



DARLING MADNESS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROSEMARY A. JOHNS

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LOST BOYS OF NEVER



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The last time that I could be touched without flinching was five years ago, when my brother tried to burn me alive.

Now, Mom promises me a new life, billionaire stepdad, safety. And all on the mysterious, paradise island of Never. But it's a lie. Never's a nightmare of secrets and dangerous desires, a cover to hide an asylum for the most broken heirs of the super-rich elite.

Now, I'm one of them.

All I wanted was a chance at a normal life. But instead, I'm claimed as the Darling of the dark and ruthless men who run Never — my stepbrothers.

Peter, Shadow, and Pan.

They're cold, wild, psychos.

I should run from and not towards them. They're forbidden. Only, they're as beautiful, as they're damaged. And their scars match my own. When they swear to burn down the world to keep me safe, I finally have a chance to no longer fear the flames...or their touch.

Except, there's more secrets to reveal. There's a killer on the island. And he's coming for me next.

If you fly to Never, you may never grow up...

Our darling. Our madness. Our Never.

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ALL BOOKS ARE STANDALONE SERIES

CONTEMPORARY STANDALONES

ELITE

ONE SECRET RULE

DARLING MADNESS, LOST BOYS OF NEVER

BEING PUCKED

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

PACK BONDS OMEGAVERSE

REBEL & HER KNIGHTS

EMBER & HER MARSHALS

ANGEL & HER CHAMPIONS

JEWEL & HER KINGS

PUCK & HER BLADES

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COMPLETE SERIES

COMPLETE BOX SET

CRAVE

CRUSH

CURSE

REBEL WEREWOLVES - COMPLETE SERIES

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ONLY PERFECT OMEGAS

ONLY PRETTY BETAS

ONLY PROTECTOR ALPHAS

REBEL: HOUSE OF FAE - COMPLETE

HOUSE OF FAE

REBEL GODS - COMPLETE SERIES

BAD LOKI

BAD HADES

BAD RA

REBEL DEMONS

MY DEMON OF FIRE

MY DEMON OF AIR

MY DEMON OF EARTH

MY DEMON OF WATER

REBEL ANGELS - COMPLETE SERIES

COMPLETE SERIES BOX SET BOOKS 1-5

VAMPIRE HUNTRESS

VAMPIRE PRINCESS

VAMPIRE DEVIL

VAMPIRE MAGE

VAMPIRE GOD

REBEL VAMPIRES - COMPLETE SERIES

COMPLETE SERIES BOX SET BOOKS 1-3

BLOOD DRAGONS

BLOOD SHACKLES

BLOOD RENEGADES

STANDALONE: BLOOD GODS

THE SHADOWMATES SERIES - COMPLETE

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AUDIO BOOKS

LISTEN HERE...

BOOKS IN THE OXFORD VERSE

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A FAMILIAR CURSE

A FAMILIAR HEX

A FAMILIAR BREW

A FAMILIAR GHOST

A FAMILIAR SPELL

A FAMILIAR YULE

A FAMILIAR BRIDE

OXFORD PARANORMAL BOOK CLUB

COMPLETE SERIES

BITING MR. DARCY

HEXING MERLIN

Welcome to Never



Peter, a demon boy (villain of story)

Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up, Notes

Welcome to Never! Fly to this dangerous billionaire's island for the broken, super-elite filled with dark desires, forbidden passion, and secrets, expecting to find the typical themes of a dark, spicy romance.

But once you've flown to Never, who says that you'll want to grow up...?

Never cry. Never scream. Never escape.

Introduction



Once
upon
a
...villain.

Chapter One



To die will be an awfully big adventure.

Angela's bedroom, New Haven, United States

A *ngela*

FIVE YEARS AGO...

SUCKING IN PANICKED GASPS OF AIR, I SWING MY LEG through the open window and balance half in and half out of my bedroom on the narrow ledge.

Then, I consider jumping.

What if I just...let go?

My adrenaline spikes. My breathing is ragged, and my mind feels fuzzy with fear.

It's only two floors up.

I'd survive, right?

I think.

Maybe.

The moon is hiding behind the clouds. I can't see the stars.

Through the dark, I can only just see the ground below.

Would anyone notice me escaping from my parent's house on a night like this?

Shit, am I really doing this?

I stare at the garden below with the perfect lawn, which Dad only mowed yesterday, along with his prized roses. He's won awards for them. He spends more time with those roses than he does with me.

That's not hard.

Now after the divorce, he won't be spending any time with me again.

I can smell the intoxicating scent of the honeysuckle, as it grows up the side of the house. It should feel familiar and safe here, but there's nothing safe in my house.

I should say *home*, you know?

But this isn't my home. And it's never been safe.

I shiver.

The cold breeze slices my cheeks. Driving rain plasters my flame red hair to my neck and soaks my thin purple t-shirt and jeans.

I'm chilled, shaking apart, but I barely notice.

My heart is thudding so hard in my chest that it hurts.

I can do this.

Falling is like flying.

Falling...flying...*escaping*...

If I wait much longer, then *he'll* come for me.

My brother, Kyden.

My gaze darts from the empty street below back into my dark bedroom.

I can only just make out my bed on the far side with my running kit still in a sweaty ball on the floor next to it and the bookcase that's decorated in glow-in-the-dark stars. Most of

my paperback books are spilled over the floor in messy stacks, however, amongst my sheet music.

Despite Mom's obsession with everything being in lined up rows by color, as if nothing on the inside matters as long as the outside looks pretty, I think books should be arranged by mood and always in reach to be grabbed when needed.

My books are the walls that I build around myself.

Yet it's the closed door that I can't look away from.

I wet my dry lips.

My door's not locked.

It's not allowed.

I listen hard, in case the doorknob rattles.

I hold my breath, clutching onto the windowsill with white knuckles. It's slippery, and all of a sudden, I scramble, desperately trying to get my unbalanced foot underneath myself again.

My heart is in my mouth.

Shit, I've done it.

I struggle to steel myself to carefully make this leap, shrugging my backpack more firmly onto my shoulder.

My bag has my mobile in it, a jacket and change of clothes, some food and bottled water, stuff for hygiene like deodorant and toothpaste, and all the money that I've been hiding away.

It's less than forty dollars but it's something.

My iPod is stuffed in my pocket because I'd truly die if I lost my music.

I also have one photograph of Mom, Dad, and me. It's the one that I love, from when I was only three, and we're holidaying on the beach.

My eyes are squinting, where I'm staring into the sun, Dad's face is burned because he forgot to put on sunscreen earlier in the day and he always catches the sun because of his

pale skin and freckles, and Mum's mouth is open because she's complaining.

But I love the picture because it doesn't have Kyden in it.

Although, I hate that he's the one behind the lens, capturing us.

He's controlled that moment like he's controlled all our lives.

I dream of being a singer, but in this house, he's silenced me.

That's it, I'm going to jump.

I take a steadying breath.

I don't know where I'm going.

Somewhere.

Anywhere but here.

Today, I've finally built up the courage to run because if I don't leave now, I know that my brother's going to kill me.

I've seen it in his eyes.

In fact, I've known it for years, festering in my gut, but nobody's believed me.

Kyden's smart like that.

I don't have proof, but the truth of it has blazed through my heart with every cigarette burn, lie that he's told about me, and the look in his eye when our parents admitted to him that they were breaking up.

It's pushed him over the edge.

My parents are in the Pancake Prince diner right now, signing the final papers and leaving me to be *comforted* by my brother.

They think that Kyden's such a good bro.

Such a good son.

Good friend, student, *man*.

A fucking hero.

But it's bullshit.

He's always been the villain.

