

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SEVENTEEN

Thalia studied the police station, looking like it had fallen out of some old-timey movie. An antiquated two-story building, there was not a chance it had not been updated since it was built. All red brick, arched windows, and an iconic bell tower lording over the roof. She'd never been taken downtown before. Hell, she had never been arrested before. Now, here she was, waiting to be dragged in with the rest of the street urchins.

Weighing the trajectory of her life, as one does in the back of a police car, she figured she may as well get used to this, what was she really doing with her future anyway. Sighing heavily as they slowly rolled to a complete stop.

"We're here. I'll let you out, don't worry." The small pasty policeman smiled genuinely in the rearview mirror. Thalia didn't respond, she only glanced out the window, taking in the up-lit building. Wearily eyeing large manicured bushes standing at attention on either side of a long, wide, cement path leading from the car to a set of glass doors overseeing arrivals.

The door to her right swung open. "Oh, thank god. We made it," she bit out dryly, rolling her eyes. She had obviously absorbed some of Hana's self-sabotaging ire along the way.

The cop stared pointedly, "At least you're not in cuffs. Now, let's get inside. We need to breathalyze you. If your mom continues not answering or does not show, we can release you when your BAC is below .08," he rattled, the acronym escaping her but the sentiment sticking, much like the door closing behind her. "I'm not throwing you in a cell or anything, no need to panic. We'll just have you sit in the lobby until we can verify you've sobered up," he chimed as he turned back to ensure she was following his lead, before his direct march toward the doors.

Thalia looked on irritably, finding it impossible to hold back the heat, wondering where her backbone was coming from, "You didn't even test us the first time! How do you know it's not already .08?" Thalia tried to throw reason at the nonsensical situation to no avail. "We told you we waited long enough so we would be fine to leave."

Her response smooth and instantaneous, surprising herself with the sharp logic. He motioned her forward, like she hadn't even said anything.

"Look, you're lucky this is the extent of inconvenience to your night. After all the laws and lines you crossed today, I'd suggest you be quiet and just go with it. We'll test you in about 30 mins. Until then," he finished as they approached the door, pulling it open for her, "I'd suggest getting comfortable, reign in that attitude, and show some gratitude. In a few more days you won't be considered a minor in the eyes of the law, missy. Now go sit over there." He pointed to a dingy brown plastic chair stuck to a beige wall, shrouded by a tall desk.

He walked past the front of the desk having a quiet exchange with the processing officer posted there, while a few security guards stood stationary by various doors around the lobby, too bright, too brown, too cold. The room was big enough to hold at least 60

people at once, which had Thalia wondering who was doing what, in such large numbers, in this town - first and foremost.

The floor was a speckled scuffed mess, all the mismatched chairs looking like someone had found a 'going out of business' furniture sale. A few of the chairs just looking like they had one more good sit in them before they were going to collapse.

Thalia realized the bare walls were actually supposed to be white, who knew the last time someone wiped them down. To top off the weird wasteland where furniture and hope went to die, a wall of opaque windows sat at the front of the room, by the doors, letting only light in, the frosted stickers blocking views both in and out of the station.

Thalia lifted off the seat, head peaking around the tall wooden desk just in time to see a metal door swinging open. Catching a glimpse of the large backroom filled with rows of metal bars, the door closing as quickly as it opened. She hadn't been able to count how many cells she saw, but it was enough to raise her eyebrows and push her back to the seat, thankful to be out in the lobby, waiting for her mom or her test, whichever came first. The test would come first.

Searching for more distractions she stared down at the sandy white shorts she'd had time to put on along with her baggy black t-shirt, while they had waited for Hana's parents. However, she still felt off-kilter with her wavy damp hair, wearing beach clothes, and having exposed flip-flop toes. Wishing she had a hoodie or sweater to shield her from the ever blasting coldness billowing out of a noisy AC unit on the opposite side of the room, vents angled violently in her direction.

She cradled her backpack in her lap, resting her chin on her hand obsessively tapping her phone screen, checking for any notifications, there were none. She was kind of shocked the officer hadn't taken it away and that he was being so cool in general. Time was passing too slowly waiting for Kay to reach out, so to occupy herself she decided to play some sudoku, pulling out a small booklet that was always conveniently tucked in a hidden pocket of her bag along with a pen.

Blocking out the few vandals and miscreants that were being pulled in and out of the waiting room, she focused on the game. As she stared at the boxes void of numbers, tiny specks on the floor kept pulling her attention away. Her focus drifting to count them over and over, per square, until she remembered the book of numbers in her hand. The champagne must still be champagne-ing, she thought to herself. The cycle continuing for another 50 minutes under buzzing, flickering, fluorescent lights.

Checking the time on the round clock clinging to the dusty wall above the windows, she periodically wondered if she had either been forgotten or they'd changed their minds and were instead making space for her in the metal cages behind the door. Panic starting to set in, she stopped counting, stopped playing sudoku, and started taking in her surroundings.

No one had come in or out in some time she noted. *Must be a slow night*, she thought to herself, sitting up rigidly, adding a slight arch to her back attempting to see over the counter. She stretched and stretched finally able to see a short crop of dirty blonde hair sitting behind a monitor.

