

Plebe Summer

by Zillah

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Chapter One

From mid-April to the end of June, Zain was all over the slightest hint of me withdrawing. I still had time to myself during the day, but the moment he got home he would refuse to be shut out. He has many, many tricks for taking apart, chipping through, climbing over, and openly bulldozing the walls I try to build, and I don't think there was a single one he didn't use at some point during that period.

Eye contact became a much bigger deal than I was comfortable with. It led to a few instances of him making me lay facing him in bed and hold still while he locked gazes with me. He jokingly calls them staring contests, except if I close my eyes or try to look away, he swats me. Not very hard, usually, just enough to pull my focus back to him. Once, I was so exasperated with the whole thing, I actually started to get up. Before I even made it off the mattress, he'd turned me across his lap, collected the hairbrush from the nightstand, and cracked it down a half-dozen or so times. And then quite deftly put me back exactly where I had been and resumed looking into my eyes, his own full of nothing but kindness and determination, while I blinked away more tears than the sting warranted.

Every night, he put me over his knee and administered the last insulin shot into my upper buttocks. My reaction to that varied from "NO" to a deep, visceral, grounding sense of security which I can't fully explain. Whether I put up a fight or not, it ended with me draped face-down, supported by the bed and his warm, solid thigh, my pajama bottoms around my knees. When he was done with the injection, he'd pat my bare cheeks twice before letting me up long enough to pull my pants back into place, and then beckon me to slide under the covers with him and settle down to sleep.

That was often when my tongue loosened enough to form the words needed to express my fears. He listened to every one of them, even the most irrational, and good-humoredly talked them through with me, until I was satisfied with whatever solution or reassurance he provided.

Between talks, though, he seemed to be doing everything possible to take my mind off our impending separation. We went for long late-afternoon hikes away from the tourist spots. He let me drag him around flea markets, all the while making dire noises about what would happen if I brought home another pink elephant. We marathoned an entire two seasons of *White Collar* one weekend, and took a camping trip on another.

I also wore his dog tags for a lot of the time. It's difficult for me to explain everything they symbolize. They were a good luck charm when he was deployed. They keep his name close to my heart. They mark me as his in a way nothing else does, since we don't have engagement rings. They also mean I'm not allowed to have an orgasm without his permission. He delights in making me beg. I delight in it too, if I'm being fully honest. The dog tags could

be seen as a kind of collar, I suppose, except I've never thought of us as the type of couple to do collars.

He took a week of leave before Induction Day, and we spent it straightening out the last details and packing. Most of our belongings were coming with us or being shipped to Santa Cruz for safe-keeping. The house was emptied of almost everything except the furniture when we were done, ready to be locked up until we returned in December. Just walking through it terrified me. Zain must've seen that it did, because he moved us to a tent in the backyard until the day before I-Day, when we boarded the plane to the mainland. We stayed that night in a hotel near Annapolis.

Our last morning together, I didn't meditate. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say I meditated on Zain. I used the bathroom for my glucose test, and when I came out, he was spread-eagle on his back, taking up nearly all the hotel bed's available space. I fit my body in beside his and watched him sleep awhile.

He wouldn't look like himself much longer. Before we left, he'd need to shave the rough stubble that had grown during those last few days, and later his hair, already kept in a Marine's high-and-tight, would be buzzed off entirely during his induction processing. His own clothes would be replaced, from underwear to jackets. Only his running shoes would remain, because they were already broken in, and even they were required to fit strict regulations. His tattoo, his sole distinguishing mark, would be hidden beneath the uniform.

It didn't matter, I told myself. I had drawn it for him and could picture it with my eyes closed: An anatomical heart inked in blacks and grays directly above the real, beating muscle inside him, with arteries and veins spreading up toward his collarbone like wings, then fading away. Across the ventricles, hidden among the blood vessels and shadows so you had to know where to look, I'd written *semper fidelis*. It was more than the Marine Corps motto to Zain. It was both a creed and a vow, his entire way of life summed up in a simple Latin phrase, rising and falling with his every breath.

I reached out a hand and slowly traced over the familiar lines of it, until a minute change in one of his inhalations made me look back to his face. His eyes were open a fraction of an inch.

"Morning, babe," he murmured. I started to take my hand away, but he caught it with his own and pressed it down flat on his chest. "What are you thinking about?" he asked, voice barely above a whisper and still rough from sleep.

I met his gaze helplessly. Was I only imagining I could feel his steady pulse in my palm? "I'm thinking we need to get a move on, or you're going to be late."

His lips twitched. "Liar. C'mere." He tugged and rolled simultaneously, so I ended up underneath him.

"No, really, Z, it's almost seven. My parents-"

"Know exactly where we are, and there's plenty of time."

Trying to budge him is always an exercise in futility. We may be the same height, but he has strength I'll never have, backed up with knowledge and sheer obstinance. I tried anyway, and in three seconds my wrists were pinioned to the scratchy hotel sheets, beside my shoulders.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said, against my neck.

I closed my eyes and said the only thing that came close to encompassing it all. "*Je t'aime.*"

"I love you too, *habibi*," he said, and then he was kissing me, and it was long past seven o'clock when we finally got out of bed.

I called my parents while he got ready to leave. It took him about six minutes, including showering. Being a normal human, I have to spend more time, so I went second in the bathroom, passing my phone to him when we switched places. The rush of water pouring over my head drowned out the words of their conversation, but his tone was upbeat as always. He'd hung up by the time I climbed out, and propped himself in the doorway as I started drying off.

"Your dad said something about keeping a beginner's mind?" he asked.

I smiled and quoted, "'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.'"

He raised his eyebrows and slowly nodded. "Sure, that makes more sense."

"He's reminding you to keep yourself open to the possibilities and not to think you're an expert," I said. "You should read Shunryu Suzuki sometime. You'd like him." One line of his in particular always reminded me of Zain. *The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous.*

"I'll add it to my list."

I wrapped the towel around my waist and squeezed toothpaste onto my brush. "My outfit is on the table out there. Could you bring it to me?"

He pushed himself off the doorframe, ambled away, and reappeared with a stack of clothes, which he set down on the counter next to me. As he did, a glimmer from his hand caught my eye and made me stop halfway through brushing my teeth. The dog tags were wrapped around his fingers.

"It's up to you, babe," he said, when I didn't speak. "I just figured, since I'm not supposed to wear them, you might want to."

I rinsed my mouth and spat toothpaste foam into the sink with my gaze still mostly fixed on that little metal chain. "For the whole summer?"

"Mm-hm. Although I think we could relax the rule about calling me 'sir' all the time. You wouldn't need to unless it feels natural for the situation. Getting permission to come is the most important part, anyway. What do you think?"

We had talked about going for longer periods of denial before, but the most we had done was a week. The last time I'd worn the tags more than that was when he was deployed, and we hadn't yet incorporated them into the orgasm control aspect of our relationship.

"What about safewording?" I asked, looking up to his eyes, which were warm and uncoercive.

"If you need to stop, stop, and just write 'sycamore' in your next letter to me," he said. "You don't need to wait for me to acknowledge it, and you should never feel bad about using it, *habibi*."

I'd only ever used it in the past when I could feel my blood sugar dropping during an edging session, anyway. Feeling a flush that was only partly due to embarrassment, I asked, "Would you let me come at all?"

"Well, that would be telling, wouldn't it?" His grin was positively evil, and it did things to me that were becoming difficult to hide in only a towel.

My mouth was dry. I licked my lips and nodded. "Okay."

"You'll wear them?"

"Yes, sir."

He unwrapped the chain from his hand, stepped closer, and gently placed it over my head. Then he bit down on my shoulder, hard enough to make me moan, and said, "That's my boy."

His hand slid underneath the towel, giving me two quick strokes before he stepped back with a smirk. "Now get a move on, babe, or we're gonna be late."

"I hate you so much," I said as I snatched my underwear off the counter.

Chapter Two

Seb didn't stop glaring at me all through our complimentary continental breakfast. I chalked that up as a win.

Afterward, we met Maeve and Charlie in the hotel parking lot, where Maeve wasted no time hugging us and declaring us both too skinny.

"We're fine, Mom," Seb said.

"Skin and bones, you are," she replied. "Zain, at least, has a wee bit of muscle on him."

"A wee bit?" I asked, mocking outrage. "Does this look like a *wee bit* to you?" I flexed so my biceps would strain against the sleeves of my uniform, and Seb rolled his eyes.

"Yes, you're very strong and muscular," he said. "Why don't you put those to use loading the car?"

"You're not going to help? You have so much more stuff than me!" I protested.

"But I'm skin and bones," he said, smugly. "If you wanted help, you should've fed me better."

I sighed and went to lend Charlie a hand with Seb's massive suitcase. Besides his clothes, he'd also packed a small library, a case of art supplies, and no less than six different sketchbooks. It took Charlie and me two tries to get the trunk to close after we'd shoved it in, along with my much smaller bag.

That done, I hooked my arm around Seb's waist and gave him no opportunity to get away until we were both in the backseat, with him in the middle, up against my side. When he tried to wiggle out of my hold, I casually slipped my hand down lower and patted his hip. He shot me a glower, but stayed put.

Charlie, Maeve, and I talked the whole drive over. Seb did too, though he had to be prompted to join in. His parents did the prompting as much as me, which was reassuring. I was counting on them and his siblings to keep him from self-imposed solitary confinement for the next six weeks.

We parked at the Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium, took a shuttle bus, and finally -- crawling with new plebes, their families, and midshipmen in summer whites directing them

into lines that seemed to stretch and double-back on themselves for miles -- there it was. The Academy.

Going to boot camp had been terrifying. I was eighteen, desperate to prove myself, and worried about hiding my sexuality until the repeal of DADT was in full effect. Standing on the Yard didn't feel nearly as frightening, but the momentousness of what I was about to do did strike me pretty deeply as I looked up at the dome of the chapel. Four years at one of the most challenging schools in the world, not to mention being away from Seb for most of the time, and a commitment to at least another five years of service following graduation. I was absolutely sure we could do it, and equally sure that we'd both hate it some days.

Seb came up beside me and slipped his hand into mine. "I'm ready if you are," he said, quietly. He'd said the same thing on our first unofficial date back at the Santa Cruz boardwalk, when I wanted us to ride the rollercoaster that had scared him to death since he was little.

Smiling, I whispered, "Hold on tight, babe," and kissed his cheek.

"Anyone know which of these lines we're supposed to be in?" Charlie asked from behind us.

"Let me find out," I said. There was a female midshipman standing not too far away, talking to another family. As they walked off, I approached her, letting go of Seb's hand to retrieve my paperwork from my bag. She barely glanced at it.

"Reporting from the Fleet? Over there," she said, pointing. "Welcome to USNA, Corporal."

"Thank you, Midshipman," I said, but she had already turned to help another plebe, this one looking like he was just out of high school. "That's probably the last time I'll be called that for awhile," I mused to Seb as we all moved to join the line she'd indicated. "Will you still call me 'corporal,' babe?"

"I've never in my life called you by your rank, and I'm not starting now," he said.

"Aw, but it'll make me feel better about being just a lowly plebe," I said. "Pretty please?"

"No."

"Look, there's the tours," said Maeve. "Want to do that later, *a leanbh*?"

Seb glanced at the groups gathered around their midshipmen tour guides and made a face. "I'd rather wander around and get something to eat."

"They probably frown on climbing the trees here," I said, nonchalantly.

"I'm not going to climb a tree!"

I grinned at his outraged expression and shrugged. "Just something to keep in mind, if you get the urge."

The line we were in was entirely prior-enlisted candidates, although I was the only Marine I could see; the rest were sailors. It was moving much faster than any of the others, and in no time we were close to the doors of Alumni Hall. A blue and gold rope formed a barrier about twenty feet from it, with signs posted along its length that all read *Candidates Only Beyond This Point*.

"Well, here we are," Charlie said. "We'll see you after the swearing-in ceremony, when you'll officially be the noble creature known as a plebe."

"*Bonne chance*, Zainadu," said Maeve, pulling me into a hug. Charlie went after her, but they both kept it quick and then stood back to give Seb and I as much privacy as possible as he squeezed me tightly.

"See you this afternoon," I said into his ear. "Take a tour. It'll be fun." He nodded, but didn't say anything. I pressed a kiss to the juncture of his neck and shoulder, right over the chain of my dog tags, and let him go. Then I turned and walked into the building.

Inside was much cooler. A table was set up with a row of four midshipmen sitting behind it, each with an open laptop and a sign showing a range of letters. I went to the L-Q one to wait behind two sailors.

"Oh, praise the Lord, another devil dog," said a deep, quiet drawl to my right. I looked over and found the it belonged to a lance corporal with a broad nose and square jaw standing in the G-K line. He leaned toward me and lowered his voice even further. "I thought I was going to be surrounded by squids all damn day. Good to see you, Corporal."

I grinned. "You too, Lance Corporal, but you should probably get used to being surrounded by squids. I hear they outnumber us."

"Ha, since when has being outnumbered meant shit to a Marine?" he asked, and then stuck his hand out. "I'm Jamal Jacobson, Jr., but most people call me JJ."

"Zain Mohyeldin," I replied, shaking it. "First battalion, third Marines."

"Hawaii, nice. I'm from Camp Lejeune, myself, and Atlanta before that," he said.

I was about to reply, but the midshipman in front of me said, "Next! Step forward." I handed him my Permit to Report, and in return got a name tag and a copy of *Reef Points*, the book

that would become my bible for at least the next six weeks. “Up the ladder, station two is on your right,” he said, jerking his head at the staircase beyond the table. I went.

Several hours later, having been weighed, measured, medically examined, breath-alyzed, drained of two blood samples, screened for color vision, photographed shirtless (to document my tattoo), given a buzzcut, issued new gear, put into a white works uniform, and, finally, fed lunch, I emerged again. I was now officially a plebe.

Along with JJ and the eight other prior-enlisted Marines, I boarded a bus to another building, where the Academy’s Senior Marine Corps Representative, a Colonel, was waiting to welcome us. He gave us an in-brief that could be summed up as “work hard, make us proud, and play nice with the squids,” and then it was back on the bus and off to Bancroft Hall, the only dormitory.

JJ and I were both assigned to Lima Company, 21st Platoon for the summer, meaning we’d also be in the same company during the academic year. We didn’t have a chance to talk again, though. An upperclass midshipman gave us our room assignments and orders to stay in them and stow our gear until we were collected.

I was nearly done folding all my new uniforms when the formerly-civilian plebes arrived from their own processing, and I had the pleasure of meeting my roommate.

He was young and short, probably barely over the minimum height requirement, with hair so blond the buzzcut made him look bald. When he entered the room, he immediately sat on the unclaimed desk chair and started rummaging through his sea bag. “Name’s Bradley Platt.”

I glanced from him to the open door and back, and then, figuring that must’ve been directed to me since I was the only person in hearing distance, I said, “Nice to meet you, Platt. I’m Zain Mohyeldin. Want any help unpacking?”

“Worry about your shit and I’ll worry about mine, okay?” he said.

I shrugged and tried not to smile at his look, which he probably intended to be threatening. Seb could’ve done better in his sleep. This kid was going to be entertaining. “Okay, if that’s the way you want it.”

“That’s the way I want it.”

So I left him to it and settled down in my own chair with *Reef Points*. Maybe ten minutes later, I was distracted from my reading by him leaning over me to examine my corkboard, the only

space in the room allowed to be personalized, where I'd pinned one of my favorite selfies with Seb.

We had been sitting on the beach behind the house in Hawaii, watching the sunset. Just as the light reached that point where everything is gold and scarlet, I'd bitten his earlobe and snapped a picture before he could push me off. It captured the hint of a smile on his lips perfectly.

"Wow, your girlfriend is one ugly chick," said Platt.

"He'll be thrilled you think so," I replied. "He's always telling me he can't pull off drag when I want to do Aladdin and Jasmine for our Halloween costumes."

Platt recoiled like I'd confessed to having the plague. Once again, his expression was comical. I was going to have to practice my poker face if he kept this up.

"They stuck me with a fag?!"

"Fraid so, although, hey, I do have a deep aesthetic appreciation for certain women, so I could say I'm bi if it'll make you feel better?" I offered. The poor kid had shifted from disgust to looking honestly terrified that I was going to jump him or something. I wanted to give him a reassuring pat on the back, except that would've made it worse.

He was rescued by our Squad Leader, Midshipman Belcher, barking commands down the hall. "PLEBE-HO! That means you will move expeditiously to the passageway, face the bulkhead next to your doorway, execute an about-face, sound off with your name and alpha code, and remain at attention until directed otherwise! NOW!"

I was moving as he spoke, and so was the first to sound off. Platt followed me and positioned himself on the other side of the doorway. I heard him stumble over his alpha code. They had only been given to us that morning, not enough time to memorize them for most people without training. Luckily for him, ten other plebes were sounding off at the same time, and Belcher didn't notice.

"We will be in formation for the Oath of Office ceremony at seventeen forty-five, which gives me one hour to turn you lot into something resembling midshipmen," he said, striding back and forth between us in the passageway. "You should all be unpacked. If anyone noticed anything damaged, missing, or otherwise wrong with their room, report it now, because you will be held responsible for anything damaged, missing, or otherwise wrong when you leave it."

No one moved. At least, I assume no one did, but because I had my eyes on the boat -- that is, fixed straight ahead -- I couldn't see my squadmates at the other end of the passageway. After a pause, though, Belcher said, "Good. Now--"

That was when Platt, the dummy, decided to step forward. Belcher was an inch from his face in two seconds.

"What is your name, Candidate?" he snapped.

"Platt, sir," said Platt. To his credit, his voice didn't shake at all.

"Did you see that I was speaking just now, Platt?"

"Yes, sir, but I--"

"YES, you saw that I was speaking, but you decided that what you had to say was more important, Platt?"

From the hesitation before he answered, I guessed Platt had probably realized his mistake by this point. Unfortunately, he was too far gone to turn back. "No, sir. I... needed to report an issue with my room, sir."

"I inspected that room myself earlier today, Platt," Belcher told him. "Are you saying I missed something?"

Meaning the invitation to report anything amiss had been a trap for us, and Platt had walked right into it. I've never liked tricks and bullshit as a leadership style.

"No, sir," said the fly to the spider. "It's actually- as a religious accommodation, I'd like to request a different roommate, sir."

Oh for pity's sake, could this kid be any dumber? It was honestly painful.

Belcher, of course, looked over at me. "Your name?" he demanded.

"Mohyeldin, sir," I replied, still staring at the opposite wall.

"What about your religion prohibits you from sharing a room with Mohyeldin, Platt?"

"I'm a Christian, sir," Platt said. "My religion prohibits me from intermingling with homosexuals."

From the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of surprise cross Belcher's face. He looked at me again. "Are you a homosexual, Mohyeldin?"

"Yes, sir."

Belcher didn't say anything for a moment. Then he stepped back from Platt and turned away. "Request denied, Platt. Just try to keep your hands off Mohyeldin and there won't be any 'intermingling.'"

Several of the other plebes laughed, and poor Platt's blush went all the way over his scalp. I winced. Yeah, he was ignorant, but he was also completely harmless, and Belcher might as well have just tattooed a giant bullseye on the kid's forehead.

My opinion of Belcher didn't improve as he took us through the basic commands we'd use for the ceremony. I know the whole deal with "break 'em down so you can build 'em up again," but I could see he was intentionally making his instructions unclear, and then criticizing Platt and the two female plebes on the squad, Stevens and Sullivan, a lot more than the rest of us for the inevitable mistakes. I bit my tongue and reminded myself that he was a student too, and unlike the drill sergeants I'd had previously, this was probably his first time being in charge of training. Hopefully his leadership skills would improve over the three weeks he'd be with us.

After all the buildup, the ceremony itself flew by. One second we were marching into Tecumseh Court in front of Bancroft Hall, the next we were raising our right hands and swearing to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and the next we were being dismissed for one last opportunity to meet with our families.

The area beyond T-Court, Stribling Walk, was set up with markers for every letter of the alphabet. I made my way to the one for "M", where Seb and his parents were already waiting. Seb greeted me with folded arms and a raised eyebrow.

"Are you *supposed* to look like a cross between a prison inmate and the Cracker Jack guy?" he asked.

I glanced down at my white works uniform and grinned. "No, he wears blue, and prison inmates wear orange."

"I never thought I'd miss the ugly green and khaki," he said, shaking his head.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’ll be sure to advise my chain of command that they should make you a fashion consultant.” Then I got a hold of him and hugged, determined not to let go until he uncrossed his arms and released some of the tension from his frame. While I was waiting for that, I asked Charlie and Maeve, “How’d you guys spend the day?”

“We attended the Parents’ Picnic and met some lovely people,” Maeve said. “And then we took the tour, which was very informative, and we ate at... oh, what was the name of that restaurant?” she asked Charlie.

Seb beat him to it. “Dry Dock,” he muttered into my shoulder. “Zain, people are staring.”

“No they’re not, they’re too busy hugging their own loved ones,” I said. “Did you check out the Mid Store? I heard they have some great deals.”

That got Maeve started on the recipes she was dying to try from a cookbook she’d bought called *Of Tide & Thyme*. I listened, ignoring Seb’s subtle attempts to free himself. Somewhere during the desserts section, he gave in and settled down against me, his arms wrapping around my neck, his breathing deepening.

“And then we took a bit of a walk until the ceremony,” Maeve concluded.

“Sounds like a good time,” I said. “Did you climb anything, babe?”

He made an incoherent noise and punched my shoulder, hard.

I laughed. “I’m just making sure!”

“Jerk. I hate you,” he said, going back to hanging onto me like a lifebuoy.

“That’s the second ‘I hate you’ of the day, and only one ‘I love you,’” I mused. “Doesn’t seem right, does it?”

If possible, he clung even more heavily. “Go away.”

“You know, on a subatomic scale, time and distance are mere illusions,” Charlie said. “You two are never apart. Of course, in another sense you never existed in the first place—”

“Dad.”

“-and just because they’re illusions doesn’t mean they don’t hurt. Illusions, after all, are the only things with the power to hurt us, if we give it to them.”

Seb sighed. “Thank you, Dad, that’s very helpful.”

"It is, actually," I said. "If I'm late reporting back, I can just tell my squad leader that time and distance are illusions, so really I was there all along."

That got a weak laugh from Seb, before he twisted to look at my watch. "Speaking of which, you should leave," he said.

"I still have a few minutes," I said. If I sprinted back, I'd make it plenty early.

He was already shaking his head and pulling away, though. "Some of the others are already gone, look."

The crowd *had* noticeably thinned when I glanced around. "Yeah, but—"

"I don't want you making a bad first impression, Z," he said. "Go... be all that you can be and all that jazz."

I snorted. "That's the Army, babe."

He rolled his eyes. "Army, Navy, whatever."

"Do me a favor?" I asked through my laughter. "Don't let all these people in the nice white uniforms hear you say that. Ever. I would like you to remain in one piece, at least until Parent's Weekend." Sobering a bit, I added, "It's less than six weeks away now, so I'm sure you can manage it. Right?"

I knew he'd caught my meaning when he blinked a few times, like he was trying not to cry. "Right."

"I'll see you then," I promised. I felt myself choking up too, which was the last thing Seb needed, so I quickly turned to Charlie and Maeve. "You guys, I probably won't see until Thanksgiving, though."

"We still expect letters," Maeve said sternly. "I'll be sending care packages all summer. You let me know anything you need, Zainadu."

"I will," I said. "Thank you both, for everything." I embraced them each one last time, and then checked my watch again. "Okay, I really have to leave now, *habibi*."

"That's what I've been *telling* you."

"I still have a few seconds for this, though," I said, and gave him a deep, thorough kiss.

We were both slightly out of breath when it was over. With his forehead against mine and his eyes closed, he said, "*Je t'aime*. There, now I've told you *that* twice today as well, so you can go."

"I love you, too." I squeezed the back of his neck and then, reluctantly, let my hand fall and started to leave. Five steps down Stribling Walk, I glanced back. His eyes were still closed. "Seb," I said, stopping. It took a long moment, but he did open them and look at me. "Have a good summer," I told him. He nodded, once. I smiled at him, and then turned away and broke into a run to catch up with the last few stragglers making their way to the formation areas.

Chapter Three

On the flight to California, it felt as if my soul being pulled like taffy, stretched thinner and thinner with each mile that passed by beneath the plane, until I was connected to Zain by nothing more than a taut, ethereal string. If I paid attention, I could detect the tug of it in my solar plexus.

Zain is my true home, but Solshine Farm is a safe fallback position.

My parents bought it as ten acres of vacant land set between the redwoods and beaches, off the highway just north of downtown Santa Cruz. They built a sprawling French Country farmhouse, filled with light, singing, and treasures collected on their travels. Keegan, Dax, Quinn, and I all took our first howling breaths there.

Darkness had long since fallen when my father finally parked the car in the garage, but local time and my body clock were completely out of synch, so while my parents went straight to sleep, I climbed out my bedroom's dormer window onto the pitched roof and laid a while gazing at the stars.

The last time I'd done that in this house, Zain was beside me. I wondered if he would be able to look at the sky tonight, or if the detailers were keeping him too busy with training. Pressing my hands against the rough shingles beneath me stopped them from seeming so empty.

I slept late the next day. My mind wasn't present in my meditation or yoga at all, but I forced myself to finish. It was ridiculous and frustrating. I was not going to fall apart because Zain wasn't there. The angry bleating of a goat outside matched my mood as I descended the back staircase to the kitchen.

"Dax, I already told you, we are not doing redheads versus brunettes!" Quinn said. I turned the corner and found her sitting in the breakfast nook with a newspaper spread out on the table in front of her.

Dax was leaning against the kitchen island, constructing his own equivalent of a sandwich. It involved two hot dog buns and five different condiments that I could see. "Why not?" he asked.

Quinn sighed, like she had explained this before. She probably had. "Because it's not fair putting you, Keegan, and Dad on the same team and sticking me with Mom and Seb," she said. "Mom's a klutz and Seb'll get bored and disappear halfway through. They have to be on opposite teams to keep it even. Boys versus girls."

"We *always* do boys versus girls, though."

I moved closer, and they both saw me at the same time. "Oh, hey, Seb!" said Quinn.

"Hi," I replied suspiciously, looking from her to Dax. "What are you guys picking teams for?"

"Little game of three-on-three basketball after dinner tonight," Dax said.

I opened the fridge to find something to eat. "Can I get bored and disappear before we even start?"

Together, they said, "No."

"What about Jasmitha?" I asked. She hates basketball too, but I can usually argue one of us should be the referee, and she hates doing that even more.

"She's not coming," Quinn said. "She had some ACLU commitment, so Keegan's driving down without her."

Sorting through my mom's neatly-labeled tupperware wasn't getting me anything. I took a carton of orange juice out and set it on the counter as my brother said, "I like that it'll be just the four of us, without any in-laws."

"DAX!" said Quinn.

He jumped and almost dropped his sandwich. "What?!"

Glaring at him, she jerked her head in my direction.