Only, no one can see the truth under the glossy shine of his successes: star quarterback, psychology scholar at Yale, and charming playboy.

Kyden is charismatic, funny, and entertaining. My parents worship the ground that he walks on.

Why would they listen to their drop out fourteen year old?

After all, my older brother with the psychology degree has told them that I *act out for attention* because I'm prone to *being hysterical*.

The gaslighting asshole.

How can I show them that he's wrong, when now, I flinch every time that someone touches me?

I have panic attacks in class.

And my mind spirals with anxiety that I can't control because Kyden spends his life controlling me like I'm his personal toy.

I clench my jaw, looking down at the ground below me. I could break my ankle or my neck, but either way, I'll be free of Kyden's hold.

Time to do this.

I wipe the tears out of the corners of my eyes, which are blurring my vision along with the rain, then edge further out toward the window ledge.

Then I hear it: the footfall on the stair.

My pulse races, and I startle.

No, no, no...

He's coming.

He's fucking coming.

“Gela,” my brother’s using his fake pleasant voice to con me, but it’s about as convincing as his fake tears, “why are you hiding up here? You’re not avoiding your big bro, right?”

I swing my other leg around, balancing on the edge of the window now.

I have to do this.

Right. Fucking. Now.

But then, the door’s swinging open, and I freeze.

Terror races through me like it always does, and I can’t get my muscles to work.

A scream’s bubbling up inside me. I battle to swallow it down.

I won’t give Kyden the satisfaction. He’s spent my entire life bullying and manipulating me, until every day revolves around appeasing him.

But not anymore.

My world’s in flames around me, but this time, I won’t be the only one who burns.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Kyden’s voice is calm, even though I know that he must be raging inside. His tone always sounds neutral; it did, even the time on that beach holiday that he threatened to drown me. “Move away from the window and get inside. Are you crazy? You’re letting the rain in. It’ll stain the carpet. You know how Mom is about her carpets. It’s just like you to wreck something else, when she needs support and rest, rather than more drama.”

He looks like me, even though I wish that he didn’t.

Kyden is older, twenty-five.

He’s handsome with neat copper hair and beard. His hazel eyes match mine, as long as you don’t notice the dead look in his eyes like a crocodile’s.

He wears black turtlenecks and trousers since he attended Yale on a scholarship like he took the dark academia aesthetic too much to heart.

I blink at him. “You think that the problem here is the carpets getting damaged...? Way to prioritize, K.”

Kyden’s gaze darts to mine and then away; he never holds eye contact with me long. “I think the problem, sis, is that *you’re* damaged.”

My eyes burn with tears.

“Fuck you,” I snarl. “If I am, then it’s your fault. You’re the one who let a whole bunch of moths free under my bed covers, so that I developed a phobia, or shared those humiliating photos of me at school, so now no one will talk to me, or lie to Mom and Dad about me, finally wrecking their marriage.”

“Shut up.” Kyden’s lips are pinched. He’s pale with rage, and it makes me tremble. I know what he’s capable of, when he’s like this. He takes one step towards me. “Don’t shift the blame for this divorce onto me. It’s all on you, sis. I’m successful. I’m going to have my own psychotherapist practice by the end of the year. But your madness and moods have created too much stress for Mom and Dad. You’re lucky that you didn’t give them fucking heart attacks. Is that what you want? You’re a nightmare, you know that? Do you have any idea what trying to raise a bad kid like you has done to this family? Now Dad’s moving to the other side of the fucking country, and it’s your fault. Apologize.”

I shake my head.

“I said, *apologize.*”

I swallow. “Not this time, asshole.”

When Kyden dives across the room to try to snatch my arm, I yell in alarm.

He hesitates.

I suck in a sharp breath, holding out my arms to ward him back. “Don’t. I’ll jump.”

“If you go through that window, I’ll follow you.” Kyden prowls closer, and I hunch my shoulders. “Hunt you. Then I’ll drag you back inside, and you know what I’ll have to do next.”

He shakes his head. “Mom will cry. Dad’s heart will break. Why can’t you just grow up?”

“Have you ever thought,” I pale with hurt, “that the reason I don’t want to is because it may mean becoming more like *you*.”

Silence.

“It’s too dark in here.” Abruptly, Kyden turns and swims through the room’s shadows; he catches my gaze through the gloom. “Let me light some of these candles that you put everywhere to make yourself look bohemian and interesting. You’re as fucking shallow as Mom. Do you even have an original thought in your stupid head? She once dreamed of being a singer as well. At least she was sensible enough to know that it was just a kid’s fantasy because you know what...? *She grew the fuck up.*”

I flinch.

I wish that I could be as cold as Kyden.

Yet I won’t allow myself to be wrecked by his hurtful touches or equally hurtful words anymore.

I glance out of the corner of my eye, as Kyden lights my large, crimson candles, which are dotted around my bedroom, before picking one up and stalking toward me.

There’s danger in each coiled step.

I battle not to tremble, flashing back to every other time that I’ve been cornered by him like this.

I can stand up to him.

I will.

“I’m leaving, K.” I tilt up my chin, forcing the waver out of my voice. “So, you got what you wanted finally, right? Your *bad, crazy* sister out of the family. I’ve left Mom and Dad a letter. I’m taking my phone, so that they can contact me. But I just won’t be here — near you — anymore. Throw a party and burn cigarette holes through my face in all the family photos or whatever the official celebration is for psychos. Let me go, then I *can* grow up. Just far...far...away from...”

Kyden forces his hand over my mouth, muffling me.

My eyes widen in fear.

“Don’t make a sound. Don’t move. You don’t get to be the one who chooses to leave,” Kyden’s voice is low. He leans closer, and I flinch violently, as his hair brushes against my forehead. “My little sister who’s named after an angel. But you aren’t one, are you? We both know that you’re the devil inside this family. People used to believe that the mad were demon possessed.”

He tilts his head, and I wish — *just once* — that I’d see guilt, regret, *any* fucking emotion flicker in his eyes, as he tears me apart.

He releases his hold over my mouth but then leans to grip me by the chin. When I try to pull away, he tightens his grip cruelly.

His fingers dig in, bruising me. He’s so much taller and stronger than me.

“Let me go,” my voice is raspy with tears.

“Why did they need more than me? Why wasn’t I enough?” Kyden sounds genuinely confused and for the first time, hurt. He studies me like I’m a bug who’s trapped in his killing jar; I’m so far beneath him that he’s only waiting for the toxic fumes to overpower me. My pulse is roaring in my ears. “Why did they need another child, when they already had me? I looked at you on the day that they brought you back from the hospital, pink and wrinkly and crying, and I knew that you were going to destroy everything. I would have been so much happier as an only child.”

I can’t bite back the sob. Tears chase down my cheeks.

Fuck him. Seriously, *fuck him*.

I know it’s true though.

All of it.

And that’s why it hurts.

“Then why keep me here?” I beg, as my voice breaks. “If you never even wanted me in the family...?”

He raises the candle between us, and I squint at the sudden flood of light.

His face is cast into a relief of sharp lines and shadows.

My guts churn with dread.

“Because despite everything,” Kyden replies, watching my expression intently, “you’re mine. Mine to torment. Mine to play with. And mine to burn.”

Then, to my shock, he shoves the candle against my shoulder, and my t-shirt catches fire.

An agony as bright as the flame itself flares through me.

I stare at Kyden in shock, struggling to get away, as he holds my arms to my side to stop me patting out the flames, while they lick against my skin.

“Stop it, K,” I howl. “Please, *brother*...”

I can’t say anymore because the scream swallows up my words.

I can smell my own skin burning.

“Why do you only call me *brother*, when you’re scared?” Kyden’s eyes gleam in the dark. “Why do you only call me *brother*, when you’re begging?”

