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“LET’S BEGIN WITH YOUR DEATH.”

“Last night?”

Dr. Grady nods as my fingers curl into a fist. I take a deep breath and force them to relax.

“Okay,” I begin hesitantly. “Last night.”

My mind goes back to the memory, and I rub my palms against my knees, unsure of just how much I want to share.

“Take your time,” she says quietly.

I do take my time, reliving every horrible moment of last night’s dream. The point of the arrow tore through me in a searing burst, but rather than feel my chest explode, it was more like an implosion. The air sucked in through my split and bloodied lips, and the burning, oh God, the burning, pulling into the hole in my chest before it sharpened into cold that became a slow, spreading ache. My body went numb as my sluggish mind tried to grapple with the all-encompassing truth that I was dying. My rapid, shallow breaths lifted and lowered my abdomen and I wondered how many more breaths I had until it was over. I wondered if I was only imagining my hand moving and I was already gone. They say your brain can live for minutes after your heart stops beating.

“The arrow hit me here.” I point at the center of my chest and give her the condensed version of my dream. “And I knew I was dying.”

“Were any of your family with you?”

I shake my head and my fingers trace the exact spot where the arrow penetrated. I can still feel the dull, lingering ache of it.

“Was there anything else?”

Someone nearby was crying, the sound raw and ugly, like an animal—something between a shriek and a moan. Then the horrible sound turned into a low gurgle, and I realized it was coming from me. I was choking on my own blood. I held my breath to make it stop, but the noise echoed and echoed until my foggy brain understood that I wasn't alone.

"There were other people," I go on. Their faces are a murky tease of a memory now. "Some of them were screaming. Some were trying to talk to me, I think. I don't remember what they said." I pull in a shaky breath. "We all died."

Every single time I die, it feels real.

Dozens—maybe hundreds? I don't know how many deaths I've experienced, there have been so many now. The night terrors have been life-long and have now escalated to the point where they've become my nightly personal hell. So here I sit, trying to sift through nightmares and reality with my new personal therapist.

"Is there usually this much detail?" Dr. Grady asks. "When you dream like this?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Maybe." I shrug helplessly. "I mean—that's the problem. I don't usually remember my night terrors. But lately, I have been. More and more every night."

She clicks her ballpoint pen and writes something in her notebook.

"Lately, as in 'since your father died and you were brought to the island?'"

I give her another shaky nod. "Yeah."

"To live with your mother?" She clicks the pen again.

I nod. We stare at each other for a moment, like she's expecting me to say more about that, but I don't want to.

"Do you think that's related?" she asks.

Of course, she's not going to let me off that easy. She's a therapist. She's here to get inside my head. That's why my mother made me come to this appointment.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. "It's a big change. I mean—a lot is different now."

Dr. Grady gives me what I call *the terribly sympathetic but encouraging smile*. That's what adults do when they know you lost your dad and your whole damn life, but they want you to be okay eventually. The sooner the better, too. She must notice me noticing because she clicks her pen again and writes another note.

"We're not going to get into that just now," she says, finishing her scribbling. "Let's go back to the night terrors. Your mother tells me they started when you were a child?"

"Yeah. Since I was two, I think." There's a fray in the fabric of the couch I'm sitting on, and my fingers fidget with it, pushing the edge back and forth. "I had them a lot when I was little, but I grew out of

them, mostly. I still get them, but I'll go months without any and then get a couple of weeks of them in a row."

"That's quite normal for night terrors," she assures me. "And if it's any consolation, early-onset night terrors are usually the mark of a very bright child."

"No, it's not really any consolation."

She waves her hand. "Back to last night. What happened when you woke up?"

I rub my chest again. "I just laid there in my bed and couldn't move for a while. That usually happens."

Dr. Grady taps her pen on her chin. "Sleep paralysis," she says, making a notation. "That can go hand-in-hand with this kind of intense dreaming. A stress trigger can bring on clusters of these sorts of dreams if you're susceptible to them. I know it's frightening for you at the time, but it's just your subconscious telling you it doesn't like where you're at."

That's obvious, I think. But I say, "I guess."

"Having to move, losing your parent, it's a lot for anyone to live through," she tells me. "You need to give yourself permission to grieve—and not just for your father, but for your way of life before now. No one expects you to be okay with any of this, J.J., especially your mother. But she loves you and she grieves along with you."

My head snaps up from where I was watching my finger play with the upholstery on the couch. "I'm supposed to believe that she grieves for my father?"