Dax's eyes widened. "Oh!" he said. "Seb, I really didn't mean that I'm glad Zain's not here."

"It's fine," I told him, but it was too late. They were both looking at me like I was going to break down in sobs at any second. I turned away and went up on my toes to reach for a glass from one of the open shelves that line the walls.

"Here, let me get that," said Dax. Before I could say anything, he'd crossed the room and taken it down over my shoulder.

He was just trying to help. I accepted the glass from his hand, poured myself juice, grabbed a croissant from the bowl my mom keeps full of them on the table, and went back upstairs.

In the middle of pricking my finger for a test, there was a knock on my bedroom door.

“Seb?”

It was Quinn. I considered not answering, letting her think I’d gone to one of my hiding spots. But that wasn’t fair to her or Dax, especially considering I wasn’t really mad at either of them. And it was also exactly the kind of thing Zain had been trying to prevent by asking me to stay here.

Another knock. “Sebby, come on, please?”

I left my meter counting down to the reading on my desk and went to open the door, absentmindedly sucking my bleeding finger. She was chewing on her lower lip, and neither of us said anything for a moment. Then I stepped to one side and gestured for her to come in.

“Sorry,” she said, once I’d closed the door behind her. “We did exactly the wrong thing, didn’t we?”

“It’s fine,” I said, glancing my meter. The number was too high again.

Quinn sighed and sat down cross-legged on the edge of my bed. “No, it’s not. We’re trying to get better, but you’re always going to be the baby of the family, you know? We can’t help being protective.”

“You’re barely over a year older than me,” I pointed out. We’re all close in age. Sometimes people ask if we’re two sets of twins, or possibly quadruplets.

“Yeah, but.” She waved a hand vaguely, like that was enough of an explanation. “Anyway, I came up to see if you want to help with the chores. Dax and I can handle them by ourselves, if you want to take it easy today-”

“I’ll help,” I interrupted. “Let me just eat breakfast first.”

“Okay,” she said. I expected her to go back downstairs, but she sat there, looking at me, as I did my injection and started to eat. “Aren’t you going to ask me how the job hunt is going?”

I swallowed a bite of croissant and parroted back, “Quinn, how is the job hunt going?”

“Ugh, don’t ask,” she said. “Remind me why I picked mass communications as a major? It’s such a *useful* degree.”

“You wanted to work for Buzzfeed, I think.”

“Haha, right. Good one, Past Me.”

While I finished the croissant and orange juice, I was treated to a speech on the state of online media and how deeply screwed we millennials were in trying to start a decent career.

“I mean, look at us!” she said at one point, towards the end. “Keegan’s doing what she loves, but the rest of us? Dax and I are back at home; I’m applying to be a cashier at Costco; he’s scraping by on the pennies you get paid in the minors and whatever odd jobs he can pick up, hoping to move up to major league one day; and you’ve been mostly living off Zain’s salary, right?”

She didn’t wait for me to answer, but it was true, and a lot of the reason I’d wanted to go to art school. I needed to be able to support myself. It was a good reminder of why Zain and I were doing this.

After she wound down, we joined Dax in the backyard, where the dairy goats and free-range chickens grazed and scratched next to the gardens and orchard. He was already luring a goat into the milking station with the promise of an apple. I went to pull weeds from the raised beds of beets, carrots, leafy greens, peas, garlic, and onions.

Over the following days, I spent a lot of time in the garden, working or just sitting with a sketchbook. I hadn’t realized how much I had missed really growing things in Hawaii, where we’d had a couple of fruit trees that took care of themselves.

Planting and harvesting goes on almost year-round on the farm, thanks to the Mediterranean climate, and the produce is sold at the local farmers’ markets that take place nearly every day of the week somewhere in the county. The rhythm of it is rooted deep in me. Sometimes I wonder if my beliefs about the spiritualism of nature would’ve ever taken hold, had I grown up elsewhere.

When I wasn’t doing that, I was roped into family activities. Mom convinced me to tag along with her and Dad to the markets some days. I went to the 4th of July fair with Quinn, and Dax kept threatening to drag me to a baseball game. Keegan wanted me to come visit her at the rescue center so she could introduce me to her sea lion patients, but we hadn’t worked out the logistics of it yet. Between the five of them, there was always someone around.

I wrote to Zain every night, filling the page with mundane things. Dax had brought a new girl home. The goats were kidding soon. Neal was in trouble again on White Collar. On the back of each letter, I drew. Little comic strips of my parents. Zain as a Disney prince. Studies of birds and plants and seashells from my daily beach walks. Basically anything I could think of that would make him smile. I ended each one with *je t’aime*.

It was nearly a week before I got any from him, and then three arrived at once. I took them from the mailbox directly to the attic and curled up under the rafters to open them with fingers that were trembling slightly.

Hey babe,

I just saw you a few hours ago, but I miss you already. I did get back to my squad on time, I want to mention, because I'm sure you're worrying about it. Worrywart.

I'm making new friends, of course. You know how no one can resist my charming personality. Except my roommate, maybe. He's a real charmer himself, but I'll have to tell you more about that later. Gotta go, we're doing uniform races tonight.

*Love,
Z*

PS- I almost forgot to add! Edge three times the day you get this. No, you can't come. I'll be imagining you begging me tonight.

Bastard, I thought, fondly. Like the constant reminder of wearing the tags wasn't enough. I hoped he'd considered I might get more than one letter in a day, if this was how it was going to work. Putting that one aside, I opened the next, which was postmarked a day later.

Hey babe,

Sorry this letter isn't very long. I have extra duty tonight so I don't have much time. Apparently, Colonel Hathi's March from The Jungle Book isn't an acceptable cadence for drill. :) I'll write more later. Miss you.

*Love,
Z*

PS- Ask your mom to send protein cookies. Four dozen should be enough. Pretty please.

I frowned and read it twice, and then read the postscript once more, but it still didn't make sense. The third was even shorter.

Hey babe,

I've been advised that I shouldn't start each morning's PT with a rallying cry of "Let's get down to business to defeat the Huns." More ED tonight. (Not the little-blue-pill kind, no worries.) Miss you.

Love,
Z

What the hell was he doing?

Chapter Four

Most of my first day at the Academy was devoted to placement exams. Our scores on them would determine which courses we were enrolled in at the end of the summer. I was hoping to test out of the introductory-level classes, getting a jump start that would lead to more free time for Seb in my final year. I wanted to do everything possible to ease the hardships.

My roommate, Platt, had been ignoring my existence since our initial meeting, with two exceptions. The first was that morning.

The rooms in Bancroft Hall each have a glass shower stall and a sink in the corner. It's a necessity when there's thousands of Midshipmen all needing to get ready at the same time. I was used to having no privacy, and didn't think twice about stripping off right after we returned from morning PT. It wasn't until I glanced at Platt, and noticed him glaring at our closed door, that I paused.

"Did you want to take the first shower?" I asked. "I'm happy to wait, and I'll probably be quicker than you, so—"

"No," he snapped, still carefully not looking at me.

"Okay," I said, shrugging. I washed as efficiently as I could, to give him more time, but even after I'd moved to the sink and started shaving, he was making no moves to undress. "You probably want to get started," I suggested, gently, as the minutes ticked by.

"I'm not taking my clothes off where you can look at me," he said. He still sounded angry, but I was beginning to think that was a cover for fear. I wondered if he'd ever been in a communal showering situation before. Maybe he'd been homeschooled, like Seb, and never had to use a locker room? Now that I thought about it, he'd probably been wearing the same underwear since the day before, because I hadn't seen him change them.

"Is it the gay thing again?" I asked. He didn't respond. "Kid," I said, "even if I wasn't taken, you're really not my type. But if it'll make you feel more comfortable, I'll keep my back turned, okay?"

To prove it, I faced the wall opposite from the shower while I brushed my teeth. After a few seconds, the water started running behind me.

It was a little awkward to navigate around the room and get dressed while not turning around, but I kept my word, and eventually we were both ready to go to the morning meal formation.

The other time was during the exams, and I think it was his attempt to save face from what had happened the day before.

We were grouped with our platoons, each in a separate classroom, for the tests. JJ and I were sitting next to each other. We still hadn't had much opportunity for conversation, but just the fact that we were both Marines meant we had more in common with each other than with anyone else. Between the chemistry and calculus tests, the detailers stepped out of the room for a few minutes, letting us relax marginally.

"Are we allowed to talk?" someone asked from behind me.

"Didn't tell us not to," answered another, and, slowly, people began comparing notes on harder problems.

Stevens leaned back in her seat. "Hey, Mohyeldin, what'd you get on question twenty-seven?"

"Like he'd know," said Platt, on her other side. "Didn't anyone ever tell you what 'MARINE' stands for, Stevens? 'Muscles Are Required, Intelligence Not Expected.'"

It's an old joke, but in this crowd of military newbies, it got a few laughs. Platt looked pleased with himself, until I grinned at him and said, "I love to defy expectations."

JJ hooted, reaching his fist across the aisle. I bumped my own against it, and then quickly came to attention in my seat as the door opened. It was Belcher, holding a stack of exam booklets. He looked around at us all suspiciously, but by that time, Platt was the only one out of place.

"Platt, quit gaping at Mohyeldin," he said. "We all know you want him; you don't have to advertise it."

I frowned as Platt went bright red again. I wasn't enjoying the way Belcher used me as an object to torment the poor kid, and this time without any reason whatsoever. Didn't he see how he was setting us against each other?

After the tests, in the early evening when the heat and humidity had abated somewhat, we were split into squads again for our second-ever drill practice on Worden Field. Belcher started with a review of what we had learned the day before, and then moved quickly into more complicated commands. Again, he didn't take the time to fully explain each one before moving on to the next. It shouldn't have been any surprise to him when we stumbled over

them, but instead of telling us what we were doing wrong, he just barked out the commands faster and faster, until even I was hopelessly confused.

Platt had it worst, of course. He turned left instead of right at one point and ran into Sullivan, nearly knocking her to the ground.

“Squad HALT!” Belcher howled. “PLATT, do you need your ears cleaned out?”

“No, sir!” said Platt.

Belcher stood directly in front of him. “What the fuck was that, then?”

“No excuse, sir.”

I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who noticed the slight tremble in his response.

“ONE more time,” said Belcher, stepping back. “And you’d better not fuck up again, Platt. Forward MARCH!”

I can make my voice pretty damn loud when I want to, so even the squads on the far side of the field noticeably reacted when I sang out in time with the steps, “Oh, the aim of our patrol is a question rather droll, for to march and drill over field and hill is a military goal!”

In the moment after, when Belcher seemed too shocked to respond, I heard Stevens and Sullivan both snorting with suppressed laughter.

“Squad HALT!”

I obediently came to attention, my face perfectly blank.

“MOHYELDIN!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Move to the right flank of the squad and execute three cycles of pushups, twenty-five reps each.”

I resisted the urge to ask him if he wanted them Marine-style -- that is, two pushups to each rep.

That night at dinner, I noticed Platt took two helpings of the apple crumble they served for dessert, and scarfed it down like he was afraid someone was going to take it away from him. He saw me watching and glared. Apparently, diverting Belcher's attention hadn't earned me any points. A sweet tooth, though. I could work with that.

Seb's mom makes these amazing protein bars that look as healthy as they are, so they'd get by the ban on junk food in care packages, but they actually taste like cookies. I asked him to send some in my rushed letter, before I headed off to complete my punishment for Colonel Hathi's March.

Chapter Five

“Did Zain not tell you why he needs so many biscuits?” my mother asked.

I tilted my mixing bowl towards her for inspection. She glanced at the melted chocolate inside and shook her head, motioning for me to keep stirring. “They’re to share with his squad,” I said. “You know, help him make friends.”

“Since when has he ever needed help with that?”

It was a good question. Zain’s personality is equal parts confidence, amiability, and charm. People gravitate to him in a way they never do with me. I shrugged and said, “He didn’t go into much detail.”

“It’s ready now,” she said. “Pour it over them.”

I followed her directions and let the chocolate drizzle over the pan full of protein bars we had already made, using the spatula to scrape out the last of it from the bowl.

“He’s not having trouble, is he?”

“He’s fine, Mom,” I said. “It’s *Zain*, remember?”

In truth, I wasn’t sure about that, but my mother didn’t need to be worried, too.

The day after those three short, cryptic letters, I got a longer one, explaining what was happening with his squad leader and roommate. I’d become angry reading it, both at them and at Zain. I wanted him to lie low, not draw attention to himself with Disney songs, of all things. Even from three thousand miles away and several days in the past, he could read my mind.

I can feel you giving me that “Zain, this is not appropriate behavior” look, but hear me out, babe, he wrote. If someone has to be the target, I’d rather it be me. The others are only little.

He didn’t mean physically. Zain would probably consider a full-grown grizzly bear to be “only little” if it had an injured paw, and would try to help it while it growled at him. The idiot’s simply incapable of standing by and watching someone else in need.

And here I am enabling him, I thought, looking around at the last two batches of bars, cooling on the countertop. So what does that make me?

Dax interrupted my musings by charging in from the garage. Mom didn't glance up before she pointed him out again. "*Buanderie, a leanbh*, how often must I tell you?"

He rolled his eyes at me, backtracked to the laundry room, and reappeared without his gym bag slung over his shoulder. "Oooh, protein bars!"

I smacked him away. "No, they're for Zain, not you."

"Zain's going to eat all of those?" he asked. I glared, and he raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, alright, jeez." He leaned against the kitchen island and took an apple from the fruit bowl instead. "Hey, what're you up to this afternoon, *frérot*?"

"Packaging and mailing these, what do you think?" I asked.

"I can help with that," he volunteered. "And then when we're done, we can go do something else. We haven't gotten any brotherly bonding time since you came home."

"I'm not going to a baseball game," I told him.

"What about a hike in Big Basin?" he asked, and chomped down on his apple, knowing he had me.

Big Basin is California's first state park, the home of some of the most ancient redwoods. We took a trail into the old-growth forest, surrounded by their comforting presences, and the deeper we went, the more my fingers itched to draw. I found a boulder, sat down, and pulled out my sketchbook, while Dax waited patiently nearby. That's very unlike him. He has enough energy for five people and usually has to be tied down to stay in one spot for more than a few minutes. This time, though, he seemed to be making an effort at unobtrusiveness, and, as I sketched, I soon forgot he was even there.

Capturing the magnificence of a redwood with pencil or paint is like trying to convey the ocean through a glass of tap water. But I keep trying, because art is the only way I know how to express the way my soul aches and floats when I'm among them.

The main trunk of an old-growth coastal redwood can be twenty-six feet wide at the ground, and from there they can stretch up for over three hundred and seventy feet -- Mother Nature's skyscrapers. But it's not just their size that gets to me. The top might die or get torn off in a storm, so the tree puts out new trunks, running parallel to the main one, with branches shooting off and growing into each other, until the crown is a knot of interconnected wood. Huckleberry bushes and other scrubs sprout right out of the bark. Soil can collect in the joins of the branches and create natural gardens hundreds of feet in the air, with earthworms and

salamanders for birds to feast on. Many of the species found there are endangered, or completely unidentified. One tree can hold an entire world.

What amazes me most, though, is how a redwood can survive nearly anything. Forest fires burn caverns into them -- burn the entire center out in some cases -- and they will keep growing around the scar. Their wood is resistant to insects, fungi, and diseases. Chunks bigger than a car can die and come crashing to the ground, but the tree goes on, upward and outward, for thousands of years. Even cutting down a redwood doesn't necessarily kill it. The roots will send up new trunks, clones of the original tree, in a circle around the stump, like a fairy ring. They're known as cathedral trees, and standing in one is truly a sacred experience.

Trees can't hide from the obstacles that come their way and the things that want to hurt them. They have to deal with it, rooted to spot. Wrapping my mind around the idea of that is harder than looking at an entire redwood at once, so I focus on reproducing just one small patch of bark on my paper, and then another, and another.

I don't know how much time passed before Dax broke the silence. "Seb, I'm starving. Aren't you hungry?"

Yes, I realized, with a guilty jolt. I was past hungry and a good way into a low. Now that I was paying attention to it, every slight movement made it feel like the top of my head was lagging behind the rest of me. "A little," I said. "Go ahead. I'll catch up with you in a couple of minutes. Just want to finish this one."

Zain would've laughed at that, said, "Nice try, babe," and hauled me along with him. Or, more likely, he would've taken one good look at me and pulled out a tube of glucose tablets. Dax simply said, "Okay, but don't be long."

I waited for him to get out of sight before digging through my bag for a box of raisins and my test kit. The number wasn't terribly bad, so I ate while I slowly hiked back. I crushed the empty box and stuck it in my pocket before reaching the parking lot, where Dax was sitting on the tailgate of his truck.

He hopped off as I came out of the woods. "Finally! I was about to go looking for you. Quinn just texted me that Keegan and Jaz are coming for dinner, and they'll probably beat us there from Oakland at this rate."

My letter to Zain that night had redwoods growing all over the page, almost crowding out the words, and no mention of the low.

Hey Babe,

The cookies were a huge hit. Thank you. They even got Platt to speak civilly to me for two seconds, because he wanted to ask for more. Progress!

No, I haven't gone to my chain of command about Belcher. His behavior has been questionable, but not over the line. I don't want it to seem like I just think I'm a better leader than him (though I am, for the record) and get them set against me, in case there's something I really need to report later. Anyway, our company commander seems to have noticed what was going on. She observed a few drill training sessions, and Belcher had toned it down since. I know you're still going to worry. It's okay. I promise I will get help if it's necessary, and yes, I'm keeping a beginner's mind.

JJ and I have been sharing deployment stories with each other, mostly about the pranks we pulled. He loves the one with SSgt Ford's socks. I almost pissed myself laughing over a few of his, but he'll have to tell them to you himself for the full effect. I'm going to introduce you two during Parents Weekend. He says he's looking forward to meeting the guy willing to put up with me.

Tell Keegan if she wants letters too, she's gotta send me care packages. I don't put out for peanuts. :P (No, really, tell her I'll try to write to her and Jaz, but with my schedule, I can't make any promises. And then tell her I'm sorry and I love her, and make sure to do that sweet, vulnerable look you do so well while you say it, so she won't be mad at me. Oh, and might as well give the rest of them my love while you're at it. Thanks, babe. You're the best.)

So, how horny are you getting? Feel like you could do daily edging in the shower? I think you can. Otherwise, no touching except to use the bathroom. I expect a full report at the end of the week. (Yeah, you're probably going to want to be alone for that phone call, and well out of everyone's earshot, too.)

Miss you.

*Love,
Z*

Chapter Six

Belcher took two days after the visit from our company commander to go back to his old ways. The only difference was that he reeled it in whenever there were other detailers around. Once I noticed that, I realized he wasn't simply incompetent, he was an underhanded bully, and my growing dislike of him made me more bold.

For example, we were out on a run one day and Stevens was falling behind. I dropped back to check on her. "Beautiful day for a stroll around the Yard, huh?" I asked as I came along side her.

"Go on," she said. "I'll catch up in a minute."

"Nah, I think I'll take the scenic route with you," I replied. I was about to make another joke when I saw her grimace with pain. "You okay?"

"Just a blister forming. These fucking shoes weren't fully broken in."

"How bad-?" I started to ask, and was interrupted by Belcher, shouting back from the spot he'd chosen at the front of the squad, "Mohyeldin, what the hell are you doing?"

About time you noticed you're leaving two of your guys behind, I thought. Aloud, I yelled, "Building unit cohesion, sir." *You know, that thing you're supposed to be doing by now?*

"Can't run faster than a girl, Mohyeldin?" he asked, completely ignoring Stevens. I heard her swear under her breath at him, and privately agreed.

"I don't see any girls here, sir," I shouted. "I only see midshipmen."

That shut him up until we got back to Bancroft.

Before dinner, I took a small tub of Vaseline that Maeve had sent me to Stevens' and Sullivan's room, to help her reduce friction on her feet. She said "Thanks, Dad," as she took it, and Sullivan groaned.

"Ugh, don't call him that, you're making me think about my own dad," she said. "I wish I was with him. I hate this place."

Her eyes were faintly pink, I saw when I took a closer look at her. "Chin up, Sullivan," I said, and then recalled our conversation about favorite Disney movies earlier that week and added, "Remember, Belle had to be apart from her dad too, and it all turned out okay in the end."

She snorted. "Belle fell in love with the Beast and turned him into a handsome prince. If you think that's going to happen with me and Belcher, you're even crazier than you seem, dude."

"Anything's possible," I said, because I still thought perhaps, maybe, Belcher would turn out alright.

"Mohyeldin, why did you choose to sing Be Our Guest at dinner tonight?"

I considered all the many ways I could answer that while Midshipman Lt. Cameron, a firstie and my company commander, studied me from behind her desk. I was standing at attention in the middle of her office, where I had been ordered to report at the conclusion of our evening meal.

Finally, I said, "It seemed the most appropriate song given the circumstances, ma'am."

She put the pen she had been holding down on her notebook. "The Dant did not appreciate your dinner show, Mohyeldin. He's waiting on my report before he decides what to do with you, so stuff the smartass remarks and give me an actual reason. I checked your records, and there's nothing like this from before the Academy, is there?"

I kept my face blank while I winced internally. I knew the Commandant of Midshipmen was in King Hall tonight, but I'd hoped he wouldn't hear me over the few dozen tables between my squad and the Anchor, where he was seated. "No, ma'am," I said.

Lt. Cameron raised an eyebrow at me and waited for more. *She'd make a good Top*, I thought. The look didn't affect me so much as knowing my future at Annapolis could be in jeopardy, though.

"My reasons were twofold, ma'am," I said. "Sullivan has been homesick, and I wanted to cheer her up. Beauty and The Beast is her favorite Disney movie."

Picking up her pen again, she wrote something on the notepad and said, "The second reason?"

"I wanted to draw the attention of Midshipman Belcher away from Midshipman Platt, ma'am."

She paused and looked up at me. "Why?"

"Belcher... appeared to be rating Platt in such a way that he was unable to finish his meal, ma'am," I said.

Plebes have to put down their utensils and stop eating to answer any questions their detailers ask during meals. These quizzes are supposed to be given to each member of the squad equally, but Belcher had been relentless on Platt, allowing him only one small bite of food between rounds of increasingly difficult questions, trying in vain to trip him up. It took Lt. Cameron a few seconds to respond to my carefully-worded statement.

"Did Belcher indicate he was not going to allow Platt to stay behind and finish his meal after he was done rating him?"

This was what I had been afraid of. The detailers would naturally be inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to one of their own, over a plebe they barely knew. I hoped I hadn't just blown my chance for anyone to take me seriously. "No, ma'am," I said, keeping my voice emotionless.

"Do you have any reason to believe he wouldn't?"

I hesitated. Surely she had to be aware of it, after watching our drill training sessions? I decided to be as blunt as I could. "Midshipman Belcher sometimes pushes the boundaries of SOP, ma'am."

To my relief, she nodded. "I'm aware of that, Mohyeldin. I've spoken to him about it. Hazing is not tolerated at USNA, and certainly not in my company," she said. Then she folded her hands together on top of her notebook and leaned forward. "Neither is insubordination. If you feel Belcher is abusing his authority, I expect you to come to me. If you feel I am abusing my authority, I expect you to go to the CO or SEL. If you do not, I will withdraw my recommendation to the Dant to allow you to continue here."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Write me a one-page report on Gaston's leadership style, due tomorrow at 2030."

I blinked and almost laughed. "You mean Gaston from Beauty and The Beast, ma'am?"

"What other Gaston would I mean, Mohyeldin?" she asked, arching that eyebrow again. Then she went back to writing with a casual, "Dismissed."

"Good night, ma'am," I said, before doing an about-face and leaving.

Platt wasn't in the room when I got there, but returned a few minutes later and gave me his customary glare of greeting. "I know what you're doing," he said.

"Um... writing a letter?" I replied, holding up the paper as evidence.

"With the singing shit." He put his shoes in his closet and climbed onto his rack without changing out of uniform. "Stop trying to help me. I don't need it."

He wasn't as stupid as he'd appeared on I-Day, Platt. During dinner, he'd been holding his own in the face of questions that would've stumped any of the others, myself included. It didn't surprise me that he'd caught on.

"I'm not doing it to help you," I lied, and then backed it up with the truth. "I'm doing it because Belcher annoys me. And I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm kind of a hard person to annoy."

There was no response from him. After a few seconds, I continued writing. The letter would arrive after my phone call with Seb the next day, so he'd already know what it said, but I still wanted to write to him every chance I had.

We were given back our own cell phones, fully charged, to make the calls. Platt took his into the passageway while I sat at my desk and pulled 'Habibi' up in my contact list. The phone rang once before Seb picked up.

"Zain?"

"No, it's Bill the Goat," I said. "Meh-eh-eh!"

Hearing his laugh again was like coming home. I wanted to just bask in it awhile, but we had limited time and a lot to accomplish with this call.

"Where are you, *habibi*? Are you alone?"

"Yes, I'm in the attic," he said. "Quinn and Dax are both working and Mom and Dad are at a market."

"Perfect," I said, and then switched to French and said the sentence I'd been practicing. "*Stroke yourself and tell me what you want me to do to you when we see each other again.*"

"Zain!" he said, sounding a bit strangled.

I lowered my voice so Platt couldn't overhear. "Now's probably a good time to call me 'sir', babe."

There was a pause, and I wondered if he was going to safeword, but then he said, "Yes, sir. I want... I want to suck on you, sir."

Seb has difficulty expressing himself verbally sometimes. A lot of our play is centered around breaking down that barrier for him, and I usually give him a lot of positive feedback. With my lack of privacy, I couldn't say 'good boy' like I would usually, but I still wanted to be encouraging, so I murmured, "Mmmhmm."

It wasn't ideal in other ways, either. By the time he was describing how he wanted me to open him up, I desperately wished I could close the door and join him in jerking off. His breathing was getting heavier and heavier, and interspersed with those little whimpers that tell me he's close.

"*Mon dieu*, please, sir?"

"Not yet, my boy," I said, shaking my head even though he couldn't see it. "You're almost to the best part. Go on."

He called me something very rude in French, but continued. "Want you to fuck me, sir. So hard, and -- *umngh* -- I'll be so good for you, sir. I won't come until you say I can. Oh, *merde*, I need to come! I'm so close. Please?"

"Twenty more, and then you can. Count them. Slow."

"Yes, sir."

He sped up a little towards the end, but I decided to let it slide. Poor boy had been teased for two weeks now, after all. The hitch in his breath as he found his release nearly drove *me* to the edge. I squirmed in my desk chair, trying to relieve the pressure, as I listened to him gathering himself back up.

"You okay, *habibi*?"

"Yes, sir," he said, still panting a bit. "That was amazing, Z. Thank you."

"Anytime, babe," I said. "Well. I mean, not for another two weeks, because I won't be able to call you again until then, but--"

"Zain. Shut up."

I grinned. "You all cleaned up over there?"

"Yes. Good thing I know you so well, I brought a box of tissues up here."