Then Kyden grits his teeth and places his strong hand in the center of my chest and pushes.

I flail backward out of the window like a phoenix with broken wings.

For one moment, I’m balanced on the very edge, before I’m falling.

I flail my arms, howling up at the moonless sky.

Kyden’s leaning out of the window, watching me as I burn and fall.

Please, please, please...

The stench of burning flesh.

The rain striking my face.

Agony.

I want my mom...

I want...*someone*...

I don't want to be alone apart from Kyden.

Please, please, please...

I'm going to die.

I don't want it to be like this.

Please, please, please...

Funny, how I only truly know how desperate I am to live,
when I'm about to die.

Chapter Two



Dreams come true, if only we wish hard enough.

Never, Off the Scottish Coast

A *ngela*

FIVE YEARS LATER; PRESENT DAY...

NEVER IS A TINY, PRIVATELY OWNED PARADISE ISLAND OFF THE Scottish coast.

It's secret.

Mysterious.

You can only get there by helicopter.

And a month ago, Mom married the billionaire who owns this paradise.

Of course, she didn't invite me to the wedding.

She always did want to marry into money. I guess that dreams truly can come true, if you wish hard enough.

It's not surprising that I wasn't considered bridesmaid material, since I haven't seen Mom for years and spend most

of my free time volunteering for the burns charity that helped me out when I was at my lowest, singing in the shady clubs that I also work in as a server, and trying to build my profile on social media.

Unsuccessfully.

Trying to build a career in a world where there are millions of hungry, talented artists all trying to do the same thing (and songs are given away for free), is soul destroying.

And it doesn't pay the fucking bills.

Nor, by the way, have my parents from the day that I turned eighteen.

So, it was more of a shock, when I got the offer to visit and meet my new stepdad.

Excitement burns through me, and I bite my lip.

I press my nose onto the side window of the small, two-seater helicopter. The summer sun is bright through the glass. Above me, the sky is a perfect blue.

It's noisy with the whir of the rotors, as the helicopter skims low over the foaming Atlantic.

I love the thrill of this flight, which is my first time in the air.

I've never traveled outside America before, and it's seductive to believe Mom's promise that this time things will be different: I'll have a new life and family.

I've lost so much time...lost out on living...already.

First, there were those months in the burn center with skin grafts and multiple surgeries. Then the long recovery and therapy. After, trying to catch up on everything that I missed, alone in boarding school.

Instinctively, I pull my long-sleeved top over my wrists. The burns stop at my elbows, but it's instinct now.

Dad insisted that I pretend it was an accident because I shouldn't want revenge.

Instead, I had a duty to *forgive your brother because he's unwell*.

I clench my jaw, and my guts churn at the memory of Dad towering over me in the hospital, after I told him the truth of what'd happened.

For the first time ever, they believed me.

“What did you say to him, Gela?” Dad demanded. “What the hell did you say to him to make him...? You know how upset he is by our divorce. Then on the same night you push him. He said that you were threatening to *jump* and all your stuff was packed like you were trying to run away. How could you be so selfish? Is that what you told him? That you were leaving him — abandoning him — as well, when you know how much you mean to him? Why would you be that cruel?”

I was in too much pain to defend myself; I felt hollowed out. “Where is he?”

“Sent away to somewhere that can help him.”

“How do you help a monster?”

I closed my eyes then, hearing Dad's gasp.

I never saw him again.

Now, I crane to catch my first glimpse of Never.

My nostrils flare at the strong scent of gasoline.

I struggle not to hurl.

Yeah, turning up to meet my wealthy stepdad in sneakers and vomit stained jeans is tempting but isn't on page one of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

I guess.

Because I haven't read that book.

Shocker.

“We're almost there, lass.” The pilot's warm Scottish voice says through the intercom on my headset. He introduced himself as Fyfe. He looks to be in his fifties with thinning, gray hair and a weathered face. His eyes are hidden behind

aviator sunglasses. “I didn’t know that our Jim had a daughter.”

My brow furrows. “Jim?”

“Mr. Never.”

“He’s literally called his island *Never*...? Like Neverland? Hey, Peter Pan would make a terrible pilot.”

“Aye, because his plane would never land.”

I cross my arms. “You stole my punchline.”

“Sorry, but I’ve heard every Peter Pan joke there is.” Fyfe shoots me a sly look. “But then, they never grow old.”

I laugh. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Never’s the island’s real name. Jim just plays up to the whole theme now and exploits it. Jim’s family owns the island and have since ancient times. There used to be a whole fishing community out there and smuggling too, if the stories are to be believed. But now, there’s only Jim, Never Hall, and...well, his project.” Fyfe gives me a funny look. “Are you certain that you’re his daughter because I hope that mine knows my first name, you know?”

I snort. “Stepdaughter, the poor, unwanted one who wasn’t even invited to the wedding. The first that I knew Mom had even remarried was when I received a letter last week. It said something like: *You’re still alive, right? So, since you’re working two jobs, renting a cockroach infested shoebox of an apartment and can’t afford to go to university, do you want to come to this amazing college on a gorgeous island off the British coast and by the way...I’m married to its charming billionaire owner. Wait, did I forget to tell you?*”

Fyfe chuckles.

I mean, I’m paraphrasing. But it was pretty much that.

Sort of.

I don’t think that she knew about the cockroaches.

“I never thought that Jim would remarry.” Fyfe clicks his tongue. “Your mother must be quite some lass.”

I huff. “You could say that. So, what’s Jim...I mean, Mr. Never...shit, I don’t know what to call him...this guy who’s going to be my stepdad like then? Have you known him long?”

“I don’t think anyone really knows Jim. But I probably know him better than anyone on the mainland does. I’ve been piloting these rides over from the mainland since I was a lad, only a couple of years older than yourself.”

I glance down at the pamphlet that’s crumpled on my lap. It’d been included with Mom’s short letter.

It’s neon green with the logo of a gold clockface on the top, above the flowing gold lettering:

NEVER ACADEMY FOR THE GIFTED, Aged 16 - 30

I smile.

For the first time in my life, Mom believes that I’m gifted at something.

I’m not the fuck-up.

Fyfe looks uneasy for a moment, but then, his expression shutters.

What’s the problem?

“So, has your Mom enrolled you in Never Academy?” He asks.

I nod. “Once the summer’s over in a couple of weeks, anyway. I don’t know that I’m gifted but I can sing.”

“Oh, aye.”

I flush.

I’m not used to talking about myself. Posting online is something different, when you’re hidden behind a screen or on stage with the safety of lights and a microphone, performing.

I duck my head.

“Yeah, and dance too. It says in here that they have classes in music, dance, and art, as well as a focus on nature. It sounds like a dream.”

Fyfe hums noncommittally.

I side-eye him. “Is that a polite British way of telling me that I’m going to look a total loser because the others are like Aretha Franklin or...?”

“Ed Sheeran?” Fyfe’s lips twitch.

I scuff my foot on the bottom of the cockpit. “I mean, what’s the catch? Nothing in life’s free. I’ve learned that. This isn’t an all-girl’s school, right?”

I turn to look at him in horror.

Please, no...

I already spent my college years in one of those and I’m not ready to live as a nun for the next three years.

So, I’m a virgin.

But I was hoping to find someone who cared about me enough to help me finally cope with touch without flinching from it.

To love me.

Fyfe smiles, shaking his head.

I can’t help matching his smile.

I don’t know about love, but at least, I’m going to see a dick.

Hey, let’s go crazy, I may even stroke one. Well, crazier (which appears to be my thing), and suck one.