I probably shouldn't spout off this way because she's a therapist and she'll read all kinds of stuff into it, but I have to say something about this.

"Like I said, it's okay to be angry—" she begins.

"My *mother*?" I spit the word like it's a curse word. "My mother walked out on us to be with the man she was having an affair with. Before I came here, I'd seen her twice in the last five years. If she didn't have to pay child support, she wouldn't have contacted my father ever again."

"You don't know that. And none of that means she doesn't have feelings about him, or you," she assures me. "Guilt can be a powerful thing, especially if you're trying to pretend it isn't there."

"It isn't there."

Dr. Grady gives me the sympathetic, stupid, encouraging smile again. "Regardless of her feelings for your father—or lack thereof," she amends, putting up a hand as she sees me start to protest. "Her feelings for you are very real. And she grieves the fact that you grieve. She knows how close you and your father were. You may not see it now, but you and your mother need each other. You're more alike than you think."

“I’m nothing like her.” I snap, ripping at the stupid fray until it becomes a full-on hole in the couch. Good. I feel like destroying something.

“I’m only saying that maybe her fiery red-headed temper is in your shared DNA.” She glances disapprovingly at the anger chasm I ripped into her couch. “You were only twelve when your parents divorced and I’m sure they shielded you from a lot of the conflict that went on between them. Your mother dealt with the aftermath by distancing herself—which she may regret now.”

I answer her with raised brows, tight lips, and a blank stare. She obviously doesn’t know my mother well. There is no ‘red-headed temper’ in her share of our DNA. My mother is cool to the point of emotionless. At least, with me, anyway.

“J.J.—”

“I thought you said we weren’t talking about this stuff. Just the dreams.” I cross my arms and glare at her. This was a stupid idea. It’s not like she can cure night terrors. I’ve had them practically my whole damn life.

“If we’re going to get to the root of what’s triggering these dreams, we need to put them into perspective with everything that’s affecting you. But I think we’ve talked ourselves into a corner on this subject for now.” She scratches out a few more notes. “Let’s talk about school. How are you acclimating?”

I relax a little now that we’ve left that line of questioning. “It’s okay. Different.”

She reaches for her cup of coffee and leans back in her chair. “Yes, I imagine it is. Public school in Chicago is a far cry from a private high school of seventy students with a view of the beach.”

I smile a little at that. “That’s one of the good parts.”

“Have you made friends?”

“A few. It’s small enough that everybody knows everybody. So far, they’re all okay.”

“Classes?”

“Fine.”

Dr. Grady opens a folder and pages through, finds a sheet and gives it a quick scan. “Three AP-level classes? I know you’re a senior, but don’t you think you need to give yourself some breathing room? Remember, we’re a lot more flexible here since we’re essentially an online school with guided facilitators.”

“I can handle it.” I shrug. “I think it helps, having a challenging course load. It takes my mind off things.”

She looks at me thoughtfully. “And we’re back to my earlier point: give yourself space to grieve, J.J. Ignoring what you’re feeling won’t make it go away.”

I'm not getting into this again. I look away as the heaviness settles inside me. She clicks her pen writes again.

"Your mother says you've been having the night terrors almost non-stop since you got to the island. That was three weeks ago. You really should have come to see me earlier—we can find something that might help you get a better quality of sleep." She turns to the computer on her desk and starts clicking the mouse, scrolling through to find what she's looking for.

"There has been some research that suggests benzodiazepines—that's an anxiety medication—can be effective in treating night terrors. I'll start you on a low dose, and we'll see how that goes." She clicks the mouse again. "I've emailed the prescription over to the dispensary at the company infirmary. They should have it on-site and if not, they can order it from the mainland and have it here within a few days. Your mother can pick it up for you."

What kind of company keeps a stock of anti-anxiety medicine? I can't help but wonder. This whole island complex with its security gates and armed guards gives me the creeps.

"Thanks," I make myself say.

"I want to see you next week. Is Thursday after school okay again?"

"It's fine. Can I go now?"

"Do you want to go? You still have ten minutes left on the appointment."

"I want to go." I grab my backpack and stand up.

She tears off the sheet of paper she's been writing on and tucks it into a folder on her desk. "Take it easy this week," she says, walking me to the door. "You've got a lot on your plate. Self-care is an important coping skill and we're going to work on that. The dreams will likely let up on you when you decide to let up on yourself."

I nod, but I don't believe her. These dreams are different because my whole life is different now. *I'm* different.

I don't want to be here. And at night, I don't want to be there, wherever *there* is. Comfort is a luxury I don't get to have anywhere.