"Well, I did give you a pretty big hint in that letter," I said, and then took the opportunity to transition to the next item on my agenda. "Speaking of which, I was going through *your* letters this morning and I realized you haven't written that you miss me once. I'm starting to get a complex."

There was a pause, followed by, "I didn't think it needed to be said."

"Mhm. You mean you didn't want me to feel bad about leaving you there," I corrected him.

"Technically, I'm the one who left *you* there," he muttered.

"Would it be easier for you to tell me if we came up with a code phrase for it?" I asked, only half kidding. "You know, like you could write 'india mike yankee sierra foxtrot' for 'I miss your stupid face.' Only that's kind of long."

He groaned. "How about I say 'whiskey tango foxtrot' instead?"

"Works for me," I laughed. "Should we come up with code phrases for communicating your glucose levels too?" There was an even longer pause at that. I could just imagine the creative faces he was pulling at me right now. "Yeah, I also noticed you haven't been mentioning those," I said, when it was clear he wasn't going to answer.

"Nothing major has happened," he grumbled. "I didn't see the point of worrying you."

"Brat," I said, rolling my eyes. "I'll be worried if I want to be worried, and you're just gonna have to deal with it. Anyway, knowing you're hiding stuff from me worries me more."

His sigh made a burst of static on the line. "I know."

"So, 'I love gummy worms' for a low, 'I need a nap' for a high?"

"I don't need code phrases, Zain, gods!"

"Okay, well then, tell me. Or, hey, better yet, print off your logs and send them to me with your letters!"

"NO! I'll tell you!"

"Yeah, I had a feeling you wouldn't like that idea," I said, brightly. "Alright, but if I find out you're hiding from me again--"

"I won't."

"Awesome."

With all three of my missions accomplished, I let him direct the rest of our much-too-brief conversation until Belcher bellowed a one-minute warning down the passageway.

"Babe, I gotta go. I love you and I miss you," I said.

"I love you, too," he replied.

I waited a few seconds before prompting, "And you miss me?"

"Yeah."

Snorting, I said, "Seb, I'm not hanging up until you say it, which means in about thirty seconds I'll be guilty of insubordination. Again."

"Fine, I miss you, too," he said. "Stupid face."

"Awww, you're so sweet. I'll talk to you in another couple of weeks, okay?"

"Okay." There was a small quiver in his voice. I wished one of his family members were in the house to give him a hug -- not that he'd go looking for it.

Belcher stuck his head through my doorway. "Time's up, Mohyeldin. Hand it over."

Quickly, I said, "Later, *habibi*," and heard his "Au revoir" in response before I ended the call.

The day after was Sunday, and I was looking forward to having the room to myself while Platt attended chapel services. I planned to take a shower and relive Seb's fantasy in some detail.

All that changed, however, when I happened to glance over as Platt was switching his uniform shirts. I did a double-take. The skin between his shoulder blades was a mottled greenish-blue color, in a patch about the size of my foot.

He caught me staring and demanded, "What the fuck are you looking at?"

"The giant bruise on your back," I said. "How'd you get it?"

A flash of some emotion crossed his face. Shame? It was quickly replaced by his usual anger, though. "None of your fucking business," he snapped, yanking his new shirt down.

"Platt."

"Platt!" It was Belcher. I came to attention, but he completely ignored me. "Time for your EMI," he said to Platt. "Let's go."

There was no mistaking Platt's expression now. It was flat-out fear.

"Sir," I said, "it's Sunday morning."

"Did I ask you what day it was, Mohyeldin?" Belcher asked, in a quiet, dangerous tone.

I felt my hackles rise. With an effort, I kept my voice level. "No, sir, but Extra Military Instruction can't be given during a midshipman's religious services."

Belcher looked from me to Platt and tilted his head to one side. "Were you planning to attend religious services, Platt?"

He hesitated.

Say yes, I thought, as hard as I could, like I might force the words out of him by willpower. / *know you were. You go every Sunday.*

"No, sir."

Something was very, very wrong here. I stepped between him and Belcher, almost involuntarily, and lowered my voice. "Platt."

He was looking down, but with his eyes unfocused, and the tension in his body reminded me powerfully of Seb when he's trying not to cry.

Behind me, Belcher said, "Then come with me. Mohyeldin, stay in your room."

I watched them go, my hands curling into fists at my sides. A few seconds later, I darted to the doorway and saw Belcher lead Platt into his room at the corner of the passageways and close the door behind them.

Then I ran in the opposite direction, toward Lt. Cameron's office. Two different voices shouted "Slow down, Plebe!" after me, and I ignored them.

Cameron looked startled as I burst in, but there was no time to spare for the usual military niceties. “Ma’am, I believe Midshipman Belcher is hazing Midshipman Platt right now,” I said.

“Where?” she asked, springing to her feet.

“In Belcher’s room, ma’am.”

With her beside me, no one tried to stop us from running on the way back, but she slowed to a walk as we neared Belcher’s room and signalled me to be silent. I obeyed. As much as I wanted to put a stop to whatever was happening behind that door, I knew catching him in the act would be most effective.

Gently, Cameron tried to turn the handle, and then shook her head. *Locked*, she mouthed to me.

I had heard the dorm rooms didn’t even have locks until a few years ago, when a decision was made to install them following complaints of male midshipmen entering female midshipmen’s rooms while they slept. The locks were intended for protection, but now I cursed this one for having the opposite effect. I was considering whether I could break the door when I spotted JJ walking quickly toward us and remembered he was standing watch as Company Mate of the Deck today, meaning he had a skeleton key.

Lt. Cameron saw him at the same time. “Jacobson,” she whispered, “give me your key.”

He obeyed immediately, and Cameron slid it into the lock, turning it and the handle at the same time.

When the door finally swung open, Belcher was standing in the middle of the room with his back to us, and Platt... Platt was on all fours at his feet, licking mud off Belcher’s boots.

The moment he saw us, Platt scrambled backward. I caught sight of tears running down his face before he wiped them away with both hands.

Belcher spun around and gaped at us, white as a sheet. “Ma’am-” he started.

Lt. Cameron didn’t let him finish. “Jacobson, take Midshipman Belcher to my office and hold him there,” she commanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” said JJ, stepping into the room. Platt flinched away from him, but Belcher didn’t resist as he was ushered out. Cameron and I stepped aside to let them pass, and when they had gone, she looked uncertainly at Platt, who was now curled up against the far wall, quietly sobbing.

"I need to get the Conduct Officer," she said. "Mohyeldin, stay with him."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "A chaplain would be helpful too, ma'am."

She nodded. "Good idea. I'll be back as soon as possible."

I heard her order my squadmates, some of whom had overheard the commotion and come to see what was happening, to go back to their rooms and stay there. I was grateful for that. Platt didn't need an audience right now.

He was making the most horrible, broken noises and trying, unsuccessfully, to muffle them by biting down on his forearm. Without thinking, I did what I would've done with Seb: started toward him, intending to pull his arm away before he drew blood.

"STAY AWAY FROM ME."

I froze three feet into the room, shocked by the terror in his voice. "Okay," I said, as softly as I could. I took a step back and moved to one side, so I wasn't blocking him from the doorway, and then crouched down to his level. "I'm staying over here, Platt. I'm not going to do anything but stay here, like this, until Lt. Cameron gets back, alright?"

And then I watched, unable to do anything, while he fell apart.

Chapter Seven

I wasn't sure how I felt after the phone call. Talking to Zain had been great, of course, but once he hung up, the clock reset. It would be another two weeks before I heard him again.

"Think of it this way," Jasmitha, my sister-in-law, said during Sunday brunch at her and Keegan's apartment in Oakland. "You're one-third done. It'll be Parent's Weekend before you know it."

"And then it'll be the beginning of the academic year," I pointed out. "We'll have a few more communication options, but I still won't be able to see him much."

"Sure you will," said Keegan. "Remember what I told you about Skype?"

Jaz turned to look at her with narrowed eyes. "What, exactly, did you tell him about Skype, dear?"

"More than I wanted to know," I said, at the same time that Keegan said, "Nothing, darling!"

"Oh, really? Okay, no more scones for you!" Jaz declared. She and Keegan both made a grab for the last one and wound up in a tug of war, giggling like schoolgirls. I watched them, trying not to feel jealous. Every happy couple I saw these days made me more and more glum. I'd started fabricating excuses to get out of going to the farmers' markets with my parents because their singing in the car reminded me of Zain.

Eventually, the scone broke in half, and Keegan took a victory lap around the table holding her portion over her head while Jasmitha tried to snatch it away as she passed by. I slouched down in my chair and was reaching for the scrambled eggs when a song started playing from my pocket.

*"Do you hear me?
I'm talking to you,
across the water,
across the deep blue-"*

Keegan stopped and looked at me. "Isn't that-?"

"Zain?" I asked, into my phone. It was his ringtone and his name on the screen, but I couldn't believe it. How could he be calling again so soon? Unless... "What happened? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, *habibi*," he said.

I frowned. He sounded strange in a way I couldn't define. Tired, perhaps. "Then why are you calling a day later?" I pressed.

"Absolutely nothing has happened to me, *habibi*, I promise you, so when I say this, I need you to remember I'm alright, okay?"

Nausea took a firm grip on my stomach. I turned away from the table and Keegan and Jaz's questioning looks, and quietly said, "Zain, you're freaking me out."

"Sorry, I'm really trying not to," he said. There was a pause, and then he continued, carefully, "I'm calling because I was a witness to hazing, which means under the Victims & Witnesses Assistance Program, I'm allowed to speak with a family member, and I needed to hear your voice."

I swallowed. Keegan was saying something to me, but I couldn't concentrate, so I shook my head and retreated to their bathroom.

"*Habibi?*"

"Yeah," I said, locking the door, and then asked again, "What happened? It was your squad leader, wasn't it?"

"Yes, good ol' Belcher," he said, exhaustion in every word. "I can't tell you much, to protect the victims' privacy, but he was hazing Platt and possibly a few others on the squad. They're still in the process of interviewing everyone to see."

"But not you," I said, just to make sure.

"No, not me," he said. "I was only a witness." I felt relieved, and then guilty for feeling it. The other midshipmen might be unknown to me, but they didn't deserve it either. Zain's voice was still tinged with sadness as he continued, "I knew something was wrong this morning, so I got Lt. Cameron and we caught him in the act with Platt."

"Did Belcher put up a fight?" I asked, worried again.

"No, he seemed to realize he was cornered. Cameron had JJ take him to her office, and then she had to go get some other people, and Platt was... upset, so I stayed with him. Not that I was much help."

"I'm sure that's not true. You're always a help when people are upset," I said, referring mostly to myself.

He laughed, and it was an ugly sound. "Not this time, babe. He didn't want me anywhere near him, and I didn't want to push, given the circumstances, so I couldn't do a thing. It was difficult."

Difficult. That had to be the biggest understatement he's ever made. I knew it would've been torture for him, keeping his distance when every instinct he has was screaming at him to make it better. My poor warrior guardian.

"I'm so sorry, Z. I wish I were there."

"Me, too. I have this intense desire to hug you right now."

I smiled wanly. "Shouldn't I be the one hugging *you*?"

"Nah," he said, with the smallest hint of amusement, "I'm a big, strong Marine, y'know." I waited, but he didn't add the 'oorah' like normal. Instead, he continued after moment, "Platt had a bruise on his back that looked at least a couple of days old. I should've noticed sooner."

"Zain. It is not your fault. Do you hear me?" I demanded.

Sighing, he said, "I hear you."

"And do you understand?"

There was only silence.

"Zain, answer me. Please."

"I can't help it, babe," he said. "I know I should've done something."

Sometimes, I'd love to swat him.

"They have counseling as part of this victims and witnesses program, right?" I asked.

I heard him sigh again. "Yes, but I don't need to take up their time when-"

"No, you're going," I interrupted. "Don't even argue with me. I want you to go and talk about this with someone who knows how to convince you it wasn't your fault, because you do *not* need to be blaming yourself and tearing yourself up with guilt. That bastard squad leader of yours is not going to get into your head. I won't allow it; it's not happening, so you're going."

"Habibi, calm down, I can't understand rapid-fire French," he said. I blinked. I hadn't realized I'd switched languages at some point in my rant. Zain continued, "I'll go to counseling if that's what you want, okay?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Promise?"

"I promise I'll go. I can't promise I'll be convinced."

"Just try," I said. "That's all."

"I promise I'll try. Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, cursing myself. I hadn't meant to get him worried about me, on top of everything else. To distract him, I asked, "So what happens now, with the hearing? Will Platt have to testify?"

"It depends," he said. "They need to finish the investigation first, and then they'll formally notify Belcher of the charges. He could plead guilty, which would waive his right to a hearing, and then they'll just go with our statements as evidence."

"Do you think he will?"

"I don't know. If he pleads not guilty, there'll be a hearing in front of the Battalion Officer or the Deputy Commandant, depending on how serious they think it is, and who testifies will be up to them."

"Could they expel him?"

"Yes, and I hope they do," he said, sounding uncharacteristically fierce. "Final decision on separations goes to the Secretary of the Navy, though."

There was a knock on the other side of the bathroom door, and Keegan called in, "Seb, is everything okay in there?"

"Is that Kee?" Zain asked.

"Yeah, I was having brunch at their place when you called," I said.

She knocked again. "Seb?"

I put my hand over the mic and raised my voice. "I'm fine, Keegan."

"Actually, give me to her for a minute," Zain said. "I need to ask her for something."

What, now? I wanted to say, but I opened the door and held out the phone. “Zain wants to talk to you.”

She took it, walked a few steps away, and listened to him with an intense look on her face. Jasmitha, meanwhile, gestured me back to the table and handed me half of the scone, saying, “You look like you need this.” I didn’t argue. Between the meal being interrupted and the stress of the phone call, I could feel my glucose dropping.

As I finished eating it, Keegan came over and said, “Stand up a minute, Sebby.”

“Why?” I asked, frowning.

“Oh, for-” She put the phone on speaker. “Zain, tell him to stand up.”

“Probably best just to humor her, babe,” he said.

I stood, and she instantly engulfed me in a bear-hug.

“Oooff,” I said, and then closed my mouth to avoid ingesting the curly red hair my face was pressed into. She rocked me back and forth, showing no signs of letting go, until I made another muffled protest.

“Okay, okay,” Zain’s voice said, still tinny from the speakerphone, somewhere near my shoulder. “I wanted you to hug him, not suffocate him, Kee.”

“Same difference,” she said, but she released me and added, “That was from Zain.”

“Yeah, I gathered,” I said. “Can I have my phone back, please?”

I switched it off speaker as soon as she handed it over and asked, “Feel better?”

“A little,” he said, with his usual sunniness. “She told me you and her have plans to go to the rescue center today?”

“Yeah, but if you need to talk more, we don’t have to,” I said.

“I’m fine, *habibi*. I don’t want to hold you up. Go on. Pet a seal for me. Or a sea lion. I’m not picky.”

“Okay,” I said, reluctantly. “*Je t’aime*.”

“Love you, too.”

Remembering yesterday, I added, “And *tu me manque*.”

“I miss you, too.”

“You’ll write what happens with everything, won’t you?”

“Of course,” he said. “Now go, babe. Have fun.”

It was fun to finally see where Keegan worked and meet her patients. Most were just pups, brought in after they were separated from their mothers. A lot of them were diagnosed with malnutrition or pneumonia, but they were on the mend. She pointed out a few that were almost ready to be released back into the wild as we walked through their enclosures.

At the end of the tour, we came to a large Steller sea lion in a pen alone. I glanced at the nametag and laughed. “Kojak? I’m guessing you named this one.”

“Yep, he’s my boy,” Keegan said. “He was one of the first rescues after I started, and it’s been a long, hard road for him. We almost lost him twice.”

I’m no expert, but he looked healthy to me. As we watched, he dove into his tank and brought his flippers down hard on the surface, splashing water towards us.

“Kojak!” Keegan admonished, wiping her face off. “Nice to see you, too, buddy!”

“Why was he brought in?” I asked.

She hesitated and then said, “He had a gunshot wound.”

I stared at her. “Who would do that?”

Shrugging, she said, “We didn’t catch the person who shot Kojak, but it’s usually fishermen who don’t like that the sea lions eat the same fish they’re trying to catch, and don’t care about killing an endangered animal.”

I felt sick. “Usually? Do you get a lot of gunshot wounds?”

“More than you’d think.”

We stood there in silence for a few more minutes, watching Kojak swim.

“How can people be so cruel?” I asked.

“I really don’t know, Sebby,” she said, draping her arm over my shoulders. “I wish I did.”

Chapter Eight

I tried to pull myself together for Seb towards the end of the call, after it was clear how badly I'd freaked him out. I hated putting that burden on him, but there was no denying I felt better from hearing his voice. The overwhelming urge to do *something* faded a little. I didn't even know what I wanted to do, except if I had to stay in this office for much longer, the snarling dog inside me was going to yank free of its chain and go straight for Belcher's jugular, and I wasn't going to *care*.

Cameron came to get me. I hadn't seen her for a few hours, not since she brought a chaplain to Belcher's room and ordered me to leave Platt and go with the Conduct Officer. The moment she came through the door, I asked, "How is he?"

"He's still being interviewed," she said. "You'll see him tonight, most likely."

"That doesn't answer my question," I said, and she gave me a very cool look. Belatedly, I added, "Ma'am."

"I don't know more than that, and if I did, I wouldn't be able to tell you, Mohyeldin."

"What about my other squadmates, ma'am?" I asked.

"It appears Belcher was selective," she said. "Platt was the biggest target, and Stevens and Sullivan to a lesser extent, but he left the rest of you alone. Any idea why that might be?"

Twelve midshipmen made up my squad. Stevens and Sullivan were the only two females, and of the males, eight looked like they'd recently been captain of their high-school football teams. Then there was Platt, short and wiry rather than bulked-up, with his platinum blond hair and the always-present fear, once you knew to look beyond his anger. And there was me, of course.

"I think people like Belcher target those they perceive as weak, ma'am," I said. She nodded. "I understand if you can't tell me," I continued, "but did he... do anything physical to Stevens or Sullivan?"

"No, he didn't."

I closed my eyes and breathed out a sigh of relief. That was something, at least.

"I'm telling you the same thing I told all of them," she said. "You'll be temporarily joined with First Squad, until the second set of detailers arrives at the end of the week. Belcher hasn't

been formally charged yet. While there's still any possibility you'll be called on to testify at a hearing, you're prohibited from discussing the details of this situation with other midshipmen."

"Aye aye, ma'am."

First Squad was JJ's, and he'd never complained about his squad leader. I was glad that they weren't splitting us up, although I could imagine having one squad twice the usual size was a logistical nightmare for them.

"You have personal time for the rest of the day. We may need to ask you more questions later, so stay in the company area where we can find you. And I'll need to take your phone back now."

I handed it over without hesitation. The idea of calling Seb whenever I wanted was tempting beyond belief, but I knew phone contact was limited during Plebe Summer for a reason, and besides, it was likely to only upset him more.

Lt. Cameron stepped to the side. "Dismissed, Mohyeldin."

My squadmates, minus Platt, were gathered in the passageway between our rooms. Nakamura, who *had* been captain of his football team, was the first to see me. "All hail the conquering hero!" he shouted, and the rest of them started cheering.

I shook my head and gestured for them to quiet down. "No, I'm really not."

"C'mon, Dad, don't be modest," said Stevens. "People are saying you pulled Belcher off Platt and punched him!"

"*What?*" I stared at her. "No, I didn't, and don't you think you would've heard the punch if that was what happened? You're two rooms away."

"I was at chapel service," she said.

"Well, who's saying I punched him?" I asked, looking around at them all.

A few shrugged. Diaz, standing next to Nakamura, said, "Everyone is. I heard it from Weir, who said he heard it from JJ."

"I highly doubt that he did, since JJ was actually there and *knows* I didn't punch him," I said. "I barely did anything at all, okay?"

“Still, Belcher’s gone because of you,” Sullivan said. “I think that makes you pretty damn heroic.”

Some of the others made noises of agreement. How could I explain to them how wrong they were?

“Look, guys, I should’ve done more. It never should’ve come to that.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Dad,” said Nakamura. “You did everything you could.”

Had I? I kept going over and over the last two weeks, looking for another moment when I could’ve gone to Cameron and stopped the whole thing sooner, before Platt got that bruise on his back, before...

Abruptly, I said, “I need to write a letter. See you all at formation.” And then I escaped into my room.

I spent dinner fending off the praise of not only my squadmates but seemingly every plebe in King Hall. I felt like pulling a Seb and climbing onto the roof by the time I got out of there.

When I returned to the room, Platt was lying on his rack, fast asleep. I tiptoed to my desk, sat down, and started on the sections of Reef Points we needed to memorize for tomorrow.

A change in his breathing just before taps made my head whip around to look at him. He was on his side with his back to me and his shoulders shaking ever so slightly. My gut twisted. “Platt? You awake?”

No answer. Should I try to wake him up? He was likely to be startled and might even take a swing at me, but leaving him crying in a nightmare seemed unspeakably cruel.

I stood and put my hand gently on his upper arm. “Yo, Platt, wake up a second. C’mon.”

He sucked in a huge gasp of air and rolled over, pinning me with wide, blue eyes. “Wha?”

Holding up Reef Points, I quirked a grin. “Wanna quiz me? It’ll help your rates for tomorrow too, I bet.”

“I don’t need to memorize rates for tomorrow,” he said, blinking at the little book’s navy cover.

“What do you mean? Why not?”

He gave me a look that was both sleep-dazed and bitter. "Because I'm requesting a transfer to Tango Company in the morning. He was right. I'm not cut out for this."

I stared at him in horror. Tango is the holding company for plebes going through the several-day process of leaving the Academy. "Platt," I said, "they're not going to let Belcher be a detailer anymore. You don't have to worry about him. And you *are* cut out for this, no matter what he told you. His opinion doesn't matter. You wouldn't have been admitted if they didn't think you could do it. You can't give up, do you hear me?"

Anger chased the last of the drowsiness from his expression and voice. "Fuck off, Mohyeldin," he snapped. "You don't even know what the fuck you're talking about, okay?"

"Listen to me—"

"Fuck, now I need to take a piss." He swung down onto the deck with a thump and stomped passed me into the passageway, toward the head. I started to follow him, more arguments for why he should stay springing to my lips, and he spun around and glared at me. "Get away from me, you pervert!"

I went motionless.

Diaz poked his head out of the doorframe behind Platt. "What's going on out here?"

"Go to bed; it's almost taps," I said. "We're fine."

He looked doubtful, but he said, "If you say so, Dad," and disappeared, which left me looking at Platt and reminding myself he was traumatized and didn't know he'd just poured salt in an old wound.

"I'm sorry. My intention wasn't to make you uncomfortable. I'll go back to the room," I said, and then made good on my word.

He didn't return until long after taps.

Moving to Tango Company is supposed to take up to three days, with a gauntlet of interviews and counseling before the transfer is approved. I thought I had that time. I had my persuasion strategy all planned out. First PT, then showers, then I'd sit him down, annoy him into telling me why he wanted to leave, and efficiently dismantle all his reasons with logic and a sense of humor.

I just didn't count on Platt being Platt.

Following PT, Aarons, our temporary squad leader, accompanied us back to our room and said, "Bring any personal effects and everything issued to you on I-Day, Platt."

My heart dropped. "Bring them where, sir?"

With barely a glance at me, he replied, "Tango Company spaces."

"I submitted my resignation last night," Platt told me. "Don't want to hang around this fucking place any longer than I have to." He was stuffing uniforms into his sea bag like there was a fire, and all my careful plans went up in smoke.

"Platt, don't do this," I pleaded. "You'll regret it later."

Snorting, he said, "My only regret is coming here in the first place."

I looked to Aarons for help. "Sir, has he done any of the counseling? Aren't we supposed to have the opportunity to speak to a chaplain before making this kind of decision?"

"It's none of your fucking business who I've spoken to about it," Platt interjected.

"Quiet, Platt," said Aarons. "Mohyeldin, your concern for your squadmate is noted. I assure you, any plebe in the process of voluntarily separating from the Naval Academy is given ample opportunity to discuss their decision. The check-out process is a minimum of ten working days, and at any time until departure, the plebe can withdraw their letter of resignation."

"Don't count on it," Platt muttered. He'd finished packing and swung the bag over his shoulder. "I'm ready to go, sir."

"I'll escort you to your new room," Aarons said.

Twice in two days now, my morning included me standing in the doorway and watching Platt being lead away by a detailer. It felt about the same as the first time.

Chapter Nine

Habibi,

Platt left. Well, he's still here somewhere, but Tango Company bunks away from the rest of the regiment, and we're not supposed to intermingle with them. I failed him, but the other plebes are all treating me like I'm a hero. It sucks.

I kept my promise and had my first counseling session today. I don't think it helped much, but I'll keep going if you want me to.

Oh, I do have some good news, though. Belcher pled guilty to everything, so no one has to testify. Still waiting to hear on the sentence.

How was the rescue center? I'm going to be disappointed if your next letter doesn't have drawings of seals and sea lions all over it.

*Love + miss you,
Z*

Dear Zain,

None of it was your fault. Yes, keep going to the counseling sessions. Maybe between your counselor and me both repeating that none of it was your fault, it'll somehow penetrate your thick skull. Sometimes I really wish you weren't so protective.

I'm glad the bastard pled guilty. I hope he's been kicked out by now.

I think I forgot to mention in the letter with the sea lions why I drew one of them licking a lollypop. That was Kojak (named by Keegan, of course). He's almost ready to be released, and she wants me to come along when they do it. She warned me she's probably going to cry. I'm still deciding whether to go or not.

Quinn hates her new job at Target. Every day, she comes home ranting about consumerism and how many different kinds of deodorant there are (47, if you're wondering). Dax keeps making up excuses to go shopping during her shift and then trolling her by going through her lane and requesting price checks on everything. He tried to convince me to go with him today, but I'm not as willing to take my life in my hands as him.

Mom's been working on a wedding catering job, so Dad's handling all the gardening and the markets by himself. I drew you a picture of him arguing with the tomato stakes. His side of it got pretty heated. He might not be fluent in French like the rest of us, but he does know all the curse words and some pretty creative insults.

Je t'aime,

Seb

PS: I miss you. There, I wrote it. Can't this one cover the rest of the summer?

Hey babe,

The Dant recommended Belcher be separated from the Academy. It has to run up the chain to SECNAV still, but I think at this point that's mostly a formality. I'm hoping once Platt hears he's gone, he'll want to come back. No one will tell me how he's doing in Tango, but you know me. I'm not giving up.

Did one of those seals or sea lions (how the hell do you tell them apart anyway?) have a cigarette in its mouth? Is this some artistic statement about pollution or the cynicism of today's youth? You're gonna have to explain the symbolism to me.

I'm glad you had a good afternoon with Keegan. I didn't mean to freak you out with that phone call.

I have to go. I have another counseling session tonight.

Love + miss you,

Z

Hey babe,

Ha! Nice try with that PS, but no. No, it cannot. :P

Also, since when do you give me updates on everyone in the family except you? You're the one I'm engaged to, remember? What've you been up to? Have you been meditating? Climbing trees? How's the blood sugar? Want to send me your meter logs? Can I write a whole paragraph in questions?