I often fantasize, as I touch myself under the covers in my dank apartment at night, about the feel of a thick cock, stretching out my lips and then resting heavy on my tongue — its taste and silky feel — the bump, as it presses inch by inch down my throat.

And I open up, taking it all.

Willing and wanting.

But more, I crave the power of being on my knees, while wrecking a guy through pleasure.

So, I may flinch from touch because I'm still scared of being burned.

Yet I'm desperate — *fucking desperate* — for a man who I can trust with my heart, body, and soul.

Only, I don't know if that's going to remain no more than a dream.

Between the surgeries, jobs, and therapy, I've never even been on a date before.

Is it safer for me to continue alone with only my book boyfriends and fantasies?

How can I trust a man again?

What if he hurts me?

Fyfe leans forward to fiddle with the controls. “Anyway, I wouldn't know what your competition on the island will be like. I'm not allowed inside the academy. In fact, I've never seen further than the helipad. Only new students or professors are permitted fully onto Never.”

I turn to stare at him. “But how do you deliver food?”

“By airdrop. Anything that's delicate like certain medicines, I fly in myself and professors unload it.” Fyfe's expression becomes unexpectedly serious. “Once you fly to Never, there's no way off it. Remember that. I'm coming for a final visit with medicine and some other items in two weeks' time. After that, who knows when Jim will call for me?”

I'll be trapped on Never.

I swipe my tongue nervously over my lips.

This is okay. I want to be there. It's no different to being in a sorority house, right?

The only difference is that it's one, which will be surrounded by the ocean.

“I'd better not have any second thoughts then.” I shove the pamphlet into my pocket with a sense of finality.

“Or if you have them, lass,” Fyfe relies, “have them before the two weeks are up and make sure that you’re waiting for me. Then fly back to the mainland.”

I laugh like he’s made a joke.

He doesn’t laugh along with me.

I shift awkwardly in my seat.

What’s the mystery? What does he mean?

Why would I want to leave behind my one ticket to a better life? At least, something better than juggling a server’s job, while saving for evening classes.

This may be my only chance to prove that my dreams haven’t only been fantasies.

My only chance to have a family.

I thought that my belief in those were burned to ash that night in the rain with Kyden.

I’m desperate to be proved wrong.

My heart aches.

“It’s a shame for a pretty lass like you to be closed off on Never though.” Fyfe’s voice becomes unexpectedly regretful, before he continues with a cheer that feels forced now that I’m noticing it. “Still, it’ll give you a break from the stress and narcissism of this modern world. Do you know, selfies cause more deaths than shark attacks?”

Wow.

I arch my brow. “Shit.”

“Aye, still if we were to crash in the open ocean,” when Fyfe points beneath us at the choppy waves, I shiver, “I’d rather be facing a mobile phone than Jaws.”

I chuckle. “Look don’t worry about me. I don’t mind being closed away, as long as I’m shut up with all the pretty boys.”

“Too pretty for their own good,” Fyfe mutters. “And I include the professors in that.”

My eyes light up, and hot and cold flushes through me.

“How will I survive?” I deadpan.

Can I help it, if I’m already imagining a silver fox English professor, who’s probably a Duke or something, sternly bending me over his desk and teaching me a good lesson?

I don’t learn it.

So, he has to teach me again.

At least three times.

Fyfe hums. “I don’t know.” Then he hesitates. “Take my advice. Don’t fuck your professor on the first day. Make him work for it. It’s what I did with my university professor. Now, I’m married to him.”

I let out a startled laugh.

Fyfe’s grin is crooked.

“Here.” He reaches for something on his side of the cockpit, before tossing it across onto my lap.

I can’t help it. I jump.

My anxiety leaps, and my breathing sounds too loud in the headset.

I flush with shame, fighting to get my breathing under control.

Fyfe sits in silence and doesn’t comment.

I like him even better for that.

I clench and unclench my hands, which helps me to feel more grounded in my body. I focus on the sensations all around me: the smell of gasoline, the whir of the rotors, and the feel of the hard seat underneath me.

Finally, I feel comfortable enough to focus on the photograph, which Fyfe tossed onto my lap.

Then my eyes widen.

Two of the most gorgeous men who I’ve ever seen stare out at me.

Twins.

The photograph's a closeup, and the twins' skin is translucent, glowing in the sun. Their hair is platinum blond and falls in silky curls around their heart-shaped faces.

They look like angels.

Except, their eyes are the most arresting bright amber that I've ever seen like they're a pair of foxes.

I can't look away. I'm caught in their gazes.

Fuck, who the hell are they?

I swallow, and my skin tingles.

They're more than pretty. They're impossibly beautiful.

The photograph is informal and casual. The men are laughing, leaning against the stationary helicopter with a vibrancy and life that I can feel burning me through the picture.

One of them stares with a challenge in his eyes. His arm is slung around the shoulder of his twin, protectively. The other twin's head is ducked, and his curls hang over his eyes, as he glances at the camera more shyly.

It feels like looking into a private world. But it's one that I crave to be part of.

I flush, reaching out to stroke over the picture.

"Back with me, lass?" Fyfe asks, quietly. "They seem to cast a spell on folks."

"Yeah." *Only, I'm not.*

I'm lost in the amber gaze of these fox twins.

"That was taken the last time that I flew out here," Fyfe explains. "The twins are a couple of years older than you. They wanted me to take it, so that a part of them...a shadow... could reach the mainland."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"Just like I've never stepped onto Never fully, so they've never stepped off it. The twins were born there, and they've

never left. I bet that your new stepbrothers will have a lot of questions for you about your life in America, lass.”

My brain stutters to a halt.

WTF?

Stepbrothers...?

I almost toss the photograph onto the floor of the cockpit. With an effort, I stop myself.

Instead, I pull the picture to my chest, possessively.

These impossibly beautiful creatures are *mine*.

Family.

Why didn't Mom tell me? Did she think that I'd freak out about having brothers again? That I wouldn't accept them?

Did she think that I wouldn't come to Never, if it meant that I'd have older brothers around again?

My hands are shaking, and I'm blinking away tears.

Shit, what am I going to do?

“Did I say something wrong?” Fyfe sounds concerned; I'm not expecting it. “It must be a lot to move all the way out here and with a whole new family. But give the twins a chance. They're different, and I don't care what Jim says, it's not a bad thing.”

I stroke over the twins' laughing faces, refusing to notice how plush their lips are or the length of their eyelashes.

I force the attraction away, even though it clings to my skin like a cobweb.

Fuck, they're my stepbrothers.

Even thinking about them how I am feels wrong, forbidden.

Taboo.

I bite my lip. “Different?”

“Can I trust you with a secret?”

Dread coils through me

I hate secrets.

I spent my childhood being surrounded by them.

Secrets are dangerous.

Warily, I nod.

“Those twins are wild and a force of nature but they’re the best thing about my visits to Never. Ever since they were wee, they’d find a way to sneak past their father and secretly spend at least a few minutes with me, scrambling around the cockpit and shooting questions at me. They’re smart and always wanting to know *why, why, why*. They wanted to know about the world outside Never. I always made sure to have something fun to tell or show them. They’re good kids, in their own way, and they’ll look out for you. So, don’t tell their father on them, right?”

“Why would I? Wait, why weren’t they allowed to talk to you?”

Unease winds through me.

Is their dad some kind of tyrant? Mom praised him as *charming*.

But then, Kyden had been charming to everyone but me.

“It’s a rule.” Fyfe shrugs. “You need to learn the rules of Never, keep the secrets, and be a good sister to your new brothers.”

“I’m not good with rules or secrets.”

“What about being a good sister?”

My heart clenches, and for a moment, I think that I really will hurl. “That depends if someone’s a good brother to me.”

