument. The way the three of them interacted, the seamlessness of their partnership, felt like family. He hadn't realized how much he'd longed for that until he'd had a taste of it, and now he had. Everyone in the living room was smiling by the time he checked his phone to see the list of missed texts from Katie. Thank god none of them had been emergencies in any real sense of the word.

Dave offered Tom his hand. "Nice work, man."

Guillermo nodded, and Emme looked up from the notebook she'd been scribbling in. "I'll see you out."

Tom thought he saw Dave narrow his eyes at Guillermo when she spoke, but he shouldered his case and turned toward the front door, Emme at his side. As she opened the door into the fading evening light, she smiled at him.

"So? How'd you think it went?"

Tom cleared his throat. *Please let me in*. "Pretty well."

"Pretty well?" Emme scoffed and aimed a light punch at his arm. "Dude. It was awesome." She looked back over her shoulder, as if checking to see if Dave or Guillermo had followed them into the hallway, and lowered her voice before she spoke again. "If you want in, you're so in. I've got to talk to those two about it so they feel like I've consulted them, but seriously?"



Give me two more hours and we'll make it official." She winked at him as he stepped outside.

That wink, combined with her low-voiced whisper, overpowered his nerves long enough to wake up something else inside him, something needy and more than a little feral. He winked back. "I look forward to it," he said, before he took the front steps two at a time.

\* \* \*

Emme knew before she opened her mouth that Dave was going to argue.

He always got that stubborn set to his eyebrows when he disagreed with her. It usually happened when she wanted to make changes to a song he'd written, or when she really dug in about cutting a guitar solo. And she nearly always won the argument anyway, but having it in the first place was beginning to get exhausting.

"So? What do y'all think?" She slid onto the piano bench and turned around to face Dave and Mo.

"He's better than Alyssa," Guillermo said. "She was pretty good. And I liked her. But she's usually more of a rock girl, and you can hear it in her playing. Tom, you can tell he's a blues and soul kind of guy, and it sounds better with our songs."

"I agree. And he improves well. He'd be a good songwriting partner." Emme watched Dave's face. His eyebrows were still doing that thing. She wanted to get up and push them back into their usual shape with her fingers, as if that would make him less obstinate.

He'd been digging in his heels more and more lately, questioning every decision that she made. After being so supportive for so long, his new opposition felt like betrayal.

"I don't like him," Dave said finally. "It's not that I don't *like* him. He seems cool. I've heard him play with a couple of bands at McKinney's. Andy says he's reliable, and god knows that's a plus. But I don't think he's a good fit for us."

"Why not?" Emme tried to listen to him. She really did. She wasn't just going to shut him down before he'd spoken his piece.

Even if she'd already made up her mind, practically the minute Tom walked in.

“You’re not going to like what I have to say.” Dave rubbed his hand over his forehead. He actually looked torn up about whatever it was. For a moment, Emme felt bad for him.

Then he spoke. “I don’t like the way he looks at you, or you look at him.”

“Not this again.” Guillermo stood up. “Really, man?”

“I just think it would be safer not to risk it. Remember what happened sophomore year, when we were in that jazz quartet? And then Indelible Lines ...”

The words punched Emme right in the sternum. “You still haven’t forgiven me. For a mistake I made that didn’t even affect you at all.”

“It’s not that I haven’t forgiven you. Emily, come on. I think Jared was the one who really screwed up Indelible Lines. But you do this, like, a lot.” Dave stood up and started pacing. “You’re kind of a drama magnet. And on top of that, have you met his sister? That girl is seriously fucked up. Can he really promise not to let his personal life get in the way of the tour?”

Emme turned around on the bench and started playing scales, mostly so she wouldn’t have to look at Dave’s face while she tried to fight the sting of tears. No one believed her. No one had ever believed her. Even her best friend had assumed the worst about her, and she’d never bothered to defend herself, because if she even had to, because of the assumptions that he’d made, then what was the point? She might as well have been guilty.

But she’d learned her lesson, hadn’t she?

Even if she looked at Tom and immediately started thinking about ways to get him alone.

She shook her head. No, that wasn’t fair. She’d changed *plenty*, and she could prove it. And there was something inherently awful about denying him a chance just because his sibling sucked.

“Man, give him a shot,” Guillermo was saying when she turned around again. “We all screw up. And how shitty is it to judge him based on his sister? Uncool, Dave.”

“I know it sounds bad.” Dave sounded tortured. “I don’t want to be that guy. I’m just trying to be practical. I swear I’m not trying to be an asshole.”

“How are either of us supposed to prove anything to you if you don’t give us a chance?” Emme breathed in like she did before a song, channeling her frustration out on the exhale, imagining it spinning off into the distance like a sustained note. “I promise I won’t seduce the new bass player. I’ll

make him promise his sister won't cause problems for us. If we fuck it up —”

“I'll leave the tour.” Dave looked her straight in the eyes. “I'm serious, Emily. I'm willing to give y'all the chance, but if you fuck it up, I'm done.”

Emme nodded. “That's your choice. So we're decided?”

\* \* \*

Tom didn't drive straight home. He detoured to the park nearest his house, parked his car, and walked for a while as the sky stained orange, then purple. He sat on a bench, watching two fat pigeons fight over a discarded coffee cup, and smoked nearly half a pack of cigarettes until his nervous energy had been replaced by a nicotine hum. Going home would mean facing Katie; it would mean *telling* Katie that he planned to leave, and then who would she call when she needed money, a ride, a trip to the emergency room? Going on tour would mean managing his business from the road, checking in with his managers and his staff regularly and letting go of the tight hold he'd kept on the bar since his father died.

But god, he wanted to make music again, and he wanted to make music with Emme. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so good; maybe when he was twelve years old and J. R. had asked him to sit in with him on a set.

Inside his pocket, his cell phone buzzed again. It could be Katie, needing rescue. Or it could be Emme, with good news. He told himself his hands were trembling from nicotine overload and not desperation as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

YOU'RE IN, the message read.

How fucking long had it been since he'd been part of anything? Since his life had looked like something other than just a repeat of his father's days, without the warm numbness of alcohol to ease it along? Since he'd had a chance to feel optimistic—hell, to feel *anything* other than a sense of perpetual duty?

He couldn't remember the last time he'd done anything just for himself. Maybe back before J. R. died. Certainly long before his father had died. Maybe not even then.

He slid his phone back into his jacket. Funny how those two words made it feel just a little bit lighter.



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