The body-less head whipped towards her, a young muscular male officer locked on her with piercing blue eyes, catching her in the awkward position. His eyes rounded in surprise.

The officer jumped from his chair, "Oh, dang!" He shouted, obviously flustered. "Miss! Can you step over here, please," he drawled in the sweetest southern accent, rushing her around to the side desk. "I totally forgot I was supposed to give you that breathalyzer like 20 minutes ago!" He exclaimed pulling a small black box from the drawer as she walked around to meet him. "I'm new. Got caught up on paper work, my apologies." His manners impeccable, his smile melting, his eyes weaponry. The young officer smiled.

"No worries," she offered, brushing off the explanation. A magical newfound cool and calm eased any reservations she may have usually had talking to guys. "All of you all are like, really kind. That isn't the usual sentiment when one thinks of police. This station seems like an exception," she said smoothly to the guy, who couldn't be more than a few years older than she was herself.

His soft pink lips tilted up in a half smile, gorgeous, pearly white teeth showed behind the cocky grin and square jaw. Once she got past the horrible high-and-tight he was rocking, she realized how classically handsome he was. While thankful she wasn't under arrest, in this moment as she looked him up and down, while he fiddled with the disposable mouth piece, she would not have minded if he was the arresting officer. Her eyebrow cocking at the thought, chastising herself internally, *Jesus Christ, Thalia*. With a micro shake she knocked the thoughts out of her head, inheriting the inability to keep her thoughts and emotions off her face, from Hana, years ago.

"Ahh, we're not a bad lot, if you're not breaking the law that is," his crystal blue eyes under thick blonde lashes and straight brows locking on her pointedly. "Have you been breaking the law?" He pressed in a deep voice as he pushed the contraption towards her mouth. Thalia was 100 percent confident her rosy cheeks were an even brighter shade of pink at his suggestive tone. No amount of sun would tan her opalescent skin enough to blot out her flushing.

She was not used to boys addressing her, let alone flirting with her. They usually ignored her for Hana or simply ignored her all together. He was flirting with her, right? She questioned herself.

"I, umm. Not really. I plead the fifth. Shouldn't I have a lawyer present or something when answering questions?" A nervous giggle escaping her, her head dropping instantly. Embarrassed by her own absurdity.

She looked back to him filled with shame; his stare locked on her, unmoving. As she held his stare, unsure what was happening, his half smile broke all the way open, accentuating his perfect angular cheek bones.

"Put your lips around it and blow, miss," he demanded, looking down then quickly back to her.

His demand catching in her stomach, causing a whole different kind of panic. Thalia blinked rapidly, "I uhh, put, what where?" She glanced around awkwardly.

He leaned further over the low counter pushing the small black square towards her again. "The breathalyzer," he wiggled the device in between their faces. "Plastic tip here," he said tapping the hollow protruding cylinder. "Place it in your mouth and blow for five seconds. Let's see if we can get you out of here or not."

He winked, a bit casual for a policeman, she thought. Realizing how insane she was being, she quickly placed her mouth around the tube, blew, holding his fiery stare as

a short strand of her dark hair fell across her eyes. Making damn sure to not puff out her cheeks and very sure to arch her eyebrow at him in the process.

She hadn't ever flirted with anyone before, but she felt confident she was doing it right. She'd seen enough movies. Maybe it was the liquid courage or the really good day, or maybe she was just finally feeling good about herself, gaining some self-esteem. Either way, this man was extremely attractive, she was about to get out of this decrepit lobby, and this ridiculous incident would be behind her, ending on a super strange sort of high note. It was a good day.

She pulled her head back from the machine, wiping a drop of spit from her soft lip eyeing the officer. "Did I pass, Officer?" She asked a bit too flirty, wondering if she was pushing it too far.

To her relief he laughed, "Yeah, yeah you passed. You can get your bag and head on out. Do you have a way to get home?" He asked, discarding the mouthpiece in the trash.

For a split second she thought he was asking her if she wanted a ride. Taking another beat to process that she needed to get the fuck out of here, and the police didn't want to just let an underage kid wander the streets aimlessly, "Oh, yeah," she nodded. "I have a way home, thanks for the," flustered she wagged a finger at the box, "the reading or whatever." She finished turning to grab her bag and get gone.

"Hey!" He called out behind her, she turned back to the desk catching his look, just as the doors behind her burst open letting in warm night air. The raucous garbles of belligerence and a foul unwashed gutter smell assaulted the room. A commotion raging towards her, she caught an elbow in the side, knocking her back to the chair just as she was turning to see what was going on.

"The fuh," she burst out, no one listening or caring. Everyone focused on the loud group.

Two officers were pulling up a very dirty, very scattered, very urine and booze drenched man between them.

"We got our favorite resident in for the night, Adams," one of the cops shouted at the officer behind the desk. "Hey, hey! Stand up. STAND UP!" The same officer shouted, pulling the gummy man to his feet with his partners assist.