Suddenly, the helicopter banks to the left, and I roll into the side of the cockpit. I brace myself, and my heart rate spikes.

I stare out of the window.

Are we here?

Is this it?

And then I notice it: A ghost of green rising out of the blue beneath me.

Never.

I grin. “I see it. There! There! It’s Never.”

Fyfe chuckles. “Aye, you win the prize. I should keep candy or something to award students who see it first.”

“Do you bring all the students here and then back, when they graduate?”

“I bring them here,” he replies. “I don’t bring them back.”

My brow furrows. “Wait, what...?”

“Hold on, I’m going to bring you closer, so you can watch, as we descend.” He flicks a switch.

My stomach swoops, as the helicopter circles lower all of a sudden.

It’s like I’m not flying...I’m falling.

Kyden’s leaning out of the window, watching me as I burn and fall.

Please, please, please...

The stench of burning flesh.

The rain striking my face.

Agony.

I take a desperate breath, as my pulse pounds.

“Are you all right there, wee lass?” Fyfe asks.

I force myself to nod. “Uh-huh, I’m awesome.”

“You don’t look it. Don’t worry, most people struggle with this part of the journey. At least you didn’t hurl.”

“Yeah, I’m a badass like that.”

“Want to know a secret? When I brought your mother to the island, the beautiful Victoria threw up all over her posh dress.”

Now I do feel better.

I peer out of the window again.

The island is small, wild, and bleak. There are no beaches, only craggy cliffs and rocks surrounding it on all sides. It's wooded with lakes and rivers, and in the middle is a huge, ancient building with a wall running around it.

I swallow.

It looks like Hogwarts, if Voldemort had designed it.

"Is that the academy?" I ask in a small voice.

Fyfe hesitates.

My pulse races.

What the hell is he hiding?

I feel claustrophobic trapped in this helicopter. There's no way to escape.

I'm committed now.

Unless I want to hurl myself into the savage sea beneath me and drown, then I need to see this through and land on Never.

How bad can an academy be that trains people in music and dance, when it takes its inspiration from nature, right?

Although, maybe that's what the guy in The Wicker Man thought too.

Plus, now I've gained two sinfully gorgeous stepbrothers who I wasn't even expecting.

I'm desperate to be a good sister to them like Fyfe wants but how can I trust them?

My brother took everything from me. What makes these Lost Boys of Never different?

"Relax, lass," Fyfe says. "Remember that I'll be back in two weeks. Plus, you're Jim's stepdaughter. So, you'll be living with him in Never Hall, won't you? I don't think that you'll be sleeping in the dorms with the others."

“I guess that’s one of the perks of your mom marrying a billionaire who owns an entire island. Elite assholes for the win.” I point out of the window. “Is *that* Never Hall?”

Even from the air, I can tell that the sprawling, Gothic mansion is huge.

It looks like a fucking castle.

It’s set in the middle of walled gardens and an orchard.

“Aye, home, sweet home. Time for you to meet your new family.” Fyfe aims the helicopter toward Never Hall. “Welcome to Never.”

Chapter Three



They knew in what they called their hearts that one can get on quite well without a mother.

Never Hall, Never

“**W**ould it have killed you to brush your hair, Gela?”
When Victoria reaches to push my long windblown hair out of my eyes, I flinch.

“That’s helicopter rides for you,” I reply, “murder on the hair.”

I slouch on the bottom of the wide stone steps of Never Hall with my single battered suitcase at my feet, and I’ve never felt more out of place...or more of a hot mess.

When the helicopter landed, Fyfe had to shoo me toward the grand manor house.

It felt like being abandoned, or a kid on their first day at a new school, the type where they have metal detectors even in kindergarten.

Never is beautiful.

A paradise.

I squint through the hot, afternoon sun. I’m thirsty, and my head’s throbbing. It’s a low ache.

I want to get out of the sun.

I glance up at the gray stone baronial mansion that looks like a medieval castle, and my pulse speeds up. It's intimidatingly grand with a crenelated roof, conical towers, and lavish iron decorations.

The gardens around us are so manicured that the gardeners must labor here every day.

A fountain with a clockface gushes water into the air, to the far side sits a pond with fat koi like shadows beneath the still surface, and there are acorn shaped hedges dotted around the edges.

In the distance, little more than a hazy blur, is a high wall.

Beyond that lies the academy.

I wrinkle my nose at the cloying scent of the flowers and the orchard, which surrounds the garden.

"It's a shame that James had to deal with something or other up at the academy. Of course, he's sorry not to be able to greet you himself. I'm sure that you'll see him in the next couple of days." Victoria pushes a single strand of hair, which has dared to fall out of her intricate bun, behind her ear. "He works tirelessly for all his...students. I barely see him. You know, your new stepdad is an incredible man. With all his wealth, he could be off yachting or relaxing on a beach. But instead, he chooses to be here, doing something important."

James is *Jim*, of course.

My new stepdad.

Director Never.

I peer at Victoria, speculatively.

She looks different.

I mean, it's been years since I've seen her, but somehow, I hadn't expected for her to look changed.

You should recognize your own mom, right?

I'm not sure that she feels the same.

Possibly, it's *me* who's changed.

Can you grow out of the need for a mom, or can *they* grow out of the need for *you*?

My stomach lurches at the thought.

Victoria's taller than me and thinner too. She's wearing a silk shirt and flowing skirt in the type of neutrals that she'd have hated, once. Strings of pearls hang around her neck like a collar.

I shrug. "It's okay. He didn't get his billions by sitting around waiting to meet his new stepdaughter, right?"

Mom chuckles. "Of course not. Like all traditional Scottish lairds, James inherited some of it and then...well, let's leave the business talk to the boys, shall we?"

Let's fucking *not*.

If this is what marrying the romantic hero leads to, then I don't want to be the woman who aims for the billionaire.

I want to become the billionaire myself.

I narrow my eyes. "So, it's a castle. Does that make you a princess?"

"Only when I want to wear a tiara," Victoria replies, dryly. Then her expression softens. "I've missed you, Gela. It's been hard. Until you have kids yourself, you won't be able to understand how torn in two I've been. It's taken some time for me to accept everything that's happened."

"*Everything.*" I take a step back. I swallow bile. "You mean like me needing you? Being hurt? Alone?"

Victoria snatches my hands, pulling me into a deep hug, before I can resist.

Shocked, I freeze.

I'm trapped.

I whine, low in my throat.

She doesn't let go.

"I'm sorry." Victoria clenches her hand hard in my hair like that could soothe me. "Sorry, love, so sorry."

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse movement from the open doorway into the manor.

But then it's gone.

Is someone else here?

Listening?

"But you're here now." Victoria finally pulls back from me, and I drag in a desperate breath. My skin feels oversensitive. It tingles. I want to wash myself clean. "My talented daughter. Your voice is amazing. It always was, but you were too shy to share your gift. I never understood why you were so quiet. But now, I can't wait to hear you sing for me."

Does she mean it?

I hope that she means it.

I draw away from her to hide my confusion. "Yeah, okay."

Victoria smiles. "Don't look so worried, this is all for the best. You'll see." Then her expression clouds. "And if your stepbrothers cause any trouble for you at all, then come and tell me. I'll make sure that James deals with them. I don't want them to lead you astray or upset you."

I cross my arms, tapping my foot. "Would this be the *stepbrothers* who you conveniently forgot to tell me about?"

She at least looks sheepish. "They're hard to explain in a letter. The twins are..."

I groan. "Don't say *different*."

Victoria smirks. "Unique."

This is going to be a fun end to my summer.

She plays with the pearls at her throat. "I mean it. I want you to feel safe here. If they disrespect you in any way, tell me. This is your home, and those two will need to learn to deal with it, no matter what their issues are."

