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# MY FAULT

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## PROLOGUE

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” SHE SAID, TRYING TO GET AROUND ME and through the door. I grabbed her by the arms and forced her to look at me.

“You want to tell me what the hell’s going on with you?” I asked, furious.

She looked back, and I could see her eyes were hiding something dark, yet she smiled at me joylessly.

“This is your world, Nicholas,” she replied calmly. “I’m living your life, hanging out with your friends, and feeling like I don’t have a care in the world. That’s how you are, and that’s how I’m supposed to be, too,” she said and stepped back, pulling away from me.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“You’re out of control,” I hissed at her. I didn’t like who the girl I was in love with was turning into. But when I thought about it, what she was doing and *how* she was

doing it were the same things I had done before I met her. I was the one who got her into all this. It was my fault. It was my fault she was destroying herself.

In a way, we'd switched roles. She had shown up and dragged me out of the black hole I'd fallen into, but in doing so, she'd wound up taking my place.

1

*Noah*

WHILE I ROLLED THE WINDOW OF MY MOTHER'S CAR UP and down, I couldn't stop thinking what the next hellish year had in store for me. I couldn't stop asking myself how we'd ended up like this, leaving our home to cross the country on our way to California. Three months had passed since I'd gotten the terrible news that would change my life forever, the same news that would make me want to cry at night, that would make me rant and rave like I was eleven instead of seventeen.

But what could I do? I wasn't an adult. I had eleven months, three weeks, and two days to go before I turned eighteen and could go away to college, far away from a mother who only thought about herself, far from these strangers I'd end up living with, because from now on I would have to share my life with two people I knew nothing about—two men, to make matters worse.

"Can you stop doing that? You're getting on my

nerves,” my mother said as she put the keys in the ignition and started the car.

“Lots of things you do get on my nerves, and I have to put up and shut up,” I hissed back. The loud sigh I heard in reply was so routine, it didn’t even surprise me.

How could she make me do this? Didn’t she even care about my feelings? *Of course I do*, she’d told me as we were leaving my beloved hometown. Six years had passed since my parents split—and nothing about their divorce had been conventional, let alone amicable. It had been incredibly traumatic, but in the end, I’d gotten over it...or, at least, I was trying to.

It was hard for me to adapt to change; I was terrified of strangers. I’m not timid, but I’m reserved about my private life, and having to share twenty-four hours of every day with two people I barely knew made me so anxious, I wanted to get out of the car and throw up.

“I still can’t understand why you won’t let me stay,” I said, trying to convince her one last time. “I’m not a little girl. I know how to take care of myself. Plus, I’ll be in college next year, and I’ll be living on my own in another country then. It’s basically the same thing,” I argued, trying to get her to see the light and knowing that everything I was saying was true.

“I’m not going to miss out on your last year in high school. I want to enjoy my daughter before she goes away to study. I told you a thousand times, Noah—you’re my child, I want you to be part of this new family. For God’s sake! You really think I’m going to let you go that far away

from me without a single adult?” she answered, keeping her eyes on the road and gesturing with her right hand.

My mother didn’t understand how hard this was for me. She was starting a new life with a new husband she supposedly loved. But what about me?

“You don’t get it, Mom. Did you never stop to think that this is my last year of high school? That all my friends are here, my boyfriend, my job, my team? My whole life!” I shouted, trying to hold back tears. The situation was getting the best of me, that much was clear. I never, and I mean *never*, cried in front of anyone. Crying was for weaklings, people who can’t control their feelings. I was someone who’d cried so much in the course of my life that I’d decided never to shed another tear.

Those thoughts reminded me of when all the madness began. I still regretted not going with my mother on that damn cruise to Fiji. Because it was there, on a boat in the middle of the South Pacific, that she’d met the incredible, enigmatic William Leister.

If I could go back in time, I wouldn’t hesitate a second to tell my mother yes when she showed up in the middle of April with two tickets so we could go on vacation together. They’d been a present from her best friend, Alicia. The poor thing had broken her right leg, an arm, and two ribs in a car accident. Obviously, she and her husband couldn’t go off to the islands, so she gave the trip to my mom. But come on now—mid-April? I was in the middle of exams, and the volleyball team had back-to-back games. My team had just climbed from second place to first, and that hadn’t

happened as long as I could remember. It was one of the greatest joys of my life. Now, though, seeing the consequences of staying home, I'd happily give back my trophy, leave the team, and fail English Lit and Spanish just to keep that wedding from ever happening.