Next letter, you're forbidden from even mentioning your parents or your siblings. You can only write about yourself. Not that I want you to ignore them. Go with Keegan when they release Kojak. Go with Dax to Target, too, and take pictures of Quinn wearing her uniform, because I must see that. (Actually, maybe have Dax take them, so when she snaps, she punches him instead of you.)

For serious, habibi, quit trying to stop me from worrying about you. It's never going to work.

Love + miss you,

-Z

PS: Still no news on Platt or Belcher.

Dear Zain,

I can't believe you expect me to do this. I'm ~~fine~~ okay good. I don't know what you want me to write. I haven't done anything interesting lately. Just the normal stuff. Walks, art, reading, taking care of the hens.

Yes, I've been climbing trees. They're good places to think and draw. I don't spend all day up them. Yes, I've been meditating, too. Fifteen minutes every morning, and it does help quiet the worries.

We expected my glucose levels would be a little higher than usual this summer. I know how to deal with it. I'm fine.

And now I've answered all your questions and run out of things to say, so here's a self-portrait.

Je t'aime et tu me manque,

Seb

PS: How can you not know the difference between seals and sea lions?! One has visible ears and the other doesn't, and I'm not telling you which is which because I want to watch you having to admit you don't know to Keegan a marine biologist.

Hey babe,

Thank you for the letter and the self-portrait. I do know how hard that was for you. They were both much more informative than you probably intended them to be, but I have a follow-up question. What, exactly, does “a little higher than usual” mean? Numbers, babe. ;)

Belcher is officially separated and gone. That helps a lot. I feel less “on alert” all the time. My counselor says I have a tendency to assume responsibility for others. Shocking, right?

Our new squad leader arrives tomorrow, so the mega-squad will be split up again. I’m not sure if they’re going to put us with new roommates. I’ve heard that happens sometimes.

Tonight, every squad does a little show, as a goodbye to the first set of detailers. Turns out the mega-squad has a high number of singers, including JJ, who helped me pitch our show idea to the rest of them. Three guesses what song we’re doing.

Love + miss you,

Z

PS: You know that website where you can print mandala designs? Can you start sending me one of those, colored in, with each letter? I need something to liven up the bulletin boards we have to do in the passageways.

Chapter Ten

The company wardroom is normally off-limits to plebes, so we were surprised when Aarons, our temporary squad leader, told us to report there before the farewell show for the first set of detailers, and then led his own squad back to their section of Bancroft. JJ caught my eye as he chopped past and lifted one shoulder in the barest hint of a shrug.

The second set of detailers had been silently shadowing the first set for the past day, leading to a lot of speculation about which of them looked tougher and where they would be assigned, but I didn't remember seeing the one who was waiting for us in the wardroom. He watched us with deep-set eyes as we filed in and stood at attention in a row in front of him.

After a few seconds of studying us, he said, "At ease," and his voice was quiet and measured. "In normal circumstances, your first squad leader would be introducing me. However, in this case..." I could swear he looked at my nametag then, and lingered on me a moment as he continued without finishing the sentence. "I'm Midshipman Myrick, and I'll be your squad leader for the rest of Plebe Summer. I'll be speaking with each of you privately tomorrow. Right now, I simply wish to make clear that I take seriously my oath to demonstrate by my own example the highest standards of personal conduct, honor, morality, and professional skill. If any of you ever have any concerns regarding that, at any time, you may speak freely."

He waited again, and when no one said anything, he ordered us back to attention. Somehow, even his command voice sounded hushed, although I had no trouble hearing him.

I wondered if they'd decided to give us the exact opposite of Belcher before or after the hazing incident.

We rejoined First Squad to watch the show, since we were still technically merged with them until morning. I sat in front of JJ, who, halfway through a skit about accidentally calling a female detailer 'sir,' leaned forward and whispered, "On your five, Mohyeldin."

Surreptitiously, I scanned over my right shoulder for anything unusual. It took two seconds for me to see what he meant, and then I was grinning from ear to ear, not caring if I attracted attention.

All the way in the back, like he'd just slipped through the door, Platt was sitting at the end of an empty row of chairs, with the same chaplain Lt. Cameron had brought to Belcher's room standing beside him.

"Looks like you're not bunking in a single anymore, huh?" JJ asked.

I didn't answer. Even if Platt had decided to rejoin our company, chances were good he'd requested another roommate, or even another squad entirely, and in the circumstances, I could see the Academy giving strong consideration to his wishes. The fact that he was being allowed to sit by himself at a company event spoke volumes. But I was just glad to set eyes on his ornery face once more. They definitely wouldn't have let him come watch if he were still considering leaving. I was thrilled he was giving it another shot.

JJ nudged my shoulder then, making me realize Lt. Cameron had announced we were next and the rest of the mega-squad was standing around me. I sprang to my feet.

We filed to the stage, where there was a bit of confusion as we got into the formation we'd used for rehearsal, and then I, as the designated spokesperson, stepped forward to the mic.

"I'm Midshipman Mohyeldin, of 21st Platoon, Second Squad. We've joined with First Squad to say farewell." I paused, looking in Platt's direction, although I couldn't see him over the taller midshipmen in front of him. "And also to say welcome -- or perhaps welcome back -- in the best way I know how: with Disney music."

Laughter rolled over the audience as I returned to the formation, covering JJ's mutter of "Nice ad-lib there." Once it quieted down, he launched into song, his smooth baritone making the words carry without the help of the mic.

*"I have often dreamed of a far-off place
Where a hero's welcome would be waiting for me,
Where the crowds will cheer when they see my face,
And a voice keeps saying, this is where I'm meant to be."*

We all joined together for the second verse, some proud and true and some, like Diaz to my left, a bit hesitant at first and then gaining strength as we went.

*"I'll be there someday, I can go the distance,
I will find my way, if I can be strong,
I'll know every mile will be worth my while,
When I go the distance, I'll be right where I belong."*

I took the third alone, letting my voice soar as I pictured Seb. This part was for him.

*"Down an unknown road to embrace my fate,
Though the road may wander, it will lead me to you,
And a thousand years would be worth the wait,
It might take a lifetime, but somehow I'll see it through."*

They were more confident still as we moved toward the crescendo. I hoped Platt, sitting in the back, was getting this.

*“And I won’t look back, I can go the distance,
And I’ll stay on track, no I won’t accept defeat,
It’s an uphill slope, but I won’t lose hope,
‘Til I go the distance and my journey is complete.”*

Nakamura turned out to have been involved in his school’s chorus as well as the football team, and he rose easily to the task of the solo I gave him.

*“But to look beyond the glory is the hardest part,
For a hero’s strength is measured by his heart.”*

As he finished, Stevens and Sullivan stepped to the mic together for the last verse, and then we all pitched in again for the final, softer lines.

*“Like a shooting star, I will go the distance,
I will search the world, I will face its harms,
I don’t care how far, I can go the distance,
‘Til I find my hero’s welcome waiting in your arms.”*

*“I will search the world, I will face its harms
‘Til I find my hero’s welcome waiting in your arms.”*

We were the last to perform. After we retook our seats, Lt. Cameron made a short speech thanking us and saying goodbye, and then we were dismissed back to our squad areas. Through it all, Platt sat with his arms crossed over his chest, apparently unmoved. We left him behind as we exited the hall, making me even more sure that he was transferring to another squad.

JJ and I weren’t the only ones who had noticed his presence, though. The moment Aarons and First Squad were out of sight, the others were buzzing with the news and opinions of Myrick. The mood was almost jubilant. With Belcher gone and Platt back, morale was higher than it had been since I-Day. To add to the party atmosphere, Gambini brought out a care package he’d received and passed around chocolate chip cookies. Most of us had only taken a bite when we heard the call of “Plebe-Ho!” and had to quickly stuff the rest into our mouths, chewing furiously as we scrambled to attention next to our rooms’ doorways.

Myrick, who had given the command, stopped between Rawlins and I at the beginning of the passageway, waiting for us all to swallow and sound-off. Then he looked down at the

clipboard he was carrying and said, "Most of you will have new roommates. I will point to the each room and call out two names. Once I'm done, you will move all personal items into your new room and ensure that it is in Bravo Condition. You will have fifteen minutes." He started with my room and moved down the passageway, saying, "Nakamura and Rawlins, Koch and Diaz, Seeger and Gambini, Erdman and Hynes, Stevens and Sullivan, Mohyeldin and Platt."

I didn't pay attention after that. I couldn't believe it. Not only was Platt rejoining our squad, he was once again rooming with me. Stevens and Sullivan were the only others staying with the same roommate, and that was due to their gender. Someone, somewhere, must've wanted us together.

"Fifteen minutes for room turnover starts now," Myrick said, and there was another mad dash of plebes as we all hurried to switch everything to our new rooms and bring them up to regulation. Myrick stood in the middle of the passageway, observing us.

Nobody bothered packing anything that wasn't already packed, but other than that, our strategies differed wildly. Some just took armfuls of stuff at a time, rushing to drop off one and pick up the next. Sullivan and Stevens quickly decided they would be most effective if Sullivan took care of moving things while Stevens put it away. As for myself, I stripped the blanket off my rack, spread it out on the floor, and neatly laid all my possessions on it before bundling it up and carrying down to my new room in one trip. When he saw me, Nakamura said, "Shit, are we supposed to be taking the bedding too?"

"Nah," I replied over my shoulder as I kept moving. "Don't worry, I'll return this and make the rack again so you guys don't have to."

I had plenty of time to keep my promise and get my own room in order, and I was the third, behind Stevens and Sullivan, to be standing at attention beside my doorway, ready for inspection when Myrick ordered another fall-in at the end of the fifteen minutes.

Platt arrived later, after our rooms had been cleared and personal time began, alone, with his sea bag over one shoulder. I had a serious *deja vu* moment as he started unpacking while completely ignoring my greeting. Whatever tiny bit of progress I had made with him before seemed to have evaporated. I decided to let him be until I thought up a new approach, and turned back to writing to Seb.

A few days later, I was running out of ideas. It wasn't only me he was blocking out this time -- it was the squad and Myrick too. I knew how I would've handled Seb if *he* were acting like this, but I couldn't very well swat Platt, or hug him and refuse to let go, no matter how much I itched to do both. I asked Seb for suggestions, but I hadn't gotten his response yet. The

snail-mail delay meant I'd just received the first letter he wrote after I demanded actual blood glucose levels.

Dear Zain,

You did "Go The Distance" from Hercules for the farewell show, didn't you? Why don't you just wear Mickey Mouse ears with your uniform and make it more obvious how much of a Disney geek you are?

Quinn and I went horseback riding today. Remember those stables where she used to take lessons? They do guided trail rides now. We went up a ridge and picnicked on an overlook with a spectacular view of Santa Cruz. I was going to send you the sketch I did of it, but I want to turn it into a painting. Maybe it'll be done by Parents' Weekend. I drew you a picture of the horse I rode instead.

If you must know, my blood sugar has been averaging 40-50 above normal. I've been treating it with walks. I'm fine.

Je t'aime et tu me manque,

Seb

PS: Here's two mandalas, and I don't know who you think you're fooling with that "I need them for bulletin boards" line. I'm the one who told you about coloring them as a form of relaxation, you awful Top.

I grinned at the postscript. Truthfully, I'd expected he was going to see right through that pretense, but he's always more willing to do something if he thinks it's helping me in some way. The two mandalas he'd enclosed were both intricate kaleidoscopes of color, and had probably taken him an hour each. Good.

On a whim, I held them out to Platt, who was sitting at his desk studying Reef Points. "Hey, want one of these?"

To my surprise, he actually looked at them.

"They're mandalas," I said. "Just circular designs, basically. They've always reminded me of those round stained-glass windows in churches."

"Rose windows," he said, absentminded. He was still studying them with an odd expression on his face, but it was the first thing he'd said to me since returning. I was almost afraid to say anything else and snap him out of it.

"I thought that was just the one in Notre Dame?" I asked, cautiously.

He shook his head. "No, that's just the most famous." And then, to my amazement, he reached out, took one, and pinned it to the large, empty space on his corkboard.

Chapter Eleven

My first experience of a mandala came a few months before my diagnosis with diabetes, when I was seven years old. A group of Tibetan monks visited the Buddhist retreat center my parents frequent, and while they were there, they created a sand mandala. We returned again and again to watch them. Working from the middle out, using traditional tools, they carefully poured colored sand into the intricate design from memory, each in harmony with the rest, so no one part of it grew faster than the others. It took them five days of painstaking effort.

On the fifth day, after it was finally complete, my parents' teacher explained how the pattern was simultaneously the universe, and the viewer, and the journey to reach enlightenment. She said that the monks spent many years learning how to make mandalas, and dedicated any artistic or spiritual merit they might have gained from creating them to the benefit of others. And then, to show the impermanence of life, the monks ceremoniously swept away every grain of sand they had so meticulously placed, collecting all of it in a jar, which was emptied into a nearby creek. I remember the different colors swirling through the water as they dispersed.

The word "mandala" comes from Sanskrit, but circular designs as a gateway to the sacred are seen in every culture and religion. Medieval Christian mystics taught that creating mandalas, or simply viewing them, brought one closer to God. Carl Jung believed they were a representation of the self. Recently, coloring mandalas has become very popular as a form of meditation. You can find free, printable designs online, or buy one of the countless mandala coloring books. Even as an artist, I like using pre-made ones to de-stress instead of making my own. Creation is not always a relaxing act.

I knew exactly why Zain wanted me to color them, and part of me admired his cleverness. Not only was it something that would reduce my tension without him needing to be there, it also, by its very nature, produced physical proof that I could easily mail to him.

The larger -- and much more shameful -- part of me remembered the folder of finished mandalas I had tucked away with my sketchbooks, which Zain had probably never seen. I seriously considered sending him those, one at a time. The possibility of him catching on seemed insignificant compared to the idea of admitting that I needed to unwind more. I was handling it. I was *fine*.

In the end, I couldn't go through with the deception. Knowing I would be in major trouble if he found out gave me pause, yes, but more than that, writing letters to him was a cherished act. I didn't want to turn it into something dominated by guilt. As a penance, I colored two that first day. He didn't ask why in his response.

Hey babe,

Okay, first of all, I've told you before that we prefer Disnerds, not Disney geeks, and second, I'd have to look at the regs, but I think Mickey ears might be frowned upon.

Keep the mandalas coming. Platt actually took one and put it up on his corkboard! That has to be a good sign, right? Even if he hasn't said a word to me since?

I wish I could help him more. I saw him leaving a counselor's office when I was waiting for my appointment yesterday, so at least I know he's getting support somewhere, although knowing Platt, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he sits in there, arms crossed, without saying a word for the full hour. He could give even you a master class in building walls.

Speaking of, why is it that when you say "I'm fine," my Seb-senses start tingling? I think I need to see meter logs for the past week, just to double-check your math. You know it was never your strongest subject. And if you're going to make faces at me, sketch a portrait or take some selfies of them, please. I miss the weird contortions your nose does.

I miss the rest of you, too, by the way.

I realize we got a little sidetracked with the whole dog tags thing, but you haven't written the safeword yet, so I'm assuming you're still keeping it up. (Hehe, get it? Keeping IT UP? ;D) I want you to increase to two edges each morning. (They don't have to both be in the shower, if you're worried about conserving water.) Hands off otherwise, remember. By the time you read this, it'll probably be just a few days until the next phone call. I want you ready, my boy.

Love,

Z

Leave it to Zain to yank me from the gut-clenching feeling of impending doom, through exasperation and longing, to helpless arousal in the space of two minutes. As I put the letter down to catch my breath, there were footsteps outside my bedroom door.

"Hey, Seb," Quinn's voice called. "Come watch a movie with me!"

I bit back a groan. I'd spent the morning with her already, and all of yesterday with Keegan. Could I ever get a bit of time alone around here?

"Sebby? You in there?"

No, I thought, and rapidly considered my escape routes. She would probably look on the roof, and I didn't have time to climb out the window. Locking myself in the bathroom would give away my presence. That left the closet or under the bed, and the bed was closer. I dropped

on my stomach and wiggled into the narrow gap just in time, trying not to sneeze at the dust bunnies.

“Are you sleeping again?” she asked as she pushed open the door. I watched her feet walk first to the bathroom and then out of my line of sight, towards the window. “Huh,” she said, reappearing by my desk a few seconds later. “Maybe he’s in the attic.”

Yes, why don’t you go check there? I thought at her. Zain’s letter was in plain sight if she happened to glance down. He hadn’t been explicit about anything, but there was enough for her to figure it out. *I’m in the attic. Leave.*

There were more footsteps in the hall, and through my doorway, I saw Dax heading for the stairs. He stopped, and for a second I thought he’d spotted me, until he said, “What are you doing in Seb’s room?”

“Looking for Seb, duh,” Quinn answered. “Any idea where he is?”

“No, but if you don’t know where Seb is... ”

“Look up,” they finished together, laughing.

I rolled my eyes. *Wrong this time.*

“Where are you going?” Quinn asked.

“Kandance’s,” he said, sounding pleased about it. “I’m probably staying the night, too, so don’t wait up.”

“Okay, but remember it’s your turn with Seb tomorrow.”

Dax sighed. “I’m running out of ideas for stuff to do, though.”

“It doesn’t have to be big,” Quinn said. “Like right now, I’m going to suggest a movie in the rec room. The important thing is that one of us is with him. Remember what Zain said?”

My mouth dropped open.

“Yeah, I know,” Dax said. “Okay, I’ll think of something for tomorrow. See ya.”

No, come back! What did Zain say?

He was already halfway down the stairs, though, and Quinn left too, shutting my door behind her. I stayed under the bed. I didn’t feel like moving. *Zain* had told them to take turns keeping

an eye on me? I was torn between disbelief and shock. Yes, having company was the whole reason for my being here, but I'd thought it was on my own terms, not that I was being passed from one "caretaker" to the next, like a toddler. I blinked away tears and told myself they were because of the dust.

It was obvious now that I knew what was going on. Keegan, who normally came home once a month, was making trips down from Oakland or insisting I visit her there twice a week. Quinn hung around me whenever she wasn't working, and Dax had actually taken me to an art gallery and stood looking bored out of his skull for two hours. My parents might even be in on it.

I reacted by holing up in every hiding place I knew, which was quite a few more than my family knew to look for me. Zain would've found me, but Zain was on the opposite side of the country. I didn't write to him about it. He probably wouldn't get the letter until after the phone call anyway, and I wanted to hear his response, not read it.

At the pre-set time, I was in the attic again, ready to answer the moment my phone started to play "Lucky". I picked up before the lyrics started.

"Hello."

"Hey, brat!" he replied, jovial as ever. "Got your meter logs today. That must've been some funny calculations you were doing to get only 40 or 50 above normal. When I did it, it was more like 75 above. Strange, huh?"

"Did you tell my siblings to babysit me?" I asked. There was a pause, and I felt a vicious satisfaction that I had knocked *him* off-kilter, for once.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, but I have no idea what you're talking about," he said. "Wanna clue me in?"

So I told him what I'd overheard, leaving out that I was underneath my bed at the time. My voice was cracking as I said, "What did you tell them? 'Seb can't be trusted to look after himself?'"

"*Habibi*, no!" he said. "I didn't tell them anything like that, I promise you."

"Then what did Quinn mean by 'remember what Zain said?'" I asked, thickly.

"I really, truly don't know." His voice was earnest, and I believed him. The relief almost felt like a mild low. "Have you asked her?"

"No."

"Well, is she around? I'd love to ask that young lady a few questions myself right about now."

I snorted through my remaining tears. "No, she's at work. And she's also five months older than you, by the way."

"She upsets my brat, she's a young lady. I don't care how old she is," he said, in a dark tone that might've been only partly an attempt to amuse me. As much as I appreciated it, I didn't want him angry with Quinn.

"I'm not upset now," I said. "It was only thinking *you'd* been involved that upset me."

"Still, it'd be great to know how the hell she got the idea I wanted them to babysit you, if only to marvel at Quinn's thought processes," he said. "You should ask her about it, and then tell her to cut it out."

"Yeah, okay," I said.

"So, are we good? You're not mad at me anymore?"

"We're good."

"Awesome. Getting back to that mysterious math..."

My stomach flipped. "It was just an estimate," I said. "I didn't actually calculate it, and I wasn't taking into account the whole week."

"Ah, I see. Well, that's a clever way to make sure you can't be accused of outright lying, but for future reference, babe, when I ask for numbers, I mean *hard* numbers, not ballpark," he said, and then, as an afterthought, "Not that it matters much anymore, 'cause you're going to be sending me 24-hour meter logs with every letter."

I had half-expected that, and yet the casual way he said it winded me. Once I regained my breath, I demanded, "How is knowing exactly what my blood sugar was days ago going to be helpful? It'll be too late for you to do anything about it."

"It'll help because I'll know, and you'll *know* I'll know, which means you'll stop worrying about hiding it from me and stressing yourself out, which might, if we're lucky, lead to a drop," he said, and I cursed him for making sense.

"Do you want anything else in these daily reports, along with the meter log and the mandala? Your horoscope, maybe?"

"Don't be silly, babe. A days-old horoscope really *would* be useless."

I closed my eyes to count to ten. At two, he said, "I can hear you making faces at me. Take a picture and send it real quick."

"No!"

"Oh, I bet that one was good!"

"I hate you."

His laughter made me think of the lanai swing in Hawaii. I couldn't help smiling.

"I sent you more protein cookies to bribe Platt with, by the way," I said. "I don't know if they'll help at all, but it was the only thing I could think of."

"Aww, thanks, babe. I'm sure they will," he said. "Which reminds me, my counselor thinks I reached an important step today, in that I can admit I told my company commander the first time I saw a *concrete* warning sign. I still say I should've spoken up sooner."

"You did," I pointed out. "You defended him from the beginning, and you told me why you didn't want to report what Belcher was doing at first, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"You'll keep going to the sessions?"

"I'll keep going to the sessions," he echoed. Then there was a muffled yell in the background, and he cursed in Arabic. "That was my one-minute warning. The thing with Quinn put us behind schedule. I had plans for the dog tags, but there's not enough time now."

"It's fine," I said. "I think I'd rather wait until I see you again, anyway."

"Are you sure, babe? That would make it almost a month."

"Yes, sir."

He picked up the cue immediately. I could picture his wicked smile as he said, "Careful what you wish for, my boy. I might not let you then, either."

A small, needy breath escaped me.

"Much as I hate to leave you in this state-"

"Liar," I interjected, and he ignored me.

"-I do need to hang up now. Miss you. Love you."

I repeated him in French, and then the phone beeped in my ear as the call disconnected.

Chapter Twelve

Midshipman Myrick was proving himself a competent leader. He knew when to encourage and when to push, and most importantly, knew the difference between pushing and bullying. Unless it was absolutely necessary for him to be heard, he didn't yell. The only negative thing I had to say about him was that the dude never seemed to crack a smile. Maybe he was one of those people who believe showing a sense of humor in front of subordinates would lose him respect, or maybe he really was that solemn. Either way, I could live with it.

The first time I met with him one-on-one, he explained that he didn't want to rely on Belcher's reports, and asked me about my background and motivations for being at Annapolis. I talked about how my parents emigrated from Egypt but always wanted us kids to be fully American, and how they were so proud of their new country that I couldn't help being patriotic too, which lead to wanting to go into military service at a very young age. Then I skipped forward a bit and told him why I wanted to be an officer and how Seb and I had decided together that USNA was the best path. Through it all, he took extensive notes in shorthand, which caught my interest.

"That looks useful," I said, gesturing to the writing. "How did you learn?"

He paused, leaned over, and took a book down from his shelf, which he passed to me. "With this, but I would caution you against trying to learn it during Plebe Summer. It would interfere with memorizing your rates."

"Hmm." I flipped through the book. "May I borrow this, just to see if it's something I'd be interested in, sir?"

"Keep it," he said. "I don't need it anymore."

"Thank you, sir."

"Want a protein cookie?"

Platt looked up from studying his rates in *Reef Points*, which he seemed to have his nose buried in constantly these days, and saw the care package from Seb that I was offering.

When he didn't make a move towards it, I smiled and added, "They aren't poisoned, Scout's honor." I held up three fingers of my free hand in the Scout Sign.

"You were a Boy Scout?" he asked, frowning at me.

"Yep. Made it all the way to Star Scout," I said. "What about you?"

For a few seconds, I thought he wasn't going to answer, but as he turned back to his desk, he said, "Eagle Scout at fifteen."

I whistled. "That's impressive." He hadn't taken any of the cookies, but I decided not to count it as a loss, since it was the most he'd spoken to me in days. "I'll leave this here for now, in case either of us gets hungry," I said, and set the care package down on the deck midway between our desk chairs.

Just as I was picking up my pen to write a thank-you letter to Seb, Platt said, "So, why didn't you get past Star Scout?" and his tone was curious, not hostile.

Don't look now, kid, I thought, but you might be striking up a conversation with me.

"I came out," I said, lightly, looking over my shoulder to meet his eyes. "After that, my troop didn't exactly *ask* me to leave, but I didn't want to stay somewhere I wasn't welcome. The other kids were mostly okay with it, but the parents and the leaders weren't."

"Did you expect them to be?" he asked.

"No, not really."

He jutted his chin out. "Then it was your own damn fault. You shouldn't have told them."

Ah, there's the Platt I know and love, I thought. Well, it had been fun while it lasted. I shrugged. "It wasn't worth it to me. I figured living honestly was more important than the merit badges. Besides, the Scout's Law says a scout is trustworthy, right? You can't trust someone who's hiding who they are."

"The Scout's Oath says you'll do your best to keep yourself morally straight," he countered, emphasizing the last word.

Laughing, I said, "Yeah, I think we've probably got different ideas of what that means."

He shook his head and returned to reading, and that would've been the end of it, except when I came back from a trip to the head just before taps, I picked up the care package from the deck and noticed four cookies were missing. The rest were artfully rearranged to hide the empty spot, but Seb had included a note saying he was sorry it was only two dozen this time, and I was definitely looking at just twenty of those.

I pretended not to know as I put them away and got ready for lights-out. Platt was standing at the sink, brushing his teeth and ignoring me again. There was no sign of the missing cookies on his desk, not even crumbs. The little sneak must've inhaled them. I climbed into my rack, thinking all in all, it was a very successful evening.

Myrick was right that I didn't have much time to devote to learning shorthand, but several days later I had picked up enough to add a postscript using it, without any other explanation, to my letter to Seb. His response was amusing.

I thought that was just weird doodling at first, until I told Mom about it and she suggested it might be shorthand. Do you know how many shorthand systems there are? Do you realize how long it took me to decode? And what do I get for all that effort? "It means no worries for the rest of your days." I'm going to hakuna matata you when I see you, you bastard.

I laughed so loud that Platt, who had been sitting across the room reading a letter of his own with an intense look on his face, glared at me and stomped off. I got the feeling if regulations had allowed it, he would've slammed the door, too. My palm prickled with the desire to swat him, but I let him go.