"I need you to hold your own for a second. Just hang on to this desk," the officer to the derelicts right demanded gently, placing the man's hands on top of the waist high counter Thalia had been backing away from a moment before this madness.

The vagabond seemed to understand, anchoring himself to the desk, swaying precariously through the storm of booze crashing through him. Thalia's attention snagging momentarily, taking in their hurried chatter about what their plan was, before she found her way to eye the man in tattered jeans, crusted Rebooks, and a very dirty grey t-shirt that had more holes in it than Swiss cheese.

He was swaying from left to right, a head full of matted brown hair sort of tied up into a wrecked bun, his body dipping sideways dangerously close to her.

"Careful man," she said through clenched teeth, holding her hands out in front of her in case she needed to catch him as she tried to discreetly shimmy away. She pulled herself out of the chair poised to shuffle left when he fell straight into her hands throwing her back. Thalia gagged at the stench permeating from him, pulling her head as far away as possible.

"Oh my God," she balked, the blonde officer, Adams, running from behind the desk.

"Hey, hey! I need some help over here!" He shouted over his shoulder at the officers who had brought the man in, who seemed to be taking their sweet time chit-chatting. Thalia pushed the man off her in tandem with Adam's pulling him up. A zing ran through her palms all the way to her toes, something electric almost.

Thalia looked from her hands to the glazed eyes of the man as she stumbled sideways. Thalia froze. Taking a closer look at the scruffy, dirty face, and rich brownie batter eyes she couldn't forget if her life depended on it.

"Leo?" The name a whisper escaping her. His glassy eyes unable to focus searched her, unseeing. "Leo!" She shouted again, more loudly, more stern. Adam's pulling Leo up by his arms, holding him in place.

"You're not Leo," he slurred. "I'm me. Me. I'm Leo! Who's asking?" He hiccuped and sputtered, gurgling incomprehensibly, barely coherent, legs giving out a bit as one of the officers finally showed up to help Adams.

"You know this man?" One officer asked, more than noticeably shocked.

"I, uh, I..." she gazed in disbelief, her voice fading. Thalia didn't know what to say, every ounce of elation she had just been feeling, the clouds she had been walking on, had dissipated. Dropping her distinctly back to Earth and her bitter reality.

How in the Hell was her dad here? In town. In front of her at this very second? How did he get here? Had he always been here? Had Kay been right? He really just didn't want to be with them, with Thalia? He preferred this life to whatever he would've had with them? The questions hitting her hard as hail. World shattering, heart shattering all over again. She felt like she was back to three years old; small, powerless, clueless.

Pulling out of the tilt-awhirl in her mind she worked out, "I'm not sure. I just thought. He looks like someone I used to know, named Leo. Kind of hard to tell with all the," she gestured to the mess of a covered in dirt and mystery liquid. "I just thought he looked familiar." Unable to bring herself to say, *he's my dad*.

She started backing away, feeling for her bag that had fallen with the initial hit. "I AM Leo! Me, it's me!" Leo shouted through broken rotting teeth and splotchy mustache.

"Yes. You are the resident drunk. Now, come with us, so you can sleep it off. You're here early tonight," a second officer said casually as he moved Adams out of the way, taking up his place at Leo's side once more.

"I know you!" Leo shouted again, wobbling. In an instant his head stilled, eyes flew into focus the glassiness clearing away, his shredded voice sobering, "I know you, Thalia."

The whole world fell out from under her and went silent. Time stopped, people froze, everything fading away. Tunnel vision connecting her and Leo for a singular warped minute.

"I know you. I've always known you," Leo sputtered. "Since the day you ripped into my world. I didn't want to go, we had no choice! I tried to get back. I've tried to get back a thousand times. I will never be able to explain, to show you. I am so, so sorry for everything. You *never* deserved any of this! We should have done more, should have done better. Should have been smarter."

Leo continued to gush low and frantic, "I have never loved anything more than I love you all, nor will I ever again. I love you more than all the salt in the seas, baby girl," he managed to get out, just before his eyes rolled back and his head followed. As quickly

as it had come, it went. Time surged forward ferociously. Leo's speech turning incoherent once more.

"Alright alright, let's go bud. Sorry about that miss, didn't mean to let him get out of hand," the nameless, faceless officer said to Thalia, as she stood completely frozen, watching Leo being ushered away.

She couldn't have identified a single detail about the officers, all she registered were moving blobs in dark blue. Tears threatening to spill out of her eyes, "More than all the stars in the sky," she whispered, completing Leo's catch phrase, trapping air behind the ball in her throat.

She rushed out of the station not waiting for the blond officer, Adams, to speak to her again. She needed space, fresh air, open skies, she needed to move. She ran, in her shitty flip flops, the ten blocks towards her house, under star strewn skies, sobbing the entire time. It was only about a twenty minute walk to her house and she needed those blocks to process and then some. So, she took a convoluted scenic route, twisting and turning needlessly. She didn't attempt another call to Kay, what was the point.

An hour later she reached the bottom of the hill, standing in front of her house. She took in the lights glowing from the lounge, Kays' car parked in the gravel drive. Thalia rolled her eyes, wiped the tears from her cheeks and walked toward the house.