Getting married on a ship? My mother was out of her mind! And going and doing it without telling me a single word! I found out when she got back, and she said it all blithely, like marrying a millionaire in the middle of the ocean was the most normal thing in the world. The whole situation was surreal, and now she wanted to move to a mansion in California, in the United States. It wasn't even my country! I had been born in Canada, even if my mom was from Texas and my dad from Colorado. I didn't want to leave. It was everything I knew.

"Now, you have to realize I want what's best for you," my mother said, bringing me back to reality. "You know what I've been through, what *we've* been through. And I've finally found a good man who loves and respects me. I haven't felt this happy in a long time. I need him, and I know you'll come to love him. And he can offer you a future we could never have dreamed of before. You can go to any college you like, Noah."

"But I don't want to go to some fancy college, Mom, and I don't want a stranger paying for it," I replied, feeling a shiver as I thought how, at the end of the month, I'd be starting at a new fancy high school full of little rich kids.

"He's not a stranger, he's my husband, and you better get used to the idea," she added cuttingly.

"I'm never going to get used to the idea," I said, looking away from her face to the road.

My mother sighed again, and I wished the conversation would just end—I didn't want to go on talking.

"I get that you're going to miss Dan and all your friends, Noah, but look on the bright side—you're going to have a brother!" she exclaimed.

I turned to her with a weary look.

"Please don't try to sell this like something it's not."

"You're going to love him, though. Nick is a sweetheart," she told me, smiling as she gazed down the highway. "He's mature, responsible, and he's probably dying to introduce you to all his pals. Every time I've been there and he's around, he's stayed in his room studying or reading a book. You might even have the same tastes."

"Yeah, right. I'm sure he's crazy about Jane Austen." I rolled my eyes. "How old is he again?" I knew, of course; all my mother had talked about for months was him and Will. It was ironic that for some reason Nick had never managed to find a hole in his schedule to introduce himself to me. Moving in with a new family before I'd even met all the members of it just kind of summed up how crazy this all was.

"He's a little older than you, but you're more mature than most girls your age. You'll get along great."

Now she was kissing up to me. *Mature*. I still wasn't sure whether that word defined me, and I doubted a guy who was nearly twenty-two would really feel like showing me the city or letting me meet his friends. If I even wanted to, which was a whole different question.

“We’re here,” my mother announced.

I looked at the tall palm trees and the streets between the monumental mansions. Each house took up at least half a block. Some were English or Victorian style; lots of others were modern with glass walls and huge yards. I started to get scared as we continued up the road and the houses got bigger and bigger.

At last we reached a set of immense gates, ten feet high, and when my mother pulled a small device out of the glove box and pushed the button, they started to open. She put the car back in gear, and we went down a hill surrounded by gardens and tall pines that smelled pleasantly of summer and sea.

“The house isn’t as high up as the others in the development, which means we have the best views of the beach,” she remarked with a big smile. I looked over at her, and it was as if I didn’t even know her. Did she not realize what was surrounding us? Could she not see that it was all just too much?

I didn’t have time to formulate the other questions I had aloud because we reached the house and the only thing I could think to say was “Oh my God!”

It was white with a sand-colored roof way up high. It had three stories at least, but it was hard to tell with all those balconies, windows, and everything else. In front of us was an impressive porch with the lights on—it was after seven—and that gave the place a fairy-tale aspect. The sun would go down soon, and the sky was filled with colors that marked a sharp contrast to the immaculate appearance of the place.

My mother turned off her motor after pulling around the fountain and parking in front of the steps that led to the main entrance. My first impression on getting out was that we’d come to the most luxurious hotel in all of California. But it wasn’t a hotel, it was a house—a home, supposedly, or at least that’s what my mother wanted me to believe.

William Leister appeared in the doorway just as I shut the door behind me. Behind him were three men in penguin suits.

My mother’s new husband wasn’t dressed as he had been on the few occasions when I’d agreed to be in the same room with him. Instead of a suit or a name-brand vest, he was wearing white shorts, a lightblue polo shirt, and sandals. His dark hair was tousled instead of combed back. I had to admit, I got what my mother saw in him—he was very handsome. He was tall, a good deal taller than my mother, and had maintained himself well. His face was harmonious, though the signs of age were evident on it—the crow’s feet, the lines across his forehead—and a few gray hairs among the black gave him an alluring, mature air.

My mother ran over to him like a schoolgirl and hugged him. I took my time, walking around to the trunk to get my things.

Gloved hands appeared from nowhere, and I leapt back.

“I will take your things, Miss,” one of the men in the penguin suits said.

“I can do it on my own, thanks,” I responded, feeling very uncomfortable.

The man looked at me as if I were out of my mind.

“Let Martin help you, Noah,” I heard William Leister say behind my back.

Grudgingly, I released my suitcase.