What does she mean?

I startle, when Victoria claps her hands together smartly like she's truly a lady of the manor summoning a servant.

“Get your lazy behinds here and show my daughter to her room,” Victoria calls. “And be nice about it, or you know what'll happen.”

Hell, is that how Victoria talks to the staff here?

The manager at the bar treated me like shit, and I'm never going to talk to anyone, let alone someone under my authority, in the same way.

To my surprise, however, it's not staff members who rush through to answer her summons.

Instead, after a moment, the twins saunter through the open doorway.

Fuck, were they just in the shadows the whole time? Were they listening to what Victoria was saying about them?

She must have known. Did she ask them to wait there?

Why would she do that?

Unless, she wanted them to hear the reassurances to me, as *warnings* to them?

As the twins step out of the shadows into the sun, my eyes widen.

Then I forget how to breathe.

The men in the photographs had been beautiful.

In real life, they're transcendent.

I freeze, and my cheeks heat.

My new stepbrothers.

They're my fucking stepbrothers...

The sun halos off their curls, making them look like angels with demon eyes.

Why did these gorgeous men have to be off-limits?

They're identical. The way that their arms are slung around each other's waists is loving and affected to be casual,

but it looks protective to me.

What do they need to protect each other from?

Me?

The one who's hanging back (and casting me shy glances from underneath the longest eyelashes that I've ever seen), is dressed in a black mesh shirt like cobwebs.

He looks Goth and badass.

I catch a glimpse of his pink nipples through his shirt, and there's nothing sisterly about my reaction.

The nails on his fingers are painted with black nail polish, and he's tapping them on his hip in a rhythmic beat.

Is he stimming?

He looks like he's struggling to stand still and would be in motion, if his brother's arm wasn't holding him in place.

The smoky Kohl, which is drawn on underneath his startling eyes, make them look even more golden.

The other twin winds around the first one, tilting up his chin with a dangerous challenge in his eyes.

I recognize the look from the photograph.

He's wearing a brown leather jacket like fall leaves and punky ripped jeans and t-shirt.

I lick over my dry lips, and it feels like electricity shooting through me, as my gaze locks with his.

I shiver

He smirks, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes.

I'm frozen by the *hate* in their amber depths.

It's deep and wild.

It shakes me.

“Her arrival has broken Shadow's routine. Why couldn't we have greeted her over dinner and not disrupted his schedule? His needs matter,” the second twin's voice is rich and English.

It's the type of voice that no one can resist: sin and seduction.

Even if right now, it sounds pissed off.

"Shadow *needs* to learn how to cope," Victoria snaps. "What was the therapist's phrase: *be normalized*? Take my daughter to her room."

I wince.

Fuck, I hope that they don't think I'm the same as Mom.

No one should be *normalized*.

What the fuck is normal anyway?

Shadow starts to hum a song under his breath like he can't stop himself.

My eyes widen in awe.

Is that GRLwood's "I Hate My Mom"?

Kudos on an English guy knowing the cheeky alternative punk.

When Shadow glances at me out of the corner of his eye, I can't help sending him a secret smile.

He looks shocked like he didn't expect anyone here to know what he was up to, and perhaps, has spent his life with no one else recognizing his *subversive humming* talent.

Then he returns my smile, and it feels like something precious.

So does sharing his in-joke.

Victoria's expression darkens. "What have I told you about that humming, tapping, and singing?"

"I'll do it." The second twin quickly steps in front of Shadow like *I'm* the predator here, snatching up my suitcase. He holds out his elegant hand to me. "Come on then, darling. Let me show you to your new home, since you've already fucked up our day. You're a resident of Never now. Don't worry, I won't *lead you astray*."

Chapter Four



Pan, who and what art thou?

Stag Tower, Never Hall

“**M**y name’s Pan.” My new stepbrother — Pan — side-eyes me, as he carries my suitcase like it weighs no more than a handbag up the spiral stone staircase.

The staircase leads to my wing of rooms, which is in a high tower.

Pan’s strong, and he bounds up the steps two at a time.

Yeah, he’s so going to lead me astray.

I arch my brow. “Your dad’s really leaned into the whole *Peter Pan* thing then. Billionaires and their eye for branding, right? I mean just look at Elon Musk and his kids.”

Pan scrunches up his brow. “Who?”

I gape at him. “Shit, Fyfe wasn’t kidding about you being cut off from the rest of the world here. Although, when it comes to Elon, silver linings.”

Pan’s expression shutters. “I know what I need to about my own world, darling. And you have no idea just how far Dad has leaned into the whole *Peter Pan thing*. We’re all the Lost Boys of Never here. Well...” He tilts his head, and his

platinum curls fall over his gorgeous eyes. “I don’t know what *you* are yet.”

I look at him, affronted. “I’m your new stepsister, and don’t you dare call me something weak like *Wendy* because I’m nobody’s mommy.”

“You’re really not.”

“Why do you sound like the perfect English gentleman? Shouldn’t you be Scottish?”

“Not when your family are snobs about being descended from the English bastards who stole this land in some war or other and have beaten any accent out of me.”

He means that metaphorically, right?

I’ve never met the son of a billionaire before. I didn’t expect him to be like this.

He has to be an entitled brat.

Right?

I bet Pan was brought up with gold plated board games, caviar and lobster for breakfast, and a Ferrari for his eighteenth birthday.

Although, is there even a road on this island? I didn’t notice one, when I was up in the helicopter.

Still, Pan grew up in a castle on a privately owned island called Never. He’s named after the boy who was leader of the Lost Boys.

He may as well be the King here.

Pan walks faster, passing me on the stairs and then leading the way down a narrow corridor. There are wall-mounted stags heads on the walls.

I grimace, pushing my hands into my pockets.

My sneakers squeak on the oak floor, and I scrunch up my nose against the dusty scent.

The walls are thick and stone. They’re barer than I expected, even though the rest of Never Hall, which we passed

through, was lavishly decorated with antiques and crystal chandeliers.

Yet it's drab in this tower.

Rundown.

Perhaps, I've been put in the servants' wing. It'd make sense. I'm the outcast, deadbeat stepdaughter.

I can't pay for my place here, after all.

Yet I'm going to be living in a fucking castle. I'm not complaining.

As long as there are no cockroaches, then it'll be a step up. Although, it does look like there may be rats.

Despite it being a hot day in the sun, it's cold inside, and I shiver.

Pan glances back at me. "Keep up."

"Hey, I don't have long legs like you." I rush to follow him to the bottom of the corridor. "Where are we? Is it only me in this wing of the manor?"

Pan pushes open a door, before turning to me.

He looks adorably confused.

He'd also probably kill me for thinking *adorable*.

"Of course not. Where do you think Shadow and I sleep?" He gestures wildly at the room next to mine. He doesn't appear to be able to control his gestures in the same way that he can his words. There's an untamed power thrumming just beneath his skin. "This is our wing of the hall: Stag Tower. Shadow and I share the room next to yours. The bathroom is opposite. So, no stealing all the hot water in the morning or hogging it for hours at night. Although, it's Shadow who you have to watch out for. His eyeliner and stuff don't apply themselves, and he says that the lighting's best in the bathroom. But he needs them, so let him."

It's almost like he's asking my permission or begging me, while trying to pretend that it's an order.

I glance at the door that leads into their bedroom.

It's weird that they're going to be right next to me. I can't sort out my feelings about that or the fact that this rundown section of the hall is where they've been living.

Plus, now I need to share it with the twins.

When Pan turns back to the door, which leads to my bedroom, I'm even more conflicted, when I notice how tight his ass is.