Seb wouldn't have to wait long now to follow through on his promise. Parent's Weekend was close enough that I could almost taste his hello kiss. Everywhere you went, plebes were talking excitedly about what they would do when they saw their families and were allowed off the Yard. Eating fast food figured into a lot of the plans.

I tried asking Platt who he was expecting to come, and he snapped at me that it was none of my fucking business. That was the way of it, with me and him. One step forward, three steps back. And it only seemed to be getting worse as we reached the end of the summer, especially after that time he'd stormed out.

The night before Parent's Weekend, Myrick called a fall-in. Once we had assembled and sounded off, he walked slowly between us from one end of the passageway to the other, saying, "I have watched every one of you make great progress these past few weeks, and I have been proud to call you my squad. Going into this weekend, I want you to remember that even when you are away from the Academy, you are a midshipman. You wear the uniform. You must at all times conduct yourself with honor and respect. Remember that Plebe Summer does not end until Brigade Trials, and it is only the beginning of your long and distinguished career. Be excellent to yourselves, to each other, and to this place." He did an about-face when he reached me, looked at each of us for a second, and then dismissed us for personal time.

I had planned to send another letter to Seb, so it would hopefully be waiting in California to cheer him up after he had to leave me again, only I kept drifting into daydreams about what I would do when I saw him. Sex, obviously, but I also wanted to just hold him and talk for a few hours straight. Sleep next to him. Introduce him to JJ and my squad, and walk around the Yard with him, to see it through his eyes.

At some point, I realized Platt hadn't been in the room for awhile. I checked my watch and frowned. It was getting close to taps. I didn't know what it was, but something felt off. I decided to go look for him.

JJ nearly ran into me just outside my door. "My man!" he said. "We gotta make plans for a rendezvous this weekend. I want to meet this fiancé of yours."

"Yeah, we do," I said, "but in a second. Have you seen Platt anywhere?"

He shook his head. "Why? How long's he been gone for?"

"Approximately sixty to ninety minutes," I said, automatically shifting to a more military phrasing.

JJ stood up a little straighter. "I'll search First Squad's area and the wardroom."

"I'll take Second and Third," I said. "Meet back here in fifteen, and be discreet." I didn't want to alert anyone else before knowing what was going on. JJ nodded, and we split into opposite directions.

Pretending I was just saying goodnight to the other plebes, I went from room to room. Platt wasn't hanging out in any of them. He wasn't in the storage rooms either. I moved on to the head with a growing sense of unease, and struck out there, too. My only hope was that JJ had better luck. Bancroft Hall is the largest dormitory building in the world. If he'd left the company area, there was no way we'd find him.

But JJ was alone at our meeting spot. We had two minutes until taps.

"I hate to say it," he said. "It might be time to stop being discreet."

"Yeah, I know," I said, sighing. "Let's find a detailer."

"I just saw Aarons around the corner."

He was walking away, when suddenly I heard a thud from behind the closed door to my room. "Wait!" I turned the handle and pushed. Platt was sitting on the deck with his back against his

desk chair, one leg sprawling and the other tucked underneath him at an odd angle. "Target acquired," I said.

JJ looked over my shoulder. "Is he okay?"

I stepped over Platt's leg to crouch down in front of him. His eyes were unfocused and his breath smelled like beer. "He's drunk," I said, making sure to keep my voice down.

JJ's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "Where did he get alcohol?" he demanded in a whisper.

"No idea."

Taps started to play over the PA.

"Go," I said. "I've got him from here."

He shook his head and walked away, muttering about white boys. I shut the door behind him and switched the light off, leaving only my desk lamp to dimly illuminate the room, before I turned back to Platt.

Crouching again, I took one of his arms, hooked my other hand under his knee, and pulled him over my shoulder in a fireman's carry. He moaned a little. Putting pressure on his stomach wasn't ideal, given his state -- I didn't want him vomiting down my back -- but it was the most efficient way. He was even lighter than Seb. I carried him across the room and put him down on the deck of the shower, uniform and all. Then I turned the cold water on full-blast.

He yelped. Loudly.

"Hush," I said. "Do you want Myrick in here?" Whimpering, he tried to crawl out of the spray. I pushed him back under it without mercy. "Nope, not until you can string a decent sentence together."

I braced for him to fight me, but he stayed where I put him, slumped over almost sideways with his sodden uniform clinging to him. Eight seconds later, very carefully, he said, "Fuck you. That's a sentence."

I snorted. "Yep. Congratulations," I said, and turned the water off. Still, he didn't move. When I squatted and tilted my head to get a better look at him, I saw moisture that probably wasn't from the shower in his eyes.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked, in such a small voice. "Let Myrick come. I'm not cut out for this, anyway."

My heart swelled. "Platt," I said, putting a hand on his wet shoulder and squeezing gently. "You belong here. You've got to stop thinking about what Belcher said. He was an asshole, okay?"

"Not Belcher."

"What?" I stared at him, horrified. Was it happening again, right under my nose? "What do you mean, not Belcher?"

"It wasn't... wasn't Belcher who said I'm not cut out for it." He shook his head until I caught his chin with my other hand and made him stop.

"Platt, who was it?"

"My uncle." His tone was wooden. "My uncle who helped raise me. He's always told me that. I'll never live up to my dad. My dad was a war hero. He died in Iraq when I was nine. If he could see me now, he'd be ashamed of me."

The way he said it was the worst part. Without any emotion, as though it was a fact he knew by heart and could spiel off on command, like our rates.

"Well, guess what?" I said, making sure I had eye contact. "Your uncle's an asshole, too."

A bubble of hysteric laughter escaped him. "Yeah, he really is." Then the laughter turned into sobs, and, to my surprise, he pitched himself against my shoulder and clung to me.

Poor kid. I wrapped my arm around his back and patted him, making the same soothing noises I would've used with Seb.

It took him awhile to quiet down. Once he had, and I was sure he'd hear me, I said, "I didn't know your dad, Platt, but I know he'd be proud of you."

He didn't answer. Instead, I heard him say, "Shit," just before he wrenched away from me and threw up.

Well, I thought, wincing as I watched him spit and heave again, *at least it's in the shower.*

When it seemed like he was done, I brought him water in the cup we used for brushing our teeth. "Here, drink this. We don't have aspirin, but if you rehydrate with a few of these, you might avoid the worst of the hangover."

I wound up giving him four cups in total, because he used most of that one to rinse his mouth out and wash the vomit down the drain. Then he stumbled to his feet. Catching his arm, I guided him to his desk chair and pushed him into it before he lost his balance.

"You need to get out of that wet uniform," I said. "Are you going to be able to do that?"

He glared at me. "*You're* sure as shit not doing it."

I rolled my eyes and went to get a change of clothes for him, which I put down on the desk in easy reach. "Please tell me if you're going to fall over and brain yourself on something, okay?" I asked, turning my back. "I don't think I could hide that quite as well."

"Yeah, yeah."

There were a few odd noises, but nothing came crashing to the deck.

"Done."

I looked at him. He'd somehow managed to turn the shirt inside-out before putting it on backwards, but the shorts were okay. "That'll work," I said. "Now we just have to get you into your rack."

It was easier said than done. He had to climb up the ladder at a glacial pace, with me standing behind spotting him, and then he only got his top half actually onto the mattress before he fell asleep, snoring softly. I shoved his legs up too and turned him onto his side so he wouldn't suffocate on vomit if he got sick again in the middle of the night. Deciding that getting him under his own covers was too much hassle, I grabbed my blanket, stepped onto the bottom rung of his ladder, and spread it over him.

"You're lucky you've got a Top for a roommate, kid," I told him, as I settled down for a long night of checking him for signs of alcohol poisoning.

Chapter Thirteen

Flying back to him was like spring after a long, hard winter, when everything starts growing again, and the world is pure and vibrant. I was too excited to sleep on the plane. The drive from the airport to the Academy passed in a blur, until I found myself standing where I had stood with my parents nearly six weeks before, beside a marker for “M” along Stribling Walk, waiting for Zain to meet me.

All around, other families were hugging midshipmen, exclaiming at how much they had changed over the summer. A few parents claimed not to have recognized their own children. Trepidation overtook me, listening to them. Would Zain be a stranger too? I searched through the crowd with my eyes, sure I was missing him somewhere. They had all been dismissed from formation on Tecumseh Court already. He had to be there.

“Habibi!”

I spun around, and he was dodging through people without ever looking away from me. I only had to take a few steps forward before he was close enough to wrap me up in an embrace that went bone-deep.

He didn’t comment on me sniffing in his ear, or the tears I left behind on the shoulder of his uniform when I lifted my head up to scrutinize him awhile later. Instead, he asked, “Why are you looking at me like that? Is something wrong?”

“No, everything is good,” I said, smiling. “You’re exactly the same.”

The corners of his lips quirked. “What, you were expecting me to have turned green or something?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do,” he said. “You’re skinnier than I left you.”

“Only a few pounds,” I defended.

He tilted his head and smiled at me, playfully, and I felt goosebumps rise up on the back of my neck despite the late-summer Maryland heat. “Oh, and just how many is ‘a few?’” he asked.

“Four,” I said, “...and a half.”

“At that rate, the next time I see you you’ll be able to stand sideways, stick out your tongue, and pass for a zipper.” His tone was still joking, though I knew he was bookmarking it for later. “So, where to? Have you eaten yet? I’m starving.”

“The hotel first. I need to check in.”

“Well, lead the way, my good man!” he said, letting me go.

I started off in the direction I thought I remembered parking the rental car. But only a few yards down Stribling Walk, I felt Zain’s hand on my elbow, gently halting me. I looked over, and he was standing still, frowning at something I couldn’t see through the crowd.

“Z?”

“Babe, do you mind if I say hello to someone real quick? It won’t take long, I promise.”

I shook my head. “I don’t mind.”

“Actually, c’mon, I’ll introduce you.”

As I followed in his wake, I realized he was leading me to a small family gathered near the “P” marker. The woman was blonde and petite, dressed up like she was ready to go to lunch at a five-star restaurant. Next to her, and just a few inches taller, was the plebe. There was such a strong resemblance between them, they could only be mother and son. I wasn’t sure about the man, though. He towered over them both, dark-haired and wide with muscles. He was saying something with his right hand was on the plebe’s shoulder, and the plebe -- Platt, I thought -- looked like he wanted to shrug it off.

“Hey!” Zain said, drawing their attention to us. The man stopped talking, but didn’t move his hand. I saw Zain ratchet up the charm and give them all his most open, sparkling smile. “I’m glad I found you! Platt, I wanted to introduce you to Seb. You remember, from my picture?”

Not ‘my fiancé’, I noticed. I knew he didn’t mean it as a slight -- he’d told me about Platt’s homophobia, and chances were good his family felt the same way. From the way Platt glanced from me to Zain and back, I thought he understood the reference. Neither of us uttered a word.

After an awkward pause, the woman said, “Bradley, where are your manners? Introduce us, for heaven’s sake.”

Begrudgingly, Platt said, “This is my roommate, Zain Mohyeldin. Mohyeldin, this is my mother, Sharon Platt, and my uncle, Hal Platt.”

Zain's appearance of cheerfulness hadn't faltered for a second. He held out his hand, saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. This is some kid you've got."

Platt's mother smiled and shook it. Close up, her face was marked with fine lines, but it was hard to estimate her age. She looked like someone playing an older version of themselves in a movie. "Thank you," she said. "We're certainly proud of him."

"Well, you ought to be," Zain said, turning to the uncle, who had to let go of Platt's shoulder to take Zain's offered hand. As soon as he did, Platt stepped sideways away from him. "Listen," said Zain, "you guys obviously have things planned for this weekend, and so do Seb and I, but I was thinking if we both find ourselves free at the same time, it might be fun to meet up and do something as a group. Platt, why don't you give me your phone and I'll put my number in it, just in case?"

If looks could kill, Zain would have been turned into a smouldering pile of ash at my feet from the glower Platt gave him, but his mother was saying, "Oh, great idea! Bradley, give him your phone."

Platt had his back to both her and his uncle, hiding his glare from them. Zain paid no attention to it either; he simply waited, untroubled, as the other plebe took his cellphone out of his pocket, unlocked it, and handed it over. I watched Zain add his last name and number to the contacts list before he passed it back.

"There, now I'm only a few taps away!"

"We'll be late for our reservations if we don't leave now," said Platt's uncle. "Nice to meet you both." They walked off together, Platt still looking daggers over his shoulder at Zain.

As soon as they were out of earshot, I turned to him and demanded, "*That's* the guy you've been so worried about?"

He glanced away from watching them leave long enough to smile at me. "He's really not that bad once you get used to him, babe."

I doubted it. "What was that about, anyway?" I asked.

"His uncle," he replied, in a darker tone. "I should've realized he was going to be here, or at least thought to ask, after last night."

Frowning, I said, "You aren't making sense."

He opened his mouth, and then looked at the people still standing around us and said, "I'll fill you in on the way to the hotel. Let's go."

"Where did he get the beer?"

We were stopped at a red light. In the passenger seat, Zain sighed. "No idea. He refused to tell me this morning."

"He *refused*?"

"Oh, don't you give me that look!" he said. "I'll have you know, it's a lot harder to interrogate someone without certain techniques of persuasion."

I pressed my hand to my mouth to muffle my laughter. Zain reached over, smiling, pulled it to his side of the car, and interlocked our fingers. It appeared I'd have to drive one-handed the rest of the way. As the light turned green, I asked, "So, what will you do?"

"Well, tonight when I get back, I'll have another chance to get him to tell me, and if there's any left he *didn't* drink, I'll pour it down a drain. Other than that, I'm not sure what else I can do. I was hoping seeing his family would be good for him, but with his uncle here, I'm sure it's having the opposite effect."

He sounded frustrated. My heart twisted in sympathy for him. Show Zain a problem, and he shows you a solution. Sometimes it takes him a little longer to work one out, but I couldn't remember anything else that had ever taken *this* long, and he was throwing everything he had at it. I squeezed his hand in mine and said what I had been thinking since meeting Platt. "You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped, Z."

"I help you all the time when you don't want help," he objected, and then added, in a teasing tone, "Or at least, you *claim* you don't."

My cheeks flushed pink with the tacit admission as I said, "Well, maybe Platt really means it. I don't think he's ever going to call you."

"Neither do I," said Zain. "That was more for my peace of mind, and to remind him I've got his back. Also, I wanted his uncle to stop touching him." He brought our joined hands to his mouth and kissed the back of my thumb. "You may be right, *habibi*, but I can't give up."

"Yeah, I thought you might say that," I said, quietly.

We went another few blocks in silence. I wished I could turn down the drive he has to fix everything, just a little, to ease that burden on him, and yet I knew it was such a fundamental

part of him that changing it would turn him into the stranger I feared meeting on Stribling Walk.

Then, at another red light, Zain let out a long breath, smiled at me, and said, “Enough about Platt. This weekend is about us. What do you want to do first, my boy?”

Two words. That was all it took, and instantly I was aware of every centimeter of skin where we touched, and the weight of the dog tags hanging around my neck. I looked over at him, letting my gaze wander a bit. He was still wearing the awful Cracker Jack sailor suit, but one of the gifts of an artist is a vivid visual imagination.

He laughed. “Yeah, I thought you might say that.”

We rushed through lunch in the hotel’s restaurant first, because he was hungry and the last thing I wanted was a low to hit in the middle of it. Another time, he might’ve drawn it out, touching me and calling me his boy until I squirmed in my seat. As it was, we were both almost at that point already.

I cursed in French at the keycard when it wouldn’t open the door to our room, until he took it from my hand, moved me out of the way, and got it in one try.

“How did you-?”

“I’ll show you later,” he interrupted, hauling me into the room by the front of my shirt. I barely had time to grab my suitcase. It fell from my hand and toppled over on the floor as he pushed the door closed behind us and then pinned me up against it and kissed the breath out of me.

We had snuck a quick peck in the car under the Academy’s no-PDAs rule. This was nothing like that. It was gentle and urgent at the same time, and we were pressed together as close as we could get from head to knees. I wrapped my arms around his back, feeling the well-known lines of his shoulderblades. He nipped at my lower lip and I moaned, my hips thrusting forward involuntarily.

Then he shifted, bent his knee just slightly between my legs, and rocked, grinding all his heat and muscle against my erection.

“Fuck, *mon dieu*, stop,” I gasped. “I can’t, please, I’m too close.”

He stopped, mercifully. I had my eyes closed, afraid if I even looked at him I wouldn’t be able to drag myself back from the edge, so I couldn’t see his expression, but his voice was intrigued. “Really? Just from that?”

I rolled my eyes without opening them. “It *has* been a month, you know. Longer for actual sex.”

“Hm. I think I want to see you come like that sometime.”

I whimpered.

“Not right now, though,” he continued. “Right now, I want to undress you first, so I can watch every inch of you while I make you fall apart.”

“*Merde*.”

I felt him step back from me.

“Keep your eyes closed.”

Taking my hand, he led me across the room. I had no idea where we were when he stopped. His hands brushed up my sides, gathering my shirt, and I raised my arms over my head so he could pull it off. I heard it rustle as he dropped it on the floor, and then there was a tug at the fly of my jeans, and he slid them, together with my underwear, down to my ankles. “Just one step forward,” he said, guiding me by the elbow. I followed, leaving my clothes and sandals behind me. Only the dog tags remained. The cool air of the room brought chills skittering across my warm skin.

“Open your eyes.”

I did. Somewhere during that, he had taken off his uniform, too. My mouth went dry as I looked at him. His muscles were a shade more defined than I remembered, and the tan lines on his arms were darker. While I studied him, he was studying me just as intently, walking around me in a circle. I fought against a familiar urge to cover the scars and bruises at my injection sites. My hands must’ve fluttered towards them, because he said, “Arms by your sides, *habibi*.”

He stopped in front of me and pressed biting kisses to my shoulder, my nipple, the dog tags hanging over my breastbone, my neck just below my ear.

“Who do you belong to?”

My lips curled up. “You, sir.”

“Good boy. Tell me what you want me to do to you.”

I inhaled, and exhaled, and told him.

After -- after he had made me beg in two languages, after he finally said 'now' and stars went supernova in my bloodstream, after our breathing quieted and he cleaned us both with a washcloth and coaxed me into drinking a juicebox from my suitcase -- I lay with my head on his tattoo, eyes closed, listening to his heartbeat.

"Hey, you never did tell me what made your siblings think they had to babysit you."

His tone was so offhand, I knew he'd been planning to say it for awhile. Days, probably. And *this* was the moment he picked.

I breathed deeper, hoping he'd think I'd fallen asleep.

A quiet snort was my only warning before he swatted me. Hard.

"OW!" I lifted my head to glare at him, and the bastard was grinning.

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you?"

"I am not doing this now," I told him, rolling off the bed.

He propped himself up on his elbows and watched me stride across the room to my suitcase. "Well, then this is gonna be awkward, 'cause I am," he said, chipper as can be.

Yanking open the zipper with a vengeance, I started digging through my clothes, looking for one of my sketchbooks.

"Why don't you toss me the hairbrush while you're over there?"

That was the final straw. I chucked it at his head and locked myself in the bathroom while he was still ducking.

"Y'know, you probably should've brought some clothes in there, babe. I mean, it's gonna look weird no matter what when I need to call the front desk and have them send someone up to unlock this, but at least you wouldn't be starkers," Zain said from the other side of the door. "Oh, I know! Get in the shower and pretend you're hypoglycemic. That way, we'll avoid a lot of tricky questions, and plus I get to be the dashing prince who rescues you! Sound good? I'll go call them now." His footsteps moved away.

Cursing him, I unlocked the door and opened it.

He was naked too, propped up casually next to the TV, nowhere near the room phone, clearly waiting. And yet, he pouted at me. "Aww, you're no fun."

I narrowed my eyes. "I *knew* you wouldn't do that."

"Nah, I would've if I needed to, but see, I knew I *didn't* need to, because you wouldn't take the chance," he said, and then he tapped twice on the side of his nose, held out his other hand, and smiled. "C'mon, time for a chat."

Locking myself in the bathroom again would bring us back to square one. Any other escape route required clothes. He was right -- I should've grabbed some earlier.

"Seb."

My gut tightened and my heart skipped a beat, and although he hadn't changed his tone or expression, I understood all the meanings behind them. *Yes, this is happening now, ready or not*, and, *You're pushing it, brat*, and, *I've got you, it'll be okay*.

Stepping forward, I gave him my hand.

He took me back to the bed and laid us both down on top of the covers, facing each other with about a foot of space between us. When he let go of my hand, it was to stroke down my side from shoulder to hip, where he left his palm. I was very aware of it there, so close to the lingering warmth of his earlier swat.

"Comfy?" he asked. I made a face at him. "Great! Now, when I said you should ask Quinn about that and tell her to cut it out, did you take it as a suggestion? Because I know sometimes I can make things sound like suggestions when they aren't really, but I kinda figured you knew me better."

"No, I knew what you meant."

"Oh, good!" he said, rolling onto his back momentarily to collect his cell phone from where it lay on the nightstand, right next to the hairbrush. He put it down between us and nudged it toward me. "So, if I say you should call her right now..."

I looked from the phone to him, his eyes sparkling with anticipation, like he'd asked me to do nothing more difficult than order a pizza. "Why does it matter anymore?" I asked. "I'm going to be leaving a few days after I get back."

With that particular little tilt to his head, he said, “I really wouldn’t care if you were leaving a few *hours* after you got home, babe. And anyway, what are you going to do if they make plans for you during those few days? Hide?”

“No, I’ll go along with it,” I said. For the past two weeks, I had agreed to anything my siblings suggested. Hiding hadn’t been an option when I wanted to avoid Zain wondering why I wasn’t mentioning family activities anymore. I could handle a few more days of that.

“And you’ll keep getting more and more miserable, doing stuff you don’t want to do and thinking they don’t actually want to do it, either,” he pointed out. “Nope, not happening.”

I sighed. “Well then, why did you wait until now to bring this up?”

“Because I didn’t catch on right away, and then I thought it might be easier for you to talk to them if I were here with you, *habibi*,” he said, and he pushed the phone another inch closer to me.

Involuntarily, I shyed away from it. “She’s probably at work. I’ll do it later.”

Zain shrugged and said, “Okay,” and my stomach flipped over.

Before I could tell him I’d changed my mind, he sat up on the side of the bed, looked across his shoulder, and made a ‘c’mere’ gesture. My tongue tied itself up in knots; I could only do as he bid me.

There wasn’t the usual silent argument over who would take my pants down, since I was nude already. He simply took me by the elbow, positioned me between his legs, and tugged a little, and I found myself folding obediently forward over his thigh. A moment later, I felt his other leg lock me into place, and then him leaning to get the hairbrush.

“Arms?” he asked, patting my lower back. I gulped. “Yeah, both of them,” he added when I didn’t move. “The bed’s supporting your torso well enough.”

I contorted them behind me, and he grasped my fingers in one hand and held them down against the base of my spine. Then he began.

Over the course of six weeks, the brush had lost some of its emotive weight. I had used it as a grooming tool and stopped thinking, every time I picked it up, about when it had last been put to its other intended purpose. I had forgotten the burn it could ignite when Zain wielded it. He reminded me in five seconds, and just kept going after that.

I kicked and twisted and squirmed from the start, and he held me where I was, never missing his mark or striking too close to the injection sites on my upper buttocks. Once, I had asked

him why he didn't seem to mind my struggling, and he told me, *'Because I know you're not actually trying to get away. You're trying to keep your emotions in check, so when you fight harder, I know I'm doing my job right.'* At the time, I would've sworn he was wrong, but now I could acknowledge the truth in that.

The trouble is, I can't wrestle my feelings back for long when he's intensifying everything. I buried my face in the duvet to muffle my yelps, horribly conscious of the fact that we were in a hotel room.

He paused in his steady rhythm, moved my fingers to his other hand, and ruffled the hair at the nape of my neck. "C'mon, *habibi*, let go."

I shook my head. I didn't mean to be stubborn. I couldn't.

After a moment, he switched his hands back, and then I felt him raise the knee that was underneath me and tighten his hold with his other leg, tipping my bottom up more. I braced myself just as he brought the brush down on my upper thigh.

The sting was twice as bad. He swatted lightening-fast, giving me no time at all to prepare for the next. Without having my arms free to bite down on, I could only grit my teeth desperately, until something inside me shook loose, and I started to weep into the mattress.

"Look at me a second," he said, still spanking. I managed to turn enough to meet his eyes, although my vision was blurry with tears. "Okay, almost done." He put the brush down on the nightstand and went on with his palm, slower but no less powerful.

Emotion surged out of me. Anxiety and irritation and guilt and yearning that had been all snarled together in a Gordian knot. He cut straight through it like it was nothing. I forgot where we were and ceased worrying about who might overhear.

Unfortunately, that self-consciousness came back the moment he stopped and let go of my hands. I scrubbed the moisture from my cheeks and started to push myself off the bed, intending to go wash my face.

With a forearm planted in the middle of my back, Zain knocked me flat on my stomach again. "Whoa, wait a minute, brat. Since when do *you* decide you're getting up?" he asked, sounding amused. I huffed at him over my shoulder as I tried to wriggle free, and he reached towards the brush. "Huh, maybe I'm out of practice. It looks like I stopped too soon... No?"

I shook my head again, faster. The rest of me was completely still. After surveying me a long moment, he set the brush down -- not on the nightstand, but on the small of my back. And then he left it there, so I hardly dared move, while he rubbed his fingers through my hair and down over my neck and shoulders.

"Breathe, babe. Deeper, c'mon," he soothed. Residual sobs shuddered through me as I obeyed. "That's it. There you go."

When, at last, I could exhale quietly, he picked up the brush and helped me to my feet.

"Okay, *habibi*, let's get you cleaned up."

He brought me into the bathroom and wiped the disgusting mix of snot, tears, and sweat off my skin with a cool washcloth. While he did, I couldn't stop myself from peeking at my rear end in the mirror, like rubbernecking at a car accident.

"So, what would you call that shade of red?" he asked.

Without thinking, I answered, "Vermilion." Then my jaw dropped open and I whipped my head around to look daggers at him.

"Really?" he asked, eyes twinkling. "Are you sure it's not scarlet?"

"You are AWFUL. As a Top and a human being in general, and I hate you."

He sighed dramatically. "I know. Sadly, that is my cross to bear. But, hey, you're verbal again! Ready to make that phone call now?"

My mouth distorted in a grimace, but I nodded.

We finally made it under the covers, him spooning up behind me with his arms wrapped around my chest, watching over my shoulder as I dialed.

I held the phone to my ear with a stupidly trembling hand and listened to it ring. And ring. Then Quinn's voicemail picked up, and I exhaled. "See, she's working," I said. "I'll call back later."

Just as I was about to disconnect, Zain snatched the phone from me and rolled away so I couldn't grab it back. "Hey there, Quinn, it's Zain. Long time no see. Call me when you get this. Seb has something he wants to talk about."