“I’m so happy to see you,” my mother’s husband continued, smiling affectionately. Next to him, my mother motioned for me to behave, smile, do something.

“I can’t say the same,” I responded, stretching out a hand for him to shake. I knew what I’d just done was terrible manners, but in that moment, I felt like telling the truth.

I wanted to make completely clear what my position was concerning this change in our lives.

William didn’t seem offended. He held my hand longer than necessary, and I felt strange.

“I know this is a very abrupt change in your life, Noah, but I want you to feel at home, to enjoy what I have to offer you, and especially for you to accept me as part of your family...eventually.” He added this last part when he noticed my incredulity. From his side, my mother’s blue eyes shot arrows at me.

All I could do was nod and step back so he’d let go of my hand. I didn’t feel comfortable with those shows of intimacy, especially from someone I hardly knew. My mother had gotten married—great for her. That didn’t make that man anyone to me—not a father, not a stepfather, not anything like that. I already had a dad, and he’d been enough for one lifetime.

“How about I show you around the house?” he proposed with a big smile, as far as possible from my coldness and bad mood.

“Come on, Noah,” my mother said, taking my arm and giving me no choice but to walk beside her.

All the lights were on inside, so I didn’t miss a single detail of this mansion that would have been too big for a family of twenty, let alone four. The ceilings were high, with exposed wood beams and big windows opening to the outside. A huge stairway in the middle of an immense room split in two on the upper floor. My mother and her husband took me all through the mansion, from the living room and the kitchen with its oversize island—which I knew my mother would be crazy about—to the gym, the heated pool, party rooms, and a big library that made an impression on me.

“Your mother told me you love to read and write,” William said, awakening me from my stupor.

“Same as tons of other people,” I replied bitterly. I didn’t like him being so friendly with me. I didn’t like him talking to me at all, to tell the truth.

“Noah,” my mother said, and looked me dead in the eyes. I knew she was having a tough time, but she’d deal. I was going to have a whole bad year, and there was nothing I could do about it.

William didn’t seem to notice our silent exchange and went on smiling as if nothing was happening.

I was frustrated and uncomfortable. This was too much—too different, too extravagant. I didn’t know if I could ever get used to living in a place like this.

All at once, I needed to be alone; I needed time to assimilate everything.

"I'm tired. Can I see my room?" I asked in a less strident tone.

"Of course. On the left wing of the second floor is where you and Nicholas have your rooms. You can have anyone you want over, Nick won't mind. Plus you two will be sharing the game room from now on."

*The game room? Seriously?* I smiled as best I could to keep from thinking about how from now on I was going to have to live with William's son. All I knew about him was what my mother had told me—that he was twenty-one, was studying at the University of California, and was an appalling prep. I mean, I made up that last part, but it had to be true.

As we climbed the stairs, all I could think about was how from now on, I'd have two men I didn't know under the same roof. It had been six years since a man—my father—was in my house. I'd gotten used to just women, just the two of us. My life had never been a bed of roses, especially during my first eleven years of life. The problems with my father had scarred me as well as my mother.

Once Dad was gone, Mom and I got by as best we could, managing to live like two regular everyday people, and as I grew older, my mother turned into one of my best friends. She gave me the freedom I wanted, and that was because she trusted me and I trusted her...or at least I did until she decided to throw our lives overboard.

"Here's your room," my mother said, standing in front of a dark door.

I looked at her and then at William. They seemed to be expecting something.

"Can I go in?" I asked sarcastically when they didn't step aside.

"This room is my special present to you, Noah," my mother said, her eyes shining with anticipation.

I looked at her warily, and when she stood back, I opened the door carefully, afraid of what I might find.

The first thing I noticed was the delicate scent of daisies and the sea. Then my eyes landed on the wall across from the door. It was made entirely of glass. The views were so spectacular, I was speechless. The whole ocean was visible from where I stood; the house must have been on top of a cliff because I could only see water from where I stood. Water, and the picture-perfect sun, which was in the middle of setting. It was incredible.

"Oh my God!" I repeated. That was my new favorite phrase. My eyes now roved the rest of the room—it was huge. On the left-hand wall was a canopy bed with a big pile of white cushions that coordinated with the soft blue of the walls. The furniture was white and blue, too, and included a desk with a gigantic Mac, a beautiful sofa, a changing table with a mirror, and a big shelf with all my books. Those colors and that stunning view were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen.

I was overwhelmed. Was all this for me?

"You like?" my mother said from behind me.

"It's incredible. Thank you," I answered, feeling grateful but at the same time uncomfortable. I didn't want them buying me things like these. I didn't need them.

"I spent two weeks working with a professional