Then I wish that I hadn't noticed.

He must have been sent to tempt me.

Yep, not my fault at all.

Pan moves with a snake-like slink of his hips. He's dangerous. I simply can't figure out how yet.

But he is.

I edge past him into my new bedroom, glancing around.

The room's small with dormer windows, which are swathed in heavy drapes.

The windows look out over the manicured gardens and orchard. In the distance, I can just make out the high wall, which runs like a scar, trapping the academy buildings behind it.

Hot sun spears into the room, lighting up the four-poster bed that's covered in velvet bedding and shaggy sheepskin rugs, which is taking up most of the space.

The walls are hung with tapestries, which are decorated with designs of stags and violent hunting scenes. There's a single, dusty rug on the wood floor, and a closet stands in the far corner.

"No cockroaches!" I say, brightly.

See, I can be optimistic.

Pan swaggers after me into the room. "What a terrible oversight. Shall I go out and acquire some?"

I laugh. "Fuck you."

When Pan hurls my suitcase with more force than necessary onto the bed, throwing up a cloud of dust that makes me choke, I startle.

Pan crosses his arms and leans against the wall, studying me. “Did I scare you?”

On the alert, I stiffen. “Did you want to?”

He can’t have forgotten what Victoria said. He’s meant to be *nice* to me.

Interesting definition of nice they have on Never.

“I haven’t decided yet.” There’s a wicked gleam in Pan’s eye.

I like it.

But I don’t want him to know that.

Also, the threat that Victoria paired with her order, made my skin itch.

I’m glad that Pan’s rebelling.

I don’t blame him for resenting Victoria invading his life here, if that’s how she talks to him. I bet that he thinks I’m going to be a mini version of her and waltz around his wing now, doing the same.

I’ll have to show him that I won’t.

I’ve been so frightened of what a brother may do to me that I didn’t stop to think that my new stepbrother may be equally as scared of what *I* could do to *him*.

Finally, Pan breaks our standoff with a sigh. “As much as I’m enjoying...whatever this is...I still have a job to do. So, do you have a phone? Laptop? iPad? Anything modern?”

I stroll to the bed and flop down next to my suitcase.

The bed is softer than anywhere I’ve ever slept before, and I groan in delight, before I can stop myself. Then I redden, when I catch Pan’s amused grin.

I cough to cover my embarrassment. “You should try this.” I pat the bed. “I mean, you’re probably used to beds like this,

but trust me, compared to the hard mattresses that I've slept on for the last couple of years, this is..." Pan dives to the bed, settling next to me. "...amazing."

I swallow.

Okay, I hadn't meant really try it out.

He's close.

He smells of leather and sin.

Pan's leaning up on his elbow, looking down at me. I can see every detail now: how pale and perfect his skin is, the golden flecks in his amber eyes, and the petal-softness of his lips.

He bounces on the bed. "You're right."

"Uh-huh." My throat is dry.

"And your distraction isn't going to work. I still need your phone and other shit."

Is this what it's like with normal siblings? They borrow all your stuff?

I'm lucky that he's not a stepsister, or she'd be demanding that I tip out my bag and hand over my favorite top.

For all I know, Pan may do that as well.

I rub at my aching temples. "Of course. So, you want to borrow them? It's no problem, just don't break them. I have all my own songs on my laptop and I'd probably cry on you and ruin that gorgeous leather jacket, if you lose those. Could you get me some water first though? Because my head feels like it's about to explode."

"Nobody ruins this jacket and lives." I can't tell if he's serious. *He sounds serious.* "Your headache was probably caused by the flight. I'll get you a drink from the kitchen." Pan's voice is tight. "But put all your shit out of your bag and onto the bed, so I can throw it out."

Wait, did he say *throw it in the trash*, rather than *borrow*?

No fucking way.

My heart leaps into my throat.

When Pan slides off the bed and makes for the door, I sit up with a jolt.

“Woah, hold up *the boy who wouldn't grow up*, no one, and I repeat, *no one* is parting me from my phone. That's like one of my limbs. Take my pinkie or something but not my iPhone. It's got my whole life held within it. You can't take that away from me. I'm prepared to fight for it.”

“You wouldn't win.” Pan's expression hardens. “I'm not doing this to you. It's one of the Director's rules.”

“Director, as in, your dad...?”

“And *your* stepdad.” Pan's gaze darkens. “Trust me, you don't want to piss him off. Students aren't allowed modern technology on Never.”

I leap off the bed.

This is horrifying.

A nightmare.

What the fuck am I going to do about my social media platforms and presence, which I've been building for years, trying to get my music out there?

Trying to remain relevant and visible.

Trying get a shot at a real career, which isn't only in seedy bars, where every other week, I'm pressured to become a lap dancer on the side.

This'll destroy me.

If you're away even for a week, it's like you've died.

“No television?” I demand. “Internet? Streaming? Not even social media? You're fucking with me.”

I hate that I can't help noticing how plush Pan's lips are, as he bites his lower lip. “I don't know what half of those things are. But darling, you'll know when I'm fucking with you.”

I shake my head. “Nope, there's my limit. You've reached it. If you want to steal my things, then come and get them.”

Pan doesn't even hesitate. He stalks toward me, and I battle to hold my ground.

There's a coiled energy in him like a wild animal who's somehow managed to get inside your home.

It makes the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

"Oh, I will," he hisses. "Take your fucking technology out of the bag."

"That's not very polite, bro."

He growls in frustration. "Angela, which is Greek for heavenly creature, right? Unlike you, I actually knew that you were coming here: the golden girl. You're all that your mum has spoken about. But now you're here and you're pretty as a broken doll with those haunted eyes. But I don't think that you're an angel, are you? Or a doll? Are you broken though?"

He leans closer to me, and his eyes blaze with a rage that I don't understand.

"Don't fucking call me that," I whisper.

"*Broken?*" He looks me up and down like he's trying to work me out. "Why not? If you're broken, then it means that you know you can't be fixed, even if they keep on trying. It's worse thinking that you're merely cracked, and if you can only find the correct method to mend yourself, then you'll be cured. *Become normal like everybody else.* If you embrace the difference, then you're free."

My breathing sounds too loud in the quiet room. "You're free, are you?"

He winces. "Are you?"

"We call that deflection in the trade."

Now, it's his turn to wince. "And what trade is that?"

"Being a wise-ass."

Pan chuckles, but his eyes are cold. "Are you trying to get me into trouble?"

Something's going on here that I don't understand.

Possibly, between Mom and these twins.

There's a wariness lurking under the rage. Pan's using his anger to try and mask it.

Pan's lips are close to mine. I can feel his hot breath against my skin. I don't think that he even realizes how close we're standing.

I shiver now but for an entirely different reason.

I take a slow breath. "I'm sorry. Look, if it's the rules, then I'll hand over the stuff but only until I can talk to the Director and get it back. I can see how you wouldn't want a new sis moving in and ruining your life. I upended Shadow's schedule, right? We're both grownups. We're strangers. This is messed-up for us both to meet for the first time like this."

"You're not my sister."

My expression softens. "Just because our parents decided to get hitched doesn't mean that we're really anything to each other. I mean, I'd like to become friends. It doesn't make us family, however, not really. I get that. I only meant that I know about being jerked around and I've been forced onto you. But like I said, we can learn about each other over these two weeks and at least get on before term starts."

"Don't." Pan's hands clench.

"What?"

"Don't fucking stand there and give me the *I bet we'll be best friends* speech. I've heard it before." He leans even closer, and for a heart thumping moment that makes butterflies swarm in my stomach, I think that he's going to kiss me. Instead, he whispers, "Hurt me."

His words don't register, only the seductive rumble of his voice.