"No, he doesn't," I muttered. I heard him put the phone down, and then he pulled the arm I was covering my eyes with away from my face.

“They are not going to hate you, *habibi*,” he said, uncharacteristically firm. “And even if they do get upset -- which I don’t think they will -- it is not the end of the world. They will get over it. Right?”

I sniffed and nodded.

Rubbing my hand between his, he said, “You’re shivering still. Where’s your test kit?”

“Outer pocket of the carry-on. I’ll get it,” I said, starting to sit up.

“No, stay.”

He retrieved it and climbed back on the bed, sitting cross-legged, before unzipping it and sifting through the contents. I reached over, and he pointedly moved it out of my range without looking at me. I froze in horror.

“Zain, *no*.”

“Zain, *yes*.” He held up my lancing device. “When did you last change this?”

I scowled. “No one changes their lancet every time. That’s just something the doctors tell you to do to avoid getting sued.”

Blinking in a way that lowered the temperature of my insides even more, he asked, “Have I ever said you needed to change it every time?”

Carefully, I shook my head.

“Okay, so wanna try that again?”

“Right before our last phone call,” I said. “There’s more with my extra insulin, next to the juice.”

“Which I put in the fridge earlier.”

I watched him get a new lancet and change it out with growing unease. Wasn’t this part supposed to be over by now? When he held out his hand, I hunched myself farther under the covers. “I have been doing my own tests and injections since I was nine years old, you know.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I know, you were a diabetic prodigy. I’m still doing this one.”

No.

Almost lazily, he leaned over and brought his palm down on my butt, reawakening the soreness even through the blankets.

My eyes clouded up again. The last time we'd done this had been right after the move to Hawaii, when I was so stressed about making the house into a perfect home that I'd had a major meltdown over paint samples. I was *not* that flipped out right now.

"The longer you wait, the more you're proving my point, *habibi*," he said, gently. "It's okay."

I swallowed and gave him my hand, while simultaneously moving the rest of my body as far away as I could get. He paid no attention to that, simply examined my fingertips, chose one, and tore open an alcohol swab with his teeth.

It takes him longer than me, although he's both extremely competent and efficient. He just does every part of it by the book: waiting for the alcohol to air-dry, not squeezing to get the blood out, wiping away the first drop and using the second. I battled with myself to keep from yanking my hand back in the middle of it.

"There," he said, eventually. "That's a beautiful number, look."

I opened my eyes, and he was holding the meter up for me to see the reading. "I don't know why I'm doing this," I said.

"Doing what?"

"Pushing you."

Smiling, he said, "It's okay, babe. You're just making sure we still work." Then he closed the test kit with one hand and set it on the nightstand. "Now, I don't know about you, but I didn't get much rest last night, and I've really missed sleeping next to you, so I'm gonna take a nap." He shifted off the blanket and slid underneath it, all without releasing me. "Scooch over here."

I moved into his arms and settled down against him, listening to his breath in my ear. Several minutes later, I said, "I've missed this, too."

His reply was drowsy, but immediate. "Thank you for letting me know."

'Letting' as in 'allowing,' although I feared the knowledge would be painful. Between us, the dog tags were touching the *semper fidelis* of his tattoo, both of them physical reminders of what he likes to tell me sometimes when I worry about hurting him: he's a big, strong Marine, y'know. Oorah.

Chapter Fourteen

I had missed waking next to Seb even more than I missed sleeping next to him, I think. He was curled up into me, his head tucked against my collarbone, his warm breath bathing my chest with every slow exhale. I took the opportunity to study him carefully. If he's tense, he'll carry it in the lines of his face, the set of his shoulders, and the clutch of his fingers -- even more so asleep, when he's let his guard down, than awake. Now, I saw only loose, easy, calm, and I smiled with the satisfaction of a job well done. I had no doubt that I would have to unwind him a few more times before the weekend was over, but we were probably through the worst of it.

When I ran my hand over his spine, from his lower back up to the nape of his neck, he arched into my palm like a cat and blinked his eyes open.

"Hey, *habibi*."

"Mmm."

"We should probably think about getting dinner soon," I said. "What are you in the mood for?"

A flash of mischief crossed his face before he turned his head and sank his teeth into my bicep.

I laughed, delighted. "No, that's dessert, my boy."

"Uh-uh," he said, still nibbling at me like he was trying to leave a mark. I was about to tell him he needed to use more suction if he wanted to be successful, when my phone rang.

Sighing, I reached to the nightstand and picked it up to see who was calling. Quinn's smiling contact picture looked back at me. She's always had lousy timing. I considered letting it go to voicemail, but that would've been setting a poor example for Seb, who, judging by the way he'd just gone taut, had also seen it. I pulled him closer as I answered.

"Hello, Quinn."

"Hey! It's good to hear your voice. How are you?"

"I'm good," I said, and then moved smoothly into the point, cutting off any more small talk, because if you let Quinn get on a roll, it can be difficult to stop her. "Listen, Seb needs to ask you about something. Let me put you on speakerphone, hang on."

Seb, hearing this, tried to shift away, until I reached down with my free hand and gave him a firm pat on the butt. Then he just scrunched his nose up at me. I crossed my eyes and stuck out my tongue in return, before I switched the phone to speaker and held it between us. 'Go on,' I mouthed to him, running my fingers in soothing little patterns over his hip.

After a few seconds of silence, Quinn asked, "Sebby?"

"*Salut*, Quinn," he said.

With a shake of my head, I mouthed, 'English.' I wanted to be able to follow all of this.

He made another face, but, haltingly, said, "I needed to ask you about something I overheard you telling Dax a couple of weeks ago."

"...Okay?"

"It was.... You were talking about making plans to do stuff with me, and you said something that made it seem like. Like Zain had asked you to watch me? Only, he says he didn't. So. What did you mean by that?"

Good job, babe, I thought. He'd closed his eyes halfway through, but I wasn't going to be picky.

From the phone, Quinn said, "Wait, you mean the day I wanted to watch Star Trek with you? Where *were* you when you overheard us? I checked everywhere in your room!"

"That's not important," said Seb, although I was interested to see he turned faintly pink and shot me a little, guilty glance.

"You weren't in the closet, were you, because that's kind of ironic, given your sexuality."

He looked pleadingly at me, and I shook my head again. I knew I could easily steer her back on track with a few words, but me interfering would be missing the point.

"Quinn, where did you get the idea that Zain wanted you to...babysit me?" he asked, like he was pushing every word up a very steep hill.

There was only silence for several seconds. I held him through them.

Finally, she said, "Sebby, that's not how we meant it, I swear. It was just that Zain said you were spending the summer with us so you'd have company, remember? It was when you guys called us on Keegan's birthday. Remember, Zain? You said you didn't want him to be alone."

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I remember that part. I don’t remember telling you guys to draw up a schedule and take turns forcing him into family activities, though.”

“We weren’t *forcing* him,” she protested. “He agreed to all the stuff we suggested.”

Seb’s siblings are wonderful people. They’re practically my siblings, too, and I love them to pieces. But I simply do not understand how it is that they’ve known Seb his whole life and are still completely blind to what he actually needs. It frustrates me to no end, at times. I made the mistake of letting some of that frustration show on my face now, and Seb quickly interjected, “No, you weren’t forcing me, you’re right. It’s fine, Quinn. It’s not a big deal.”

As she was asking, “Are you sure?”, I muted the phone, swatted him, and unmuted it again.

He went bright red and glared at me. I gave him a patient smile.

“Sebby?”

I saw him swallow before he answered, “Actually, no. Some of that stuff was fun, but I didn’t want to do all of it, and... sometimes I do need to be alone, too.”

“Oh. Okay. Why didn’t you just say that, then?”

He probably had, in a thousand small ways they wouldn’t have picked up on, but in actual words coming out of his mouth? Nope.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice still steady although he was wiping away tears. “That’s my fault. I’ll try to be better about it.”

“Well, we’ll try to be better about giving you some space, too,” said Quinn.

I spoke up again, because I could see Seb was just barely holding it together. “Great, sounds like we’re all on the same page. Quinn, we have to go, but we’ll call tomorrow around dinner your time, alright?”

“Sure, talk to you then! Bye!”

After disconnecting, I yanked him hard against my chest, and whispered, “I’m so proud of you, *habibi*. You did excellent. It’s okay, let it go. There you are.”

“This is ridiculous,” he choked out. “Why am I crying *now*?”

"It's just stress releasing," I said. "It's fine, don't fight it." I held him while the sobs worked themselves out, massaging his shoulders, and when he was quiet, I drew back a little and smiled. "So, just where were you when you overheard them talking, hmm?"

Blushing hotly, he muttered, "Under my bed."

A snort of laughter burst out of me. "Under the bed? For serious?"

"Shut up."

"Only you, babe," I said, and smacked a kiss on his forehead. "Although if you fit under there, you are definitely too skinny. C'mon, get some clothes on, we're going to fatten you up."

We went to a familiar chain restaurant on my suggestion, because knowing the menu and being able to look up the exact nutritional information for each dish eliminates a lot of the guesswork involved in eating out with diabetes.

While we ate, I got him talking about the start of his own college experience, which would be coming up in just a few days, and which he had conveniently avoided mentioning in any letter. I wanted to suss out where his head was in it. Seb being Seb, it took a bit of prodding for him to admit he was anxious.

"I don't know why," he said, with an annoyance that was directed more at himself than at me. "It's not any specific thing I'm worried about, it's just..."

"Heffalumps and woozles?" I suggested, and he rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, sure."

"That's natural, babe," I told him. "We're both taking huge steps here. I've got some of the sly beasts roaming around my head, too, but we're gonna be fine. And the nice thing is, when you're there, I'll have my phone back full-time, and a computer, so we'll be able to communicate a lot more. Anytime you need me, day or night, I expect you to call, or text, or email, alright?"

"What if you're in a class?"

"Doesn't matter. I'll have my phone on silent, and I'll answer you as soon as I can, regardless, so whenever you need me, you let me know right away. Yeah?"

He sighed, but nodded.

Our waitress came by when I'd cleared the food from my plate and Seb was still picking at half of his. "Do you want that in a to-go container?" she asked.

"Yes, please" I said, at the same time that Seb said, "No, thank you" and she looked between us questioningly. "Yes," I repeated, giving her a smile. "And the check, please."

"Okay, I'll be back with them," she said.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Seb said, "I didn't even take enough insulin for a portion that size."

I grinned at him. "I noticed. You can take more and eat the rest of it later, though. We're trying to fatten you up, remember?"

He slouched down in the booth. "I feel like a pig being fed for slaughter."

"The best and bravest pig who ever lived," I said, earnestly. "That's why I call you 'babe,' y'know." And then I started to sing. "If I had words to make a day for you, I'd sing you a morning, golden and true."

"Oh my god, shut up!"

But he was laughing as he kicked at me under the table.

The rest of the evening passed much too quickly. We went back to the hotel, had "dessert," and talked more, and just like that, it was time for us to leave so I could be back on the Yard before my liberty expired for the night.

There was a line of cars waiting to go through the one security gate used by visitors. Seb pulled in at the end of it, and then looked at the clock glowing on the dashboard. "We're not going to make it up there, Z," he said. "You'll have to get out and walk."

I knew he was right, but I didn't want to leave him yet. It's the same whenever we say goodbye, even knowing I was going to see him again all day tomorrow, and the day after. "I still have a few minutes," I said.

"No, go. If you're late getting back, they could cut into our time tomorrow."

They *probably* wouldn't do that, but I couldn't be sure, so I sighed and leaned over to give him a good-night kiss. "Sweet dreams," I said, as I unbuckled and climbed out.

“Je t’aime,” he replied.

All down the line, other plebes were having the same realization, and car doors were opening to let them out into the warm, summer night, to walk in double-time towards the gate. I shut the door, waved to Seb, and joined them.

Platt was already in our room. He had changed into sleeping clothes and was sitting at his desk, tracing the lines of the mandala on his corkboard with one finger.

“I’ve got a lot more of those, if you want them,” I said as I came in.

He jumped and snatched his hand back so quickly you would’ve sworn the paper had burnt him. Then he glowered at me. “I don’t need your charity.”

And here we are again, I thought. This must have more to do with me giving him my number than the mandala. “Accepting help isn’t a weakness, Platt,” I told him. “It’s part of being a team.”

I watched him turn away from me with the scowl firmly fixed on his face, and sighed. It looked more and more like Seb had been right about the impossibility of helping him.

As I climbed into my rack a few minutes later, he got up and started for the door. I frowned. “Where are you going?”

“To take a piss,” he snapped. “Do you want to come watch?”

“No, but if you’re not back in five, I’m sending out a search party,” I said, suddenly weary down to my bones. “I don’t feel like babysitting a drunk tonight.”

He didn’t respond, but he was back in the allotted time.

Clunk.

The sound jerked me awake. I opened my eyes and saw Platt’s shadowy form standing in the middle of the room, looking at something on my desk, underneath me. Rolling over, I hung my head down and squinted at it in the dim light.

It was a six-pack of beer, with one of the bottles missing its cap.

I lifted my gaze to Platt. He was still looking at it, with a strange, grim expression, but he didn't seem drunk.

"Where did you get it?" I whispered.

"Belcher had a stash in one of the unoccupied rooms," he answered, flatly. "He took me in there the night you sang *Be Our Guest* and drank one while he made me do push-ups with his foot on my back."

The bruise. It had been about the size of a footprint, I remembered. I swallowed down a spike of nausea. *That* was what he'd been doing while I was talking to Lt. Cameron? I remembered him coming back to the room afterward and telling me to stop trying to help him.

"Was it because of what I did?" I asked. "Did I provoke it?"

Platt gave me an incredulous look. "No, it was because he's an asshole. Like you said."

Still. If I hadn't been in trouble over that stupid stunt, I might've caught on sooner. I allowed myself a second of regret, and then pushed it aside to deal with the pressing issue. "Is there any more where it came from?"

With a shake of his head, Platt said, "That's the last of it. Do what you want. Report me. Whatever. I'm done with alcohol."

"I'm not going to report you." I wouldn't dream of betraying the trust he'd just shown me. The only problem was how to get rid of the evidence. I swung down onto the floor, picked up the six-pack, and carried it to the sink. "Go listen at the door and let me know if you hear the watch coming," I told him. He did as I asked while I emptied the five full bottles down the drain and carefully put them back into the holder, trying not to make any noise.

Then, wincing at every faint *clink*, I took it to my closet and moved some of my uniforms aside to hide it.

"Put it in mine," said Platt.

I shook my head. "No one's going to find it, don't worry." He looked like he wanted to argue, so I added, "Relax, I've got a plan. It'll only be here until morning."

As soon as it was concealed well enough to pass a cursory inspection, I climbed back into bed. Across the room, Platt did the same. I couldn't sleep, though. I kept going back to the way he'd said 'I'm done with alcohol' earlier. It might've just been that he was a kid who had

suffered through his first hangover, but his tone had held more conviction, and more sadness. Softly, so he could pretend not to hear me if he wanted, I asked, "Does your uncle drink?"

"No," he said, almost like he had been waiting for the question. "My mother. She started after my dad died. That's why I spent more time at my uncle's place."

And he wasn't any better. Couldn't this kid catch a break?

"You didn't have anywhere else to go?"

"I went to church," he said.

I could see how even a homophobic church could be a kind of refuge from that. He rolled onto his side, so he was facing me, and I could just make out his pupils in the darkness.

"She told me she's getting sober today."

"Well, that's good," I said, and he snorted.

"Do you know how many times she's told me that?" he asked, with a voice full of bitterness. "I don't even know. I stopped counting. My whole life, I just wanted to be like my dad, so maybe she wouldn't be so unhappy all the time, and now I'm finally here doing it, and she's just the same."

There was a heavy silence between us for a moment. Then I licked my lips and said, "I didn't leave only my scout troop after I came out. I left my home and my family. My parents consider themselves liberal by Egyptian standards, but that was one step too far." I paused. Platt was still looking at me from the other side of the chasm between our beds. "For the longest time, I thought maybe becoming a Marine would prove to them that I was still the son they raised. But then, during bootcamp, I realized you can't do this because someone else wants you to. It's not enough. You have to want it for yourself just as badly, or even more, or else you won't make it through. So, do you want it for yourself, too?"

His gaze dropped to the floor, and I watched him think. Then he nodded and met my eyes again. "Yes."

"Okay. Good. I don't know if it'll make a difference to your mom, Platt. A very wise man I know told me earlier today that you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. But if you want it for yourself, then you can make a difference in your own life."

"Yeah," he said, rolling onto his back.

That was the signal our little heart-to-heart was over. I would've left it, except a few seconds later I thought of something else. "Hey, Platt? Earlier, when I said I didn't want to babysit a drunk? I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean-"

"I know," he cut me off. "Thank you for saying it."

I blinked, and then laid there, wondering if I would wake up tomorrow and find out I'd actually dreamt this whole thing. That seemed more likely, somehow.

The six-pack was still there in the morning, proof that it had happened. Even more telling was the change in Platt's attitude. He wasn't exactly friendly, but he wasn't hostile or ignoring me, either.

"What are you going to do with the bottles?" he asked as we got ready for PT.

"Stick around after the parade and you'll see," I replied.

The formal parade following breakfast was the culmination of all our drill practices over the summer -- the entire Regiment marching around on Worden Field, while our families watched from the stands. My squad had improved greatly once we'd gotten proper instruction. Back in Bancroft afterward, Myrick told us again how proud he was before dismissing us for liberty.

I found Seb outside where we'd agreed to meet, by the gazebo in front of the chapel, with his messenger bag slung over his shoulder. "Good morning, babe!" I greeted him, and then gestured to the bag. "How full is that today?"

He gave me a puzzled frown. "It's just the usual. Test kit, insulin, food, extra test strips, extra insulin, spare batteries for my meter, a couple of sketchbooks, pens, pencils--"

"Okay, okay," I interrupted, laughing. "You're Mary Poppins, I got it." Lowering my voice, I said, "Do you think you could fit six empty beer bottles in there?"

The confusion cleared from his features, to be replaced by the disapproving look he does a lot better than I do. "Probably."

"Awesome. Come with me."

We walked back to my company area in Bancroft, where most of the other plebes had also brought their families to visit. There were detailers everywhere, talking to parents about their kids' accomplishments. Myrick was surrounded by what appeared to be several generations of the Diaz clan, so I figured he was well-occupied for a few minutes, at least.

I led Seb to my room. “You remember Platt, babe?” The two of them studied each other, both equally unimpressed, like a pair of alleycats. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. Once I had myself under control, I asked, “Platt, are your mom and uncle here?”

“No, they’re running late,” he said.

“Okay, so you can keep a lookout for us?”

He nodded and went to stand by the door, while I took Seb’s elbow and tugged him over to my closet.

“Open your bag,” I said, reaching behind the uniforms where I’d hidden the six-pack.

We had to rearrange his supplies to make room, but once we had, the first bottle slid in easily enough. The second, though, made a loud *clink* against it. I didn’t need us attracting any suspicion, so I grabbed the shirt I’d worn for PT that morning out of my hamper and started to wrap it around between them.

“Ew!” said Seb.

“Oh, please. You love my sweat when it’s still on my body,” I said, grinning, and he socked my arm.

By the door, Platt was frowning at us. “Would you hurry the fuck up? I think Diaz is almost done talking to Myrick.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep your skivvies on,” I said. Using the shirt as a buffer between them, I situated the rest of the bottles in the bag, and then flattened the cardboard carton and slid it in beside. “How’s that?” I asked Seb. “Okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Good, then I think we’ll get out of here.” Turning to Platt, I added, “Remember, you’ve got my number if you need anything.”

“And you’re welcome for the help, by the way,” Seb told him, pointedly. With his loved ones, he avoids all confrontation, yet from time to time, he’ll give near-strangers he doesn’t like a dressing-down.

Platt actually looked ashamed for a split second, before he went back to scowling. “I do appreciate it,” he said, and then he abruptly left.

Seb watched him go with narrowed eyes. "Have you ever considered he might be...?" He made a swatting motion, and I snorted at his choice of signal.

"Not really. Do *you* think he is?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, but something about him is bugging me."

I opened my mouth to tell him that was just the innate Platt-ness, when Myrick finally extracted himself from the Diazes and walked over.

Beside me, Seb put his hand over the clasp of his bag and shifted a step closer. Everything about the movement broadcasted Hiding Something, and if I hadn't already known what it was, I would've gone on full alert. Luckily, Myrick wasn't as well-versed in Seb's tells.

"Midshipman Mohyeldin," he said, nodding.

"Hello, sir," I replied. "This is my fiancé, Seb Crews. Babe, my squad leader, Midshipman Myrick."

They shook hands. Turning back to me, Myrick said, "I won't take much of your time. I have a task for you to complete." He handed me a sheet of paper, folded in half.

"This weekend, sir?" I asked, just to be sure. It wasn't like him to cut into personal time.

"As soon as possible," he said.

I unfolded the paper, read it, blinked, and read it again. Written in shorthand, it said, *Saw Platt take alcohol into your room last night. Listened at the door and heard him give it to you. You need to get rid of it. We're having room inspections tomorrow night.*

Nothing in Myrick's face suggested he was anything other than the by-the-book squad leader I knew.

Folding the paper again, I said, "Already taken care of, sir," and saw his eyes flick to Seb's bag for an instant.

"Good," he said. "I'll meet with you at 0700 tomorrow for a full briefing."

"I look forward to it, sir," I said, with complete sincerity. Myrick nodded, once, and strode away to another family. Turning to Seb, I said, "Well. That was weird."

A small line appeared between his eyebrows. "What? What happened?" I handed him the paper, but he only glanced at it and said, "I didn't learn enough of that to be able to decode anything, Z."

"Then you'll have to wait a little bit for an explanation," I said. "Also, just so you know, you would be *very* bad at covert ops. And poker." His mouth dropped open in outrage, and I beamed at him.

Several minutes later, I leaned against the side of the rental car and filled him in, while simultaneously keeping an eye out for detailers as he unloaded the beer bottles and stashed them under the passenger seat in the most conspicuous manner possible.

"That makes no sense," he said, still bent over, giving me an excellent view of his ass. "Why wouldn't he turn you in? Or turn Platt in last night? Or just let you get caught with it during the room inspections?"

"Not a clue, but I do plan to ask him all those questions tomorrow morning."

He straightened up and frowned at me. "You do realize if he *had* reported you, you'd likely be kicked out, right? What would you have done then?"

"Hey, I'm the one who's supposed to dish out the lectures around here," I reminded him, in a deliberately light-hearted tone. I'm accountable to him just as much as he's accountable to me, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him get worked up over things that didn't happen.

Seb crossed his arms. "Yeah, but you don't, so *someone* has to."

Oh, really? I thought, smiling and angling my head about twenty degrees to the right. His arms uncrossed in a hurry, and he relieved his feelings by shutting the passenger-side door and trying to step around me instead. I pushed off the car and blocked him. "I had to help, *habibi*," I said, apologetically. "I'd do it again."

"Big damn hero," he said, rolling his eyes.

I grinned. "Ain't I just."

That got me a weak smile, and then he sighed and said, "Promise me you'll be careful, though."

"I promise," I said, and then I gave him a hug, which he accepted with only mild reluctance.

As I released him, I heard a shout from across the parking lot. "MO! C'mere and meet my family, man!"

"That's JJ," I said. "You up for some company?"

He nodded. "Yes, but, 'Mo'? *Really?*"

I laughed and started to lead the way. "C'mon, babe."

JJ had a small group of people with him, all of them very tall, like he was, with the exception of a little girl with her hair in a bun on top of her head, who was holding his leg in one hand and a stuffed frog in the other.

"This must be Seb!" JJ said, before I could introduce them. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm Jamal Jacobson, Jr., more commonly known as JJ."

"Hi," Seb said. His hand was swallowed by JJ's and shook vigorously for a couple of seconds, and then the other plebe let go to gesture to his family.

"This is my mama, and my pops, and my Auntie Sarah, and this here is my little cousin, Tiana."

The little girl looked up at us and declared, "Like in The Princess and the Frog."

I gasped and bowed to her. "Your Highness! You're so pretty today, I didn't even recognize you! JJ, why didn't you tell me you have royalty in the family? Shame on you."

"Because I knew this would happen," he said, while Tiana giggled. "Does he just go around singing allllll the time when he's not here?" he asked Seb.

With a long-suffering sigh, Seb replied, "You have no idea."

Mr. Jacobson smiled at us both. "We were going to take a little tour of the Yard, and then get some lunch. Would you boys like to join us?"

I glanced at Seb questioningly, and he tilted his chin down in the barest hint of a nod. "We'd love to, sir," I said. "I'm Zain Mohyeldin, by the way, and this is my fiancé, Seb Crews."

After the handshakes and greetings were all done, Tiana tugged on my pant leg, and when I looked down she asked, "May I have a piggyback ride, please?"

"Of course, Princess! Your wish is my command," I said, crouching.

She gave me the frog, saying, “Hold this,” before climbing onto my back.

“Oh, let me take that, Tiana,” said JJ’s aunt.

“Not a problem, ma’am,” I said. “All in a day’s work for a royal guardsman.” I hooked my arms under the little girl’s knees and straightened up. “Good?”

“Yep!” Tiana said.

Mrs. Jacobson was studying a map of the Yard from the visitor center. “It looks like the Academy Museum is the closest to us, and I do want to visit the chapel and the crypt of John Paul Jones as well.”

So we set off, with Seb sticking close to my side and JJ pointing out different points of interest as we went.

We weren’t the only ones from my company who had the same idea. We ran into Sullivan and Stevens at the museum, Weir, Diaz, and Nakamura in the chapel, and Rawlins next to the statue of Tecumseh on T-Court, while we waited for Tiana and the rest of JJ’s family to return from a restroom break.

As Rawlins led his parents away, Seb turned to me with a suspicious look. “Why are they all calling you Dad?” he asked. “Have you been telling corny jokes again?”

“What? No, I would never!”

“Lies,” JJ said. “The other day he told me the highest form of flattery is a plateau.”

“Oh, c’mon, that’s hilarious,” I protested, while Seb groaned. “I have way cornier jokes than that. Want to hear some?”

“No!” they said at the same time, and I decided surrender was the best strategy, as I was outnumbered.

“Also,” Seb added, “why did some of them salute you? You’re not their superior.”

I grinned. “They were congratulating me on my hot date. It’s a tradition. ”

Blushing, he said, “It is not!”

“No, it’s true,” JJ agreed. “And you got right-handed salutes, too. If they’d saluted with their left hand, that would’ve meant they think you’re ugly.”

Seb thought about that a minute, and then said, “Okay, that explains Sullivan and Stevens. What about the guy who did it?”

“Which guy?” I asked.

“I forgot his name. The Asian kid.”

“Nakamura?” I raised my eyebrows and glanced at JJ. “I don’t know, but I’m definitely going to ask him when I get a chance.”

It was by Dewey Seawall, waiting for a turn to tour the Yard Patrol Craft, that I noticed Seb looked pale.

“Okay, babe?” I asked, quietly enough that only he and Tiana, who was riding on my back again, would hear.

“Yeah,” he said. “I just need to rest a minute.”

I nodded behind him. “There’s a bench over there.”

He walked away, and I watched carefully as he sat down and started to rummage through his bag.

“Is he alright?” JJ asked, on my other side.

Rather than answer him, I said, “Princess Tiana, may I request permission for the noble knight Sir JJ to give you a piggyback ride for a few minutes?”

“Mmmm... okay,” she said.

I passed her and the frog over to her cousin, and went to check on Seb. He was holding a tube of glucose tablets, which he dropped back into his bag with a guilty look as I approached.

“Hi!” I said, squatting in front of him. “What was the number?”

He huffed at me. “I can tell I’m low. I don’t need to test. And would you sit down like a normal person? You’re making people look at us.”

"I'm not a normal person, I'm a plebe," I said. "Plebes aren't allowed to use the benches on the Yard, and the people looking know that, so relax."

"Sure, you'll rope me into smuggling contraband, but *sitting* on a *bench* would be going too far."

I smiled at him, like I didn't see his glower at all, and said, "Seb, test." I left the 'or I will do it for you' unspoken. He knew I would. Still, I saw him glance at the crowd of midshipmen and their families a few times as he took his kit out, and he tried to angle his body away from them as much as possible on the bench, to hide what he was doing.

The meter showed a fairly mild low of 64 mg/dl, but I was willing to bet it was dropping even now. While he chewed on glucose tablets, I looked at my watch.

"They were talking about eating lunch at 1300, which is still an hour and a half away. Do you have anything other than simple carbs to snack on until then?"

He avoided making eye contact.

"Okay," I said, nodding. "I'll go see what the Mid Store sells that could work. Stay here and test again in ten minutes, if I'm not back yet."

They had packets of cheese and crackers, which Seb hates, but it was the most likely option for stabilizing his blood sugar. When I brought them back, I found JJ standing next to him and Tiana sitting on the bench, watching intently as he did the second test. JJ gave me a helpless shrug. "He said he didn't mind."

"Does it hurt?" Tiana was asking Seb.

"Yes," he said, "but sometimes you have to do things that hurt, because they help you get better."

"What does that number mean?" she asked, pointing to the readout.

"It shows how much sugar I have in my blood."

It also showed that the glucose tablets had caused hardly any increase at all. From the line to the YP Craft several yards away, JJ's aunt called to us and pointed. Their turn had come.

"Go on," I told JJ. "We'll wait for you guys here."

"No!" said Tiana. "I don't want to leave Zain!"

Seb opened his mouth to say he was fine and I should go too, no doubt, but JJ beat him to it. “Ti, baby-girl, your mama’s calling to you. You don’t want to keep her waiting, do you?”

She sighed, and then took his hand and walked away.

Seb brought one of his legs up onto the bench and hugged his knee to his chest, looking dejected. “You shouldn’t let me ruin your day,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, first, my day is *about* you, not them. Second, nothing is ruined. You just need to eat another few glucose tablets and these yummy processed-cheese-product and crackers I got you, and take it easy on the walking for a bit and you’ll be fine. And third...” I paused, realizing I didn’t actually have a third point. He saw that I didn’t and bit his lip to keep from smiling. Finally, I said, “Third, hush!”

In blatant violation of my order, he started to laugh.

Chapter Fifteen

Zain took me -- although I drove, it was definitely *him* taking *me* -- back to the hotel following lunch and our goodbyes to the Jacobsons. As we walked into our room, I started towards the bathroom, and from behind me, he said, "Leave the door open a crack, babe," and sent my heart into my throat. I had known this was coming, but knowing and being prepared are two different things.

I delayed as long as I could. He let me do it, which was kinder than he needed to be, and only made me more aware I was taking advantage of that kindness. When I had gathered enough willpower to go out and face him, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, stripped down to his boxers, with his forearms on his thighs and the afternoon sunshine hitting him from the side. Amazingly, my first thought was, *Dieux, il est magnifique*.

Then he smiled and unclasped his hands to beckon me over with a loose, easy gesture that brought the purpose behind his pose crashing back into my mind.

I stayed where I was and said, "I *would've* packed complex carbs if I'd known we were going to be walking around all morning."

"I mean, it's probably a good idea for you to do that regardless," he said, with unnecessary breeziness, "but that's not what this is about, and you know it. C'mere."

"So you wanted me to announce, right there in the parking lot, that I can't do something as simple as go for a walk because I didn't bring enough snacks with me?" I demanded.

It was an appalling thing to say, and I knew that while I was saying it. In truth, he would never make me reveal my vulnerabilities to complete strangers. When the Jacobsons had returned from touring the ship and started asking concerned questions, he'd told them I was fine and changed the subject so smoothly I doubt they noticed. Running interference for me is second nature to him. And yet, that horrible accusation flew out before I could stop myself. Tears gathered in my eyes, softening his outline.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That was completely unfair."

"I'd say 'irrational.' You're not in a very rational state of mind at the moment, so it's understandable," he said, and then, in an even gentler tone, he summoned me for the third time. "C'mere, *habibi*."

I couldn't ignore the command again. As I stepped within armslength, he stretched out a hand, hooked it into my waistband, and drew me between his knees. Our fingers tangled together at the button of my fly, until he reached around and brought his palm down sharply

on my upper leg. He never allows me to keep that last bit of control. I forced my hands to my sides and let him lower my jeans and underwear himself.

He grasped my elbow then, and I expected him to guide me across his knee, but instead, he turned me away from him. A moment later, I felt him pat my butt, like one of the warning taps he'll give me if we're around people. I frowned over my shoulder.

"Your skin is back to the normal color," he said. "Any soreness from yesterday?"

I have been spanked multiple times within twenty-four hours on a few occasions, but added together, they were probably less severe than the single spanking I'd gotten the day before. The hairbrush usually sets me straight for at least a week. In my opinion, that was all the more reason for him not to go easy on me. I felt like it would be cheating, somehow.

"It's fine," I said, and he gave me another, firmer pat. I couldn't conceal my wince.

"Yeah, sure it is," he said, with a roll of his eyes. "Okay, I'm starting a bit farther down this time. Over you go."

It took some adjusting before he was happy enough with my position to lock me in with his other leg. Then he tapped twice on my lower back, and I surrendered both hands to him without being asked.

Any ideas that he was going to give me less than I deserved flew out of my head at the first swat. He didn't have to use his full force to make an impression on the more sensitive tissue of my thighs, and he was in no hurry, either, laying each one down in a steady, measured pace, rather than his usual rapid-fire technique, because this was one of the rare times it tilted more towards a punishment than a means of getting me to let go. Both styles follow the same pattern, though, and they both end with me worn out and sobbing in his hold, overpowered by feelings of safeness and love.

He kept my hands behind me when he was done, gripping them with one of his while he rubbed his other palm in small circles over my back and murmured to me. I lost track of time until he let me up, but even then it was only to haul me into his lap and envelop me in an unyielding hug.

"Alright, babe?"

I nodded against his shoulder, still gulping and sniffing. Other than the fact that I couldn't sit comfortably at all now, I was good.

“So, what do you think?” he asked, like he was inquiring about the weather. “Maybe next time it’d be easier to just pull me aside and say ‘hey, Z, we need to stop somewhere for food, because I didn’t bring enough for this unexpected activity,’ huh?”

Put like that, it sounded as straightforward as I knew it was in reality, and yet it filled me with dread. I forced myself to speak. “I hate making you go out of your way to take care of me.”

His voice was laced with affection and humor as he said, “When have you ever made me do anything I didn’t want to do? It’s my choice to take care of you, *habibi*. My privilege.”

How does he know exactly what to say, and exactly the right way to say it, to quiet my most unreasonable fears? Doubtless, they would be back at some point, but for now I could let him cradle me.

After I finished what was now my third major crying jag of the weekend, he straightened my clothes and laid me on the bed, saying, “Stay put. I’ll go get a washcloth.”

I rolled onto my side to watch him walk and the way the slant of light from the window set his skin aglow. He rarely leaves me alone so soon after a spanking, although it was only a few seconds until he returned and stretched out beside me with the cloth. It was cool against my eyes and cheeks as he washed the tears away, and I tilted my head forward to give him better access to the back of my neck and ears, which he obligingly wiped down, too.

Then he dropped the cloth over my face with a wet *plop*. Huffing, I peeled it off and flung it at him.

“Hey, no throwing things, brat,” he chuckled, picking it up from the bedspread, where it had landed after sliding off his chest. He reached across me to put it on the nightstand and get the television remote. “Here, find something to watch.”

“I don’t want to,” I said.

“Okay, but if you let me choose, it’s going on Disney Channel. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“No, I mean...” I paused, and he looked at me with his eyebrows raised in a question. “Would you- would you pose for me?”

He grinned, slow and beautiful. “Of course, babe. It’s been way too long since I’ve had my portrait done. Go get your stuff.”

I found one of my larger sketchpads in my suitcase, and retrieved my pencils and an eraser from the messenger bag, and when I turned back around, he was sprawled out provocatively,

giving me a heavy-eyed look. With a toss of his head and a breathy voice, he said, "Draw me like one of your French girls."

He would probably refuse to give the eraser back if I lobbed it at him, so I just sighed and pointed to the edge of the bed. "Sit there, like... like you were before."

That got another quirked eyebrow, but he moved where I wanted him. I pushed the armchair away from the wall and adjusted it a few times to get the perfect angle. Then I curled up in it with my sketchpad propped against my knees and studied him.

"Lean back a few inches and turn your head that way," I said, pointing with my pencil. "No, a little more towards me. Yeah. And your hands like this." I demonstrated. "Good. Now try to hold still."

As models go, he's not the most professional. He can't resist contorting his face into silly expressions as I'm trying to capture it, and he usually wants to move two minutes into the most basic poses. Nonetheless, I have more portraits of him than any other person, drawn from life and from memory. On one level, I'm always aware that it is Zain I'm drawing. On another, he becomes nothing more than contours and shadows melting into the background, and I cease seeing him -- while, simultaneously, I perceive him more clearly than ever. This time, for instance, I noticed all the smallest changes to his body since the beginning of the summer. I wondered how many more I would catalogue when we next saw each other.

I became aware of his voice at some point, saying, "Baaa-aaabe?" in a singsong that meant he'd been trying to get my attention for awhile. Blinking, I came back into myself.

"Mmm?"

"I need to pee."

"You could just stand up, then," I said, rolling my eyes. "You don't have to sit there holding it."

"Yeah, but you looked so focused," he said. "Be right back."

The light I wanted had gone, anyway. I stretched out my joints, and was about to put the sketchbook away when he reappeared next to me.

"Can I see?" he asked. I showed the drawing to him, despite that it wasn't done yet. He studied it and then gave me a swift, bright kiss. "That school isn't going to know what hit it."

"I want to do another one," I confessed. "In ink."

"Okay," he said, without any hesitation or grumbling. "How do you want me?"

“You choose.”

I heard some rustling as I dug through my bag for a suitable pen, but I didn’t realize what it meant until I looked up again and felt my face go hot.

“Zain!”

He’d taken his boxers off, and was lounging even more pornographically than he’d started, doing something that would get an actual model banned from any figure drawing class.

“What?” he asked, innocently. “You said I could choose, and you have no idea how fucking sexy you are, staring at me so intently. Did you know you put the dog tags in your mouth and suck on them when you’re really concentrating? It was driving me *insane*.”

That explained the tooth marks on the rubber silencers. I’d thought I was biting them in my sleep. Still, I didn’t let him distract me. Lowering my voice, I said, “I am not going to draw you masturbating.”

He smirked. “Oh, I think you are, my boy.”

The hum of lust that had started the moment I’d seen him nude bloomed into a tingling ache, which shot downward from my navel, leaving me lightheaded. I swallowed on a suddenly dry mouth.

“Unless you want to safeword,” he added. “Do you?”

I really didn’t, I discovered.

Zain had stopped. “*Habibi?*”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Better draw quick, then,” he said. “I don’t know how long I can keep this pose up.”

The answer, it turned out, was five minutes, though not because of him. That was how long it took for me to give up on making anything other than scribbles on my paper and crawl into bed with him.

“We’re all so proud of you, Zainadu. You too, Sebby. The pair of you are doing amazing things with your lives,” my mom said from the phone. I could tell by her voice she was choking up. Zain looked like he might be a little, too.

Quinn's voice chimed in with, "Yeah, quit making the rest of us look bad!"

"Um, speak for yourself," said Keegan. "I'm rescuing endangered species *and* I'm married to a badass civil rights lawyer. I'm practically the female George Clooney over here. Just sayin'."

"Yeah, and my life's not too shabby either," Dax added.

Quinn sighed. "Fine. All of you quit making me, the corporate retail drone of the family, look bad."

"You, Quinn, are not a smoky fire. You are a good bonfire, burning bright," my father corrected, and there was an immediate chorus of, "What does that even *mean*, Dad?"

As he launched into an explanation, Zain whispered to me, "Do you think they'd notice if we hung up right now?"

I grinned. "Probably not for a few minutes. Let's do it and see how long it takes for them to call us back."

"I heard that!" my mom said, making Zain put his finger to his lips with a mock-sowl at me. "Although," she continued, "we all do have evening chores, so we'll say goodbye to you lads."

"Okay," Zain said. "Goodnight, Maeve. Love you!"

In the background, the others cut short their Buddhism discussion as they realized we were signing off and added their own goodbyes and well-wishes, which Zain returned one at a time, until finally everyone was done. It took awhile. I finished with, "Goodnight, John-Boy!" and disconnected the call before someone started another round.

"Well, that was fun!" Zain said. "What should we do now? We've got-" he glanced at the screen of the phone, still laying on the pillow between us "-a good three more hours before I have to be back tonight."

I knew exactly how much time we had left together, including the next day. Wishing there were more minutes until I said farewell to him wouldn't help anything, so I bit down on the words and simply shrugged.

He reached over and brushed my bangs away from my forehead, then trailed his fingertips lightly down my cheek and neck, to the chain of the dog tags. Pulling on it, he untucked them from my shirt and turned them over in his hand. "We do need to talk about these at some point."

“What about them?”

“We said it was for the summer,” he reminded me. “Which is almost over now. What did you think?”

I looked at the tags rather than him. “I... um...”

“Tell me, my boy.”

It was absurd how much that endearment helped me blurt out what I wanted to say. “I’d like to keep wearing them. They... I don’t know, they made me feel more connected to you, I guess.”

“Look at me,” he said, with two tugs on the chain. I met his eyes, and he studied me a moment before saying, “What’s your safeword?”

“Sycamore,” I said, with a little twitch at the corners of my lips. I think sometimes he does that more as a reassurance to himself that he’s not pushing me past my limits than as a reminder to me.

He smiled back. “And do you want to keep doing the rest of it, too? Not touching yourself except for twice-daily edges?”

I swallowed. I had assumed we’d go back to once a day.

Zain saw my hesitation and let go of the tags to cup my cheek. “Babe?”

“That could... get distracting,” I explained. “During school, I mean.”

“Hmm, good point,” he said. “How about twice on days you don’t have classes, and once on days you do? Doesn’t have to be in the morning, either, just whenever you feel is best.”

I thought about it. “Yeah, that would probably work.”

“And if you want to change anything at any time, you tell me,” he added.

“I will.”

“Good.” His hand slid around to the back of my neck and up into my hair, and then pulled me to him for a long kiss that ended with a bite to my lower lip and a grin. “While we’re talking about things continuing,” he said, so close I could feel the words, “I want you to keep coloring mandalas, too. You can take pictures and send them to me instead of mailing them now.”

It was such a classic Zain move, I should've seen it coming. He'd done the same thing only yesterday: distracting me and sneaking through all my lines of defense, and then, just when I'm fully disarmed, cheerfully suggesting I should maybe take a look around, realize I'm already conquered, and give him whatever he wants. I made a face. "You're lucky I don't throw a hairbrush at your head again."

He laughed. "You might want to remember how that ended last time, babe."

Ignoring that, I said, "I'm not going to have time to color one every day."

"How long does it take you to do a simpler one?" he asked.

"I don't know, twenty minutes, maybe," I said, with a tetchy shrug. "But you *are* going to have to accept that sometimes there's more important things to spend twenty minutes on."

"Says who?" he asked, pseudo-affronted. "I reject that premise completely. Other things are not more important than your health. Health first, and everything else is negotiable, remember?"

I sighed. 'Health first' is our only explicit rule, and his definition of 'health' stretches beyond all dictionary boundaries.

"If you really feel you don't have time to do it," he said, "let me know and we'll see what we can work out."

There wasn't much room to maneuver in that, but I knew it was the greatest concession I was going to get. "What about the meter logs?" I asked.

"That was a temporary measure. I don't think we'll need it when I can hear you and see you every day."

My sigh this time was born of relief. I had hated sending them to him more than anything. "Fine, I'll keep doing the mandalas, but I want you to keep doing the counseling sessions."

"Okay," he agreed. "Although I think seeing Platt make progress is helping more than they ever did."

"Still."

He brushed his lips against my jawline and echoed, "Still."

The next day, when he came to meet me, he was holding a cooler and a few plastic shopping bags. "I thought maybe we could find a spot to have a picnic, like we used to in Hawaii," he said.

We drove until we found a large park bordering one of the many rivers that empty into the Chesapeake Bay. A footpath ran around the perimeter, through clumps of woodlands and wide, green fields dotted with pavilions. There were other people here and there, but it wasn't crowded. He took my hand in his right and the cooler and shopping bags in his left, and led the way down the path towards the water.

"What happened in your meeting with your squad leader this morning?" I asked as we walked.

"Oh! Weirdest thing," he said. "So I go in and he asks if I have any questions for him, now that his time as my squad leader is drawing to a close, and I'm like, um, yeah, why aren't Platt and I both under investigation right now, and he just looks at me for a few seconds. Then he says before he took over the squad, he met with Platt in Tango Company. He didn't tell me much that happened in that meeting, only that by the end of it Platt had agreed to stay, and had also *requested* to keep rooming with me.

"I must've looked a bit shocked -- kinda like you're looking right now -- and he says, 'I believe Platt trusts you more than anyone else here, and with good reason. We, as your detailers, failed you both. Reporting you would not have served any justice. It would have been simply another failure of leadership.' Which is true, but I'm sure the administration would not see it that way, so he was taking a *huge* risk."

"You took that same risk," I pointed out.

He shook his head, unconcerned. "Nah, if I had been caught--"

"Caught doing what, Plebe?"

I jumped and looked over my shoulder.

"You been stealing socks again?" asked the Marine in civilian clothes who was sitting on the picnic table we'd just passed. I didn't recognize him, but Zain obviously did.

"*Klatsky*? What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were back in the sandbox."

"I got out months ago" he said, getting up from the table to come accept Zain's one-armed hug. "I'm a reservist now."

"No shit!"

“Yep, and an officer with Annapolis PD, so don’t even think about littering.”

“Ha, I couldn’t even if I wanted to, with him around,” Zain said, nodding at me. “This is Seb, my fiancé.”

“Oh, of course!” Klatsky said. “I knew you looked familiar. The number of times I caught him mooning over that battered old picture of you, I should’ve recognized you sooner.”

I let him shake my hand and then watched the two of them exchange phone numbers and promise to catch up when Zain had liberty sometime. As we walked away, I asked, “Someone from your deployment?”

“Yeah. And not that Klatsky would’ve said anything to anyone, but there’s a reminder it’s probably not a good idea to be talking about Myrick and everything in public. I forgot how much of a military town this is. We don’t want anything getting back to the Academy.”

We ate in a secluded grove, on a blanket he produced from one of the shopping bags and spread over the grass. I finished first, and then lay on my stomach, doodling in my sketchbook, while he started on a third sandwich.

He tilted his head to look at the paper as I filled it up with the trees surrounding us, and asked, “Which one would you climb?”

“That one,” I said immediately, pointing to a white oak with sturdy, evenly-spaced branches. “But I don’t want to climb right now.”

He grinned and stretched out next to me. “I must’ve done a good job, then.”

Even as I rolled my eyes, I couldn’t argue. I was feeling calmer than I had in weeks -- the kind of deep peace I knew would last after I left him, and perhaps after the lingering tenderness keeping me from lying on my back had faded.

The sun grew the shadows of the trees longer as we stayed there, and the wind made them dance over us, casting patterns of light that shifted too quickly for me to catch them on paper, no matter how much I tried.

Zain was being unusually quiet, and more than once I glanced at him thinking he’d fallen asleep, but he was simply watching me, his brown eyes full of their own twinkling luminosity. I felt a self-conscious flush each time, and saw him smile in response to it. Finally, I decided to take advantage of his restful mood and turned my pencil to his likeness, drawing his face again and again, in different angles and styles.

The golden afternoon seemed to expand to hold the enormity of my feeling for him, so it was an eternity later when he murmured, “*Habibi*, we should get going.”

Nodding, I collected my supplies and stood up to help him fold the blanket again.

I didn’t speak on the way back to the Academy. The words would’ve come out in French, anyway. The English language is so monstrously inadequate at times.

After the first night, we knew not to try making it through the rush of traffic to get onto the Yard. Instead, I parked on the street within sight of the gate. I got out to walk him to it, but when Zain joined me on the sidewalk, it was to back me up against the side of the car with a roguish grin.

“No rules about PDAs out here,” he said, before swooping in and capturing my mouth in a kiss that left me out of breath and blinking away tears. He lightly bumped our foreheads together, and then drew back and held up a shopping bag I hadn’t noticed before. “I got you something to remember me by.”

I wanted to comment on how needless that was, but English still wasn’t working right, so I simply took the bag from him and pulled out the piece of fabric inside.

“Unfold it,” he said, almost bouncing on his toes. I followed his direction, and found it was a navy blue t-shirt, with the words ‘Property of a Midshipman’ written in white across the chest.

I gave him a flat look. “You are not nearly as cute as you think you are.”

“Please,” he scoffed. “I’m adorable and you know it. Anyway, I wanted something more visible than these.” Reaching out, he wrapped the dog tags around his hand and pulled me forward into another, rougher, kiss. Then, still holding the chain taut between us, he said, “Now, tell me who you belong to.”

You can’t make me hard on a public street, you jerk! I thought at him, giddy, and he gave me a wicked smile that proved he could, in fact, do just that. Aloud, I said, “You,” and then defiantly shut my mouth.

He tightened his grip on the dog tags, and I had to clutch at the car behind me as my legs went pleasantly unsteady. “Sorry,” he said. “I don’t think I heard you right.”

“I belong to you, sir.”

"That's better." He ran his free hand down my arm to the shirt, leaving shivers everywhere. "So if I want you to wear this?" he asked with mischief and power both glowing in his eyes.

"I'll wear it, sir."

"Good boy," he praised, and then he let go of the chain and brought his hand to the back of my neck, rubbing away the faint marks where it had dug into my skin. I tipped my head forward with a soft moan of pleasure. "You okay, *habibi*?"

"Mm-hm."

"That might've been a little more intense than I meant it to be," he said, studying me ruefully. "I'm going to stay with you a few minutes. Here."

I let him pull me away from the car door enough to open it, and, under his guidance, sat down sideways on the passenger seat. When he took a water bottle from the cooler and handed it to me, I drank it without protest. He crouched in front of me, chattering about inane things in the way he does when I'm muddled up from a bad glucose level and just need his voice to ground me. Eventually, I started to pay attention to his words.

"How can I miss you already? You're right in front of me. Tomorrow, yep. Five minutes after I walk through those gates, of course, but *now*? That's just silly."

"Zain," I said through my laughter.

"Hush, *habibi*, I'm ruminating on your mysterious powers here."

"You have to go." The clock on the dashboard was showing he had only minutes to get back on the Yard.

"Yeah," he said. "You feeling less loopy, though?"

I nodded.

"Okay. Remember, the third scheduled call is Tuesday, and then I'll get my phone back full-time and my computer issued on Thursday."

"I know."

"Do a test before you drive anywhere."

"I will," I assured him "Go."

“Love you.”

“*Je t’aime.*”

And after one last, brief press of his lips to mine, he turned and walked away. I watched, still holding the t-shirt and water bottle, until he was out of sight, and then reached for my test kit in the back seat.

Chapter Sixteen

The atmosphere in Bancroft was bittersweet. It would be months before some of us saw our families again, and yet with the end of Plebe Summer just days away, there was a buzz of excitement in the air, too. I'm sure I'm not the only one who was looking forward to proving myself in Brigade Trials, the capstone experience of the summer.

Myrick announced the formal room inspections to the rest of the squad right after welcoming us back. The moment he dismissed us, we started preparing for them. Getting a room to Alpha Condition, even if it has only been occupied for six weeks and was maintained in Bravo Condition for most of that time, is not an easy task.

Platt greeted me with nothing more than a curt nod, and then set to work cleaning. I wanted to ask him how the rest of his weekend had gone -- from his quietness, I thought perhaps something unpleasant had happened with his mother or uncle -- yet I also didn't want to pry, so after surreptitiously scrutinizing him for visible injuries and finding none, I let him be.

About halfway through the process, he was scrubbing the deck in front of the sink, blocking the cupboard that held our cleaning supplies. I started to ask him to hand me the glass cleaner, but I only got as far as "Hey, could you-?" when he jumped and shied away from me like a skittish horse, knocking into the bulkhead.

"Fuck!"

Only then did I remember, with sickening detail, Belcher looming over him in almost the exact position I'd just been in. *Shit.*

"Sorry," I said, taking two steps backwards. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-- Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm fucking okay," he snapped at me. "What do you want?"

He wasn't trembling or breathing abnormally. In fact, he looked more angry than anything, though I knew with Platt, anger could be deceiving. Quietly, I said, "The glass cleaner." He opened the cupboard, grabbed the spray bottle, and stood up to hand it to me. I was careful not to initiate any contact with him as I took it. "Thanks."

After that, I kept a closer watch on him. He seemed to be back to his usual self almost immediately, but all of my instincts told me something was wrong, even if I couldn't see any sign of it. We'd roomed together for long enough that I had gotten fairly good at reading his moods.

Our inspections were finished shortly before taps. Platt said not two words to me in all that time. He ignored me throughout training the next day, too. I cursed myself. One awful mistake and we were back to the beginning, with the clock running out on my chances to fix things.

I had a counseling session scheduled for that night. If I hadn't promised Seb, I might've made an excuse to skip it so I could stay with Platt. My counselor noticed my distraction and asked me about it, and I ended up telling him what I'd done.

"I mean, how stupid was that? I was *there*, I should've realized--"

"Zain," he interrupted me. "A person with PTSD -- and I don't know that Platt has been diagnosed with that; he isn't my patient; but a person with PTSD can be triggered by things that would seem completely illogical to you or I. One of my patients years ago told me the sound of a shower curtain sliding open or closed gave them flashbacks to a car accident they'd been in. There's no way their roommate could've known that without being told it was happening. It wasn't the roommate's fault. And from how you've described Platt's behavior, it doesn't sound like he had a flashback or a panic attack. He was startled. That's all."

I took a deep breath. I knew he was right about the panic attack, at least. Seb's had them, so I was fairly confident I'd recognize one. "There's still something off," I said. "He wasn't acting this way a couple of days ago."

"Then it might not have anything to do with you," he replied. "I would suggest asking him if he'd like to talk. However, don't pressure him."

"Yeah, okay."

I returned to a room that was empty and *nearly* immaculate. We had hardly occupied it since the end of the inspections, so it should've still been in Alpha Condition. The small scrap of colorful paper on the deck by Platt's chair stuck out like a sore thumb. My stomach knotted. I knew what it was before I picked it up, though I couldn't quite believe it until I checked his trashcan and found the rest of the mandala, torn into uneven fragments.

When he came in a few minutes later, I was sitting at my desk, holding the piece that I had picked up and struggling against irritation. It wasn't as if he'd destroyed one of Seb's drawings, I told myself sternly. It was just a design printed from a website. But it was also something I had asked Seb to do for me, and then I'd given it to Platt as a gesture of friendship.

"Why would you do that?" I asked him, gently as I could, because I needed to understand before I reacted. "My fiancé spent at least an hour on this. If you didn't want it anymore, you could've just given it back."

He scoffed and turned away from me to open his closet. "Oh, like you care so much about your fiancé."

I pressed my lips together a moment, and then said, "I care about him more than anything -- and I do mean *anything* -- in the world, including my own life."

"You abuse him."

That ugly accusation took the breath right out of me. "*What?*"

"I saw you saying goodbye to him yesterday," he said. "You yanked on a necklace he was wearing and made him call you 'sir'. You're no better than Belcher."

I felt ill. The gulf between how I treat Seb and how Belcher had treated Platt was light years wide from my perspective, and yet if I looked back and thought about how he must've seen it, without the context...

"Don't have an excuse for that, do you?" he asked.

It was more that I couldn't figure out where to start in my explanation, but by the time I opened my mouth to say so, he'd taken his sleep clothes and disappeared into the passageway. I didn't go after him. I needed time to collect my thoughts.

He barely made it back before taps, and after turning off the light and shutting the door behind him, he climbed straight into his rack without a glance at me in my own.

"Platt," I said through the darkness, "you don't understand what you saw."

"Yeah, right. I *heard* you," he replied, with a poisonous tone. "You made him call you 'sir' and say he belongs to you."

"Well, he does belong to me, and I belong to him in the same way," I said. "Look, I'm not going to get into the private details of my relationship with you, particularly not without Seb's permission, but what you saw was consensual. Unlike what Belcher did to you. That is the difference, okay?"

"Whatever."

"Platt--"

“Just fuck off and leave me alone, you sick, twisted faggot. It’s bad enough that I have to share a room with you.”

This wasn’t getting us anywhere. It was like running full-tilt into a brick wall. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

I went through our last official training day on autopilot. Myrick took me aside after dinner and told me to get my head in the game, because the squad would need me during Trials.

If Myrick noticed, Seb would, too, and he’d be a lot more worried about it.

As I walked back to my room, trying to pull myself together for the phone call, I remembered I hadn’t talked to Nakamura yet about the salute he’d given me, so I could tell Seb. Knocking twice on his doorway, I poked my head in to find him and Rawlins tossing a Nerf football back and forth between their desks.

“What’s up, Dad?” he asked.

I glanced at Rawlins. “Mind if I ask you a personal question?”

Nakamura shrugged. “Sure.”

No one on my squad except Platt had any problems with me, and Nakamura had done it in front of two other plebes, so it couldn’t be that private, I reasoned. “When my fiancé and I were touring the Yard over the weekend, he said he saw you salute me. That true?”

He gave me a coy smile. “Well, just because I’m mostly into the ladies doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a fine-looking young gentleman from time to time.”

I imagined how Seb would react to being called ‘a fine-looking young gentleman’ and had to laugh. “Okay, fair enough.”

From behind me, I heard Platt say, “Freaks.”

Nakamura leaned back in his chair to see him. “Know who also liked the D sometimes?” he asked. “Marlon Brando and James Dean. If I’m a freak, I think I’m in good company.”

I laughed again and went to make my phone call.

When I recounted the conversation to Seb, I added, “He was on the football team *and* the chorus in high school. I should’ve guessed.”

He snorted. “I’m going to tell Keegan you’re stereotyping bisexuals.”

I gasped dramatically. “Tattletale!”

When he was done giggling, he asked, “How’s Platt?”

“Funny you should mention him...” I said. Like with our two previous calls, Platt had taken his phone into the passageway while I stayed in the room, but I was aware that I hadn’t heard him talking for a few minutes. Keeping my voice down, I explained what he had seen, and the conclusions he’d reached. When I was done, Seb was quiet for a long moment. “*Habibi*, you okay?” I asked. This couldn’t be easy for him, especially with his self-consciousness. I regretted ever starting that kind of play in public.

“Yeah,” he said. “Is... is he there now?”

“I think he’s still out in the passageway. Why?”

“Let me talk to him.”

I opened my mouth, closed it again, and frowned. “You sure, babe?”

“Yes. I just figured out what it was that was bugging me about him, but I need to talk to him before I tell you.”

Even then, I was hesitant. “Hang on.” I muted the phone and stepped into the hall, where Platt was sitting against the bulkhead between our doorway and Stevens’ and Sullivan’s, his own phone no where in sight. “My fiance wants to talk to you,” I said. He looked perplexed, but held up his hand. I shook my head. “Before I give it to you, I want your word that you aren’t going to say anything homophobic or otherwise cruel to him.”

A guilty expression crossed his face for a split second, and then he made the Scout Sign with his other hand. That was good enough for me. I handed my phone over and went back into the room.

Chapter Seventeen

"Hello?"

His voice was cautious, and it sounded younger than it had in person, reminding me that unlike Zain or myself, he was barely out of high school.

"Hi," I said. "It's, um, Bradley, right?"

"It's Platt," he returned. "What do you want?"

I didn't know what to say to that. I wanted for him to understand, and I wanted to confirm my hunch, and most of all I wanted to help Zain help this boy, but my only tools were words, and I work best in pictures. I was vaguely aware that the dog tags were clutched in my hand on top of my bedcovers, and I was rubbing over the metal with the tip of my thumb. The indented letters were too small to make out details, but I could recognize the feel of Zain's name.

"Just spit out whatever it is he told you to say."

"He didn't tell me anything," I said. "I asked to talk to you."

"So *talk*."

I wished Zain *had* given me some idea of what to say. Nearly everything I knew about Platt was secondhand, and he knew even less about me. He had no reason at all to trust me.

Then I realized I wasn't the one he needed to trust.

"Look, I'm basically a stranger to you," I said, "but you've been living with Zain for six weeks, so you *must* have some idea of what kind of guy he is. The goodness he has in his soul. There's no hiding it. Do you really think he'd abuse me? Or anyone, for that matter?"

"I saw the way he treated you," Platt said, stubbornly.

I closed my eyes to focus on finding the right way to explain. "It's not like that, though. It- what you saw? I enjoyed that. We were having fun, and it was... exciting. Do you... do you understand what I mean?"

He was silent for a long time, and when he spoke again, his voice was splintered and muffled. "I didn't. I didn't enjoy it. Even though... I thought I would."

Yeah. That was what I'd suspected.

“How could you enjoy that?” he asked.

Wiping a tear off my cheek, I said, “Because it’s different when there’s love and trust and respect. Please talk to Zain about it. I’m awful at this kind of thing. He’ll help you figure it out, okay?”

I heard him take a ragged, painful breath, and then he said, “The time’s almost up,” and there was nothing for a few seconds.

“Platt?”

“Babe, what just happened?”

It was Zain’s taking-charge voice, with an urgent edge to it.

“Where did Platt go?” I asked.

“He walked in, handed the phone to me, and left again, and there’s less than a minute until I have to end this call. Should I go after him? He looked like he was trying not to cry.”

“He’s a submissive,” I said, my tongue almost tripping over itself in my hurry. “When you were putting the beer bottles in my bag and you made that comment about me loving your sweat? He got the weirdest look on his face. I thought he would’ve been disgusted, so I couldn’t work it out until now. It was envy. I’m not sure if Belcher actually knew, but I think at least from Platt’s perspective, what happened wasn’t hazing, it was sexual abuse. I tried to convince him you weren’t doing the same thing to me. You have to talk to him. He needs to know the difference and how to find a good dom, or-”

He swore in Arabic. “Yeah. Of course. Fuck, why didn’t I see that before? I have to go, *habibi*. Thank you. That is a major help.”

I exhaled. It might not be enough, but at least now he wasn’t going in blind. “*Je t’aime*.”

“I love you, too. So much. Bye.”

Waiting two days to find out what happened was going to kill me.

Keegan pulled up in front of the house the next afternoon. I lugged myself and my messenger bag from the front portico into her passenger seat.

"Bonjour!" she sang. "Ready?" I nodded, buckling my seat belt as she shifted the car into reverse and backed out of the drive with a shout of *"Allons-y!"* She's too used to my quietness to allow it to dampen her exuberance.

Somewhere near Sausalito, we joined a small convoy of other vehicles from the rescue center and made our way further north, until the truck in the lead turned off onto an access road for a private beach.

"This is the release location we use most often," Keegan said, turning to follow. "It's not exactly a secret, but we don't want a lot of looky-loos hanging around here stressing out the animals, so keep it to yourself, yeah?"

"Mm-hm."

She parked the car beside a minivan and looked over at me. "We've got about a ten-minute walk down the beach. Want to do a test and eat first?"

"I'm fine," I said. The drop from a walk like that might even put me in my target range, if I was lucky.

We went slow, behind the group of people carrying what looked like a large plastic dog crate. Others, including Keegan, were toting pieces of plywood shaped into flat-bottomed shields and painted with the center's logo.

"I'd let you hold one of the guide boards when we open the crate, but I don't want you getting hurt if he does turn around, so stay back away, okay?" she said.

"Oui."

They set him down after we had gotten well out of sight of the road and cars. The people holding the guide boards lined up on either side of it, making a v-shaped channel towards the ocean. Except for a discussion among the group by the crate in voices too low for me to make out, everyone was hushed and waiting. Then one of the woman bent to unlatch the door. She held her other hand up, counting down from five, and on one, she let it open.

I saw a black nose first, followed by two small, black eyes set in a round head. He hesitated, and I stepped closer to Keegan's shoulder to get a better look.

"C'mon, Kojak," she muttered under her breath. "Don't be getting cold flippers on me now."

Two people by the crate lifted the back end of it, tilting it forward slightly, and suddenly he was racing down the sand to the open water in a burst of cream and russet fur. I caught a glimpse of the orange ID tag attached to his flipper as he passed us.

A cheer went up from everyone, including me, when he dived into the waves.

We watched him swim, with a startling kind of grace, until he was almost too far out to distinguish from the sea, and then we turned to walk to the cars.

Keegan didn't join in her co-workers' conversation on the way back. I put my arm around her waist and took the guide board from her with my other hand.

"I did warn you this would happen," she snuffled.

"Kee, this is a happy day, remember? You've been looking forward to it."

"It's just, I feel like a mama," she said. "You do the best you can to help them, and then you have to let them go and hope it's enough. Know what I mean?"

At that moment, I did have a fairly good idea.

"And they *never* call," she added, giggling weakly.

"He'll be alright," I said. "Someone will see his tag and report the number back to you in a year saying he's doing great."

"Yeah, one can only hope."

By the cars, we said goodbye to the others before heading home for my farewell party. I was leaving for school in the morning.

Chapter Eighteen

Seb's revelation hit like a smack upside my cranium with a two-by-four, and left me dazed like one, too. I had no time to recover, though. Platt had disappeared to god-only-knows where, or in what mental state.

I charged into the passageway, where Myrick was going from door to door, collecting phones. "Midshipman Mohyeldin," he said, sounding not at all surprised to see me.

Coming to attention, I said, "Yes, sir."

He walked over to me while marking something down on the clipboard he was carrying. Under his arm, he had a plastic bin full of phones, which he held out as he reached me. I dropped mine in with the others, and he drew a line through my name on the list fastened to the clipboard. Platt's was already crossed off, I saw.

"Sir-"

"He went towards the head," Myrick interrupted. "Make sure he doesn't get lost on the way back."

I nodded. "Aye aye, sir."

Part of me expected the restroom to be empty when I got there, and was already deciding the second most likely hiding spot, but I needn't have bothered. He was braced over the counter at the far end of the room, side-on to me, gazing down into the sink with his hands on either edge of it and water dripping off his hair and nose. It looked like he might've stuck his entire head under the spout.

"Platt?" I asked, from outside the doorway. His eyes flicked to me and back down. Cautiously, I stepped into the room. "Y'know, we've got our own shower, if you wanted to wash your hair. It has, like, shampoo and everything."

Not my best effort, but I was still trying to judge my approach. This time, he showed no sign of hearing me. I turned my back to the long mirror above the row of sinks and leaned against the countertop, keeping my body language relaxed and open.

"Okay," I said, "here's the deal. Seb asked me to talk to you about all this -- what it means, and how to do it, and, most importantly, how to find the right partner to do it with. And I agree, you do need to learn all that, as soon as possible, but I'd like to hear *you* talk first, and if you're not ready yet, I can wait. I'm a patient man. Well, Seb would say 'stubborn' or

‘obstinate,’ and he’d probably be right. The only thing is, Myrick did order me to escort you back, so.” I lifted one shoulder and gave him a whatta-ya-gonna-do look.

He glanced at me again, and then took an audible breath, tore a handful of paper towels out of the dispenser on the wall next to him, and dried himself off. When he was done, he wiped down the counter, too, before throwing the wad of wet paper into the trashcan.

I let him lead the way out.

We had an early lights-out that night, because Brigade Trials started at oh-dark-thirty the next morning. Despite knowing I needed the extra rest, I kept myself awake. I could hear Platt tossing and turning in his rack. The cover of darkness had helped him open up before. I hoped it would again.

Finally, near midnight, he said, “Might as well get put on SIQ tomorrow.”

I couldn’t imagine Myrick would allow any of us to be Sick In Quarters, even if Platt did manage to fake something well enough to fool a corpsman. All the plebes on duty restrictions because of injuries or illness were still going to watch Trials and cheer on their platoon. On top of that, isolation was the last thing he needed. Still, I responded with a simple, quiet, “Why?”

“I’ll hold the rest of you back. I’m weak.” It was the same detached tone he’d used the night he was drunk. I wondered if this was something his uncle had repeated over and over, too.

“Why do you think that?”

“The things I want...” He trailed off, before, fiercer, “Only a wimp would want someone to do those things to them.”

Casually, I said, “Did I ever mention to you that Seb has type one diabetes? Since he was seven, he’s had to test his blood sugar and give himself multiple shots of insulin, every single day. He also has to pay very close attention to what he eats, and when, along with physical activity levels, illness, stress, and about five dozen other things that can throw off his glucose. If it gets really messed up, he could wind up in the hospital, or dead, within hours. Beyond the immediate threats, he has to deal with the prospect of complications like heart attacks, kidney failure, amputations, and blindness -- and he’s an artist, remember, so losing his vision is one of the worst things he could imagine.

“Every *single* day, he wakes up, faces that, and fights not only to live, but to live the way he wants to: as normally as possible. Seb is not a wimp. And that’s not even the only way I can

see his strength, it's just the easiest to explain. He isn't weak, despite wanting the things he wants. Neither are you."

He was mute, and I hoped that was sinking in, but when he spoke again, he said, "I don't want them anymore. I don't want to ever feel that way again."

My heart broke for this kid. I tried to keep the emotion out of my voice, to keep it easy and without pressure. "Okay," I said. "It's completely up to you. If you decide to be vanilla for the rest of your life, it's fine. But you should know, when it's done right, it wouldn't feel the same as it did with Belcher. It would be different."

There was another long period of silence. Then he said, "I need to sleep for Trials."

Well, that was something, at least, I thought. *He's not thinking about skipping them anymore.* Aloud, I said, "Sweet dreams."

Brigade Trials are really just a test run for the much harder Sea Trials, which happen at the end of Plebe Year, but they aren't child's play. The day started with a more intense version of our usual morning PT, and then the real fun began.

Divided into platoons, we rotated through different stations that were designed to challenge us in new ways. My platoon got the pool phase at Lejeune Hall first, and, with most of our energy still, easily completed the required swimming tasks, as well as two jumps from the high-dive platforms.

From there, we ran across the Yard and over the footbridge to Hospital Point, where there was a five-hundred-pound log waiting for each squad. We had to carry them, as a team, while we did more PT. That was followed by a relay race with weapons and sandbags to collect and drop off at different points around the field, and then a ground combat course that set the squads against each other in a giant wrestling pit.

I was paired up with JJ, and we were so well-matched that everyone else finished first and gathered around us cheering and shouting advice. At last, I got my arm around his neck, and the detailer in charge of the station declared me the winner. JJ was indignant.

"I didn't tap out!" he said, still kneeling in the muddy grass.

"He had you in a chokehold," the detailer replied.

"But I wasn't going to tap out!" JJ insisted.

I rolled my eyes. “That’s the *problem*, jarhead. C’mon, get up. You’ll beat me next time, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I am going to take you to the woodshed next time,” he promised as he accepted my hand and climbed to his feet. I snorted with laughter, and he said, “What, you don’t think I could whip your ass?”

“No, I have no doubt that you could,” I said, swallowing down more sniggering. Luckily, we had to form up to move to the next station then, so he couldn’t ask me what was so funny about his wording.

There were more mentally-focused parts as well, testing our memory and the knowledge we’d gained over the summer. Those provided a small bit of rest between the grueling physical challenges. Through it all, Platt was quiet, yet he launched himself into everything with a ferocious tenacity. I gave him as much support and encouragement as any other member of my platoon, but otherwise kept my distance. I still wasn’t sure where we had left things the night before.

We reached the last station in the late afternoon, when our bodies and minds were both fried. The detailer in charge of it had us stand in rows in front of her and explained, “Your squad leader will put you into teams of two. Each team will decide between themselves which person will be the casualty. The casualty is unconscious, and therefore they cannot see, speak, or move on their own. They must rely on their teammate to get them to safety. I will call out changes to the situation, to which the teammate must respond appropriately in order to transport their casualty to safety on the other side of the field. When you’re done with the first round, you will switch teams and roles, and you will do it again. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” we shouted together.

“Squad leaders, assign your teams.”

Myrick moved among us, pointing to two people at a time and handing them a blindfold. “You have one minute to decide who will be the casualty and have them put this on,” he said. “Once it is on, the casualty cannot speak.”

He pointed to me, and then, naturally, to Platt.

“I’ll be the casualty,” I said, quickly, taking the blindfold.

Before I could put it on, Platt said, “No, I weigh less. I’ll do it.”

“You can still carry me easily,” I told him, which was true, but not the reason why I didn’t think it was a good idea for him to do it.

“Yeah,” he said, “but it’s less efficient that way. Give me the blindfold. I want to get it over with.”

Oh, I thought. *Of course*. If he was the casualty with me, he wouldn’t have to do it with someone else.

I passed him the blindfold and watched him put it on. “You okay?” I asked.

He nodded, with his chin jutting out and his shoulders hunched up.

Would it be worse for him if I told Myrick we weren’t participating? As I debated it, his fingers twitched by his sides, like Seb’s do when he’s trying not to cover his scars. An idea struck me. “I’m going to take your hand a minute, alright?”

Another tense nod.

“This is a signal Seb and I use sometimes,” I told him. Gently, I squeezed his hand twice. “Now, you squeeze back. Twice for ‘everything’s good,’ once for ‘something’s wrong, we need to stop.’ Got it?”

His hand was slack in mine for a second, and then his shoulders loosened up fractionally, and he squeezed twice.

“Excellent,” I said. “You’re doing just fine.”

Behind me, the detailer bellowed, “Listen up! I want all the teams on this line with three feet of space between them. Casualties can walk with their teammate’s guidance, but once you are on the line, the casualty will lie flat on their back, perpendicular to it, and will not move until instructed otherwise. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” we shouted, with half as many voices as before. Turning back to Platt, I said, “Okay, it’s on our seven, ten feet away. I’m going to guide you by the elbow, alright?”

He nodded again.

Around us, the other teams were moving into position as well. Sullivan had both her hands on Koch’s shoulders, steering him towards the line on my left, and on my right, Diaz had already picked up Gambini and was carrying him to it. When every casualty was lying down, the detailer said, “On ‘go,’ pick up your casualty and begin to run towards safety. Three... two... one... go!”

I lifted Platt from under his arms first, to get him more upright, and then transferred him to a fireman's carry, hooking my arm behind his knee and gripping his opposite hand with my own, and we were off. As I ran, I squeezed his hand twice, and he returned the signal right away. I wished I had the breath to tell him he was doing good.

The changes to the situation they had mentioned were mostly imagined obstacles that required different one-man carrying techniques, but when we reached the far side of the field, there was another curveball, in the form of a web of rope spread out on the grass, dividing it into square sections.

"Line up in front of the web!" the detailer ordered. "Casualties, you are now regaining consciousness. You can speak and move on your own. However, the blow to the back of your head has left you temporarily blind. You will keep your blindfold on. In front of you is a minefield. Only one person can traverse it at a time. The sighted teammate will go first. We will notify them when they have stepped in a square that contains a mine and have to return to the start. Once they have made it to the other side, they will guide their casualty, by voice, through the same safe path they just discovered. The layout of the field changes for each team. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Rawlins went first. We watched in silence, until he tentatively put his foot in a wrong square. All of the detailers shouted "BOOM!", making him jolt sideways and the rest of us crack up. Laughing too, he went back to square one.

Some of the teams took several tries on both the sighted partner and the casualty to make it through, whether from faulty memories or miscommunication. After the casualties had stepped on a wrong square once, they hesitated to follow their teammates' orders. At my turn, I was determined I would not allow that to happen with Platt. I found a path that crossed the field from corner to corner in a jagged line, and then stood on the other side and called to him, with as much confidence as I could project in my voice, "Okay, one trip for you. We can do this, yeah?"

"Yeah," he agreed, as Myrick positioned him on the first square.

"Good. Take a small step to your left."

He obeyed without question, and I felt like singing hallelujah. Carefully, one square at a time, I talked him over to me, and when he stepped out of the web, the entire platoon cheered.

"You can take the blindfold off now," I said. He did, blinking against the sunlight.

"Good job," said Myrick. "Stevens and Nakamura, you're up next."

As we went back to rejoin the rest of the squad and watch them, I could've sworn I heard him whisper, "Thanks."

Trials concluded at a mess night in our summer whites uniforms, with speeches by the Commandant, detailers, and alumni, and then, finally, we collapsed into our racks and slept like the dead.

The next morning was taken up with administrative stuff: getting our class schedules and textbooks, and, most importantly for me, our computers issued. We also moved into our rooms for the academic year, and this time, everyone had a new roommate. I found out mine was JJ when I walked in with my bag of gear and he sprang out from behind the door, grabbed me in a chokehold, and said, "Rematch! Right here, right now!"

I tapped out against the bulkhead.

"What? You can't do that," he said, chuckling and letting me go nonetheless. "I didn't do that."

"Yeah, well, I have more sense than you," I said. "Anyway, we can do the rematch this weekend, once-- wait a second." I dove back into the passageway. "Platt!"

He stopped and frowned over his shoulder at me.

"C'mere," I said. "I lost track of you somewhere earlier. Wanted to say it's been fun rooming with you." I held out my hand.

For an endless moment, he just looked at it.

"I promise I don't have cooties," I said, which made him scowl, but he walked over and gave me a brief handshake. "Do you know who your new roommate is?"

"Nakamura," he said, quietly.

I quirked my eyebrow and grinned. "Uh-oh. You going to request another one, or is it just the full-on Kinsey sixes that God hates?"

"God doesn't hate anyone," he corrected me. Then, looking down at his shoes and speaking even more softly, he added, "And I'm glad you were my roommate."

In the time it took me to pick my jaw up off the floor, he was walking away. I watched him go, and noticed his uniform pants were looking a bit short on him. Either they had given him the wrong size, or he had grown.

Epilogue

My parents insisted on seeing me off to college. Truthfully, I didn't mind the support. It would be the first time in my life I wasn't living with either them or Zain. Instead, I had four roommates crammed into a tiny suite-style dorm. If I hadn't been assigned the one single bedroom, I would've chosen one of my backup schools. Cooper Union was not worth having a stranger constantly in my space.

I was lying on my freshly-made bed after Mom and Dad left, missing them and my siblings a lot more than I'd expected, and my phone buzzed with an incoming text.

Hey, babe. Got your computer set up yet?

My heart skipped a beat.

Two minutes, I sent back, and grabbed my laptop out of my bag.

In two minutes and ten seconds, his face was filling the screen. I hoped the tears in my eyes weren't visible over Skype.

"Habibi!" he exclaimed. "There you are! Y'know, Keegan was right, this does raise some *interesting* possibilities."

"Zain!" I admonished.

"What?" he asked, grinning. "I was merely commenting on all the fine technological advances we enjoy, and I'm alone here, anyway."

Rolling my eyes, I gave up on getting him to behave appropriately and moved on to more pressing things. "What happened with Platt?"

He told me all of it, from finding him in the bathroom and their midnight talk, to the trust exercise, and finally, Platt's quiet admission earlier that day. "So, overall," he said, "I think we're moving in the right direction. It's going to take a lot of time, though."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Do you think he'll ever learn to be happy with himself?"

"Well, I'm not giving up on him."

I knew he wouldn't, ever. It's one of the categorical truths about Zain, filed away in my heart next to things like the shades of brown in his eyes: when he's with you, he's with you to the end. I hoped maybe Platt was beginning to know that, too.

We talked for as long as he could. I told him about releasing Kojak and my farewell dinner, and he let me go with a gentle suggestion that I should take a walk around the neighborhood or something instead of staying in my room all night.

“Don’t they have that mini Arc de Triomphe right by there?” he asked. “Why don’t you go see that?”

I snorted. “I’m pretty sure it’s not a miniature of the arch in Paris,” I said. “This isn’t Las Vegas.”

“Eh, whatever. Go draw me a picture of it.”

So I went. The park was full of people -- a good portion of them around my age, but there were also kids, dogwalkers, elderly couples, street performers... It would be a great place to draw portraits.

One of the street performers was playing to a small crowd right in front of the arch. He looked to be in his late twenties, or maybe early thirties, with messy auburn hair, a stubbly beard, and a guitar hanging from his shoulders. As I sat down on one of the low concrete benches and took out my sketchbook, he was saying, “This next song is a little outside of my usual set list, because I learned it especially for all you new college kids who have just made your first big move.”

I stopped and looked up. The song sounded familiar, though it wasn’t until he started to sing the lyrics that I realized it was by one of Zain’s favorite artists.

*“Walking through a crowd, the Village is aglow,
Kaleidoscope of loud heartbeats under coats,
Everybody here wanted something more,
Searching for a sound we hadn’t heard before,
And it said welcome to New York,
It’s been waiting for you,
Welcome to New York,
Welcome to New York”*

The End