When they do, I grab hold of his jacket, and he flinches, before he holds himself unnaturally still. "That's not really my thing. Well, unless we're talking about negotiated, consensual kink with some biting and erotic spanking."

I mean the joke to defuse the situation.

It doesn't.

"Hurt me," Pan's voice is flat now; it scares me, "rather than Shadow. I won't try to stop you. We're living in the same tower now. No one will believe me. I'm intimately aware of that. So, all I'm saying is, you can slap me or—"

"Stop," I jerk away from him, tumbling over onto my ass.

When did I start shaking?

He's staring down at me with that confused look again, which is better than the hollowed blankness of before.

"Seriously," I hug my arms around my knees, "I don't know what lies Mom has been spreading about me...*again*... but I'm not going to hurt either of you. Jesus, that's fucked-up."

Pan's eyes are glassy; he almost appears to be in a trance.

Suddenly, he doesn't look like himself but an entirely different person.

His shoulders are thrown back, and his lips are twisted into a dangerous smirk.

Somehow, he appears older.

Shit, how is that possible?

"Drop the sweet act, my dear. It's remarkably unoriginal, don't you know?" Pan's words are elegant but that only makes them more menacing.

How can even his voice sound different?

My heart hammers in my chest, and my pulse races.

I slowly edge backward, glancing over my shoulder at the open doorway.

Only, Pan notices.

"Where are you going?" He jumps forward, snatching me by the foot and hauling me toward him.

My heart leaps into my mouth.

Pain shoots through me.

I yelp, but Pan doesn't let go, dragging me after him like hunted prey toward the center of the room.

"Get the fuck off me." I kick out at him, twisting and struggling.

I scabble at the hard floor, and my nails catch, as I try to break free.

Calmly, Pan drops me on the rug. "Such a pretty but noisy bird I've caught. Now, stop flapping those wings and listen to me." When he crouches down in front of me, I cringe backward. His gaze is dark and intense. "I've seen this before: honeyed words, charm, and fake empathy. But what you need to understand, my dear, is that I will end you, before I let you do anything bad to my brother. Shadow is off-limits to you. He's mine to protect. Do you understand?"

Blanching, I nod.

"Words, please."

"I understand," I whisper.

I've never met anyone as protective — or possessive — as this.

All twins aren't like this, right?

What am I missing?

Pan considers me for a long moment. "*Liar*. And such a pretty, practiced one that it would be so easy to let myself be taken in. Are you going to tell me next that you haven't flown out here to become the new music professor?"

I gape at him.

Finally, some pieces of the puzzle fall into place. Except, I still don't understand why he's frightened of professors.

I scoot backward away from Pan, until my back hits the wall, and this time he allows me to. "It shows how much you know, asshole. I've been enrolled as a student. Am I meant to be flattered over the misunderstanding? Because weirdly, I'm not."

Abruptly, Pan stands up. "What?"

He pales, swaying.

There's a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and his gaze becomes unfocused again.

His shoulders slump, and he ducks his head.

I stiffen, unable to look away.

The transformation is fascinating.

Pan's curls cover his face.

When he lifts his head, and I can see his face again, he looks back to the Pan who I first met.

Only, he appears to be bewildered and anxious, despite the fact that he's hiding it with a cool mask that would be impressive, if I wasn't skilled at wearing my own enough to see beneath it.

He wraps his arms around himself, darting hurried glances at me. He's scanning me head to toe for injury, almost as if he's trying to work out why I'm sitting on the floor.

Does he have problems with his memory? Mental health issues?

"I'm not a fucking professor," I continue. "Mom called me to Never, saying that she'd pay for me to have a place at this exclusive academy. Since I haven't seen her in years and am too broke myself to fund college, it was like winning the golden ticket. Sort of. If that ticket came with a stepdad (and now I know, stepbrothers), who I didn't know and this whole island thing. So, maybe I've been living in a fantasy world that I'll be able to become a singer, but at least some education alongside it would be good."

Pan pales even further. "Did I hurt you?"

He rushes toward me, dropping to his knees in front of me. Then like it's second nature, he pats all over me, checking for injuries.

It's the most brotherly thing that he's yet done.

I still flinch.

Instantly, he pulls away. “Sorry, fuck, I shouldn’t have... I wasn’t thinking.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“All the fucking time.” He slams his forehead against the wall, close enough to me that I can feel the silky tickle of his hair. “Shit, shit, *shit*.”

Then he punches the wall.

Somehow, I know that he’s angry at himself. But I don’t understand why.

I reach out, snatching his hand between mine, before he can damage it further by punching the wall for a second time; only after I’ve done it, do I realize that now I’m holding his hand. “Hey, Never Hall’s survived for hundreds of years. I’m pretty sure that you’re going to break your hand, before you break that stone.”

Pan stares down for a long moment at where our hands are clasped together.

His hand is large and strong, between mine. His knuckles are bruised and swollen.

The thought jolts through me that this is the first time that I’ve held *any* guy’s hand.

Pan gently pulls his hand out of mine, shaking it out with a grunt. “I made a mistake.”

“No shit. Don’t be dumb enough to punch a wall next time.”

Pan’s intense gaze seeks out mine. “I meant that I made a mistake about you. We’re both *students* here together. I look out for the students, my Lost Boys. It’s my role. I’ll protect you, darling.”

“And who protects me from *you*? Do student union presidents drag students around like hunted prey as standard protection, or did I get the added hazing bonus?”

“I hate mums,” Pan bursts out. “Then suddenly, Dad’s marrying yours, and she’s moving in here. Now, I have you

here as well. Trust me, you don't want to be on Never. Fyfe will be back in two weeks. Catch that next flight back to your cockroach infested apartment and the shit phone that you love so much. Leave Never."

Furious, I push myself up onto my knees next to him. "Don't tell me what to do. I don't like rules."

Pan chuckles, darkly. "Fuck, you're really going to hate living in Never." Then his gaze drops to my lips, before raising to my eyes again. His voice is seductive, pulling at something deep inside me. *Stepbrother*, I remind myself strictly, *forbidden*. "Plus, I love telling bad girls what to do, while only good girls get to tell *me* what to do."

"Lucky for us then that I'm neither."

Pan's eyes gleam with a wicked light. "For me you would be. But we're never going to find out because you're only going to stay for two weeks. You can enjoy this paradise in the sun for a holiday, but then, that's it. I take my duty of keeping you safe seriously. And that means, you're getting on that helicopter, even if it means I carry you there myself."

Chapter Five



Feeling that Peter was on his way back, the Neverland had once again woke into life.

Stag Tower, Never Hall

I shiver, wrapping my towel more firmly around myself. Then I slip my fluffy bathrobe, which I brought with me to Never, over it because I don't want to risk anyone seeing my burn scars.

I'm not ashamed of them but I'm not ready to talk about them yet.

I don't know if I ever will be.

I peer around the bathroom door into the shadowy corridor.

I've been in Never for over a week now, and I've definitely learned about the *joys* of sharing a bathroom with two guys.

One of my tricks is to take a bath late in the evening, when the bathroom will definitely be free. Then I can wallow in the antique Victorian bath with actual hot water and take as long as I want.

I'll be alone in the quiet, undisturbed.

I can also slip my hand under the water and touch myself, slow and satisfying. I circle my clit, while my other hand

flicks my nipples with just the right edge of *pleasurepain* that I've learned I love.

It's only a shame that I don't dare use any of my waterproof toys because of their vibrating hum.

Since the ancient door doesn't lock, every use of the bathroom here during the day is an adventure.

I've already walked in on the twins twice.

Once, to Shadow applying Kohl under his gorgeous eyes, and once to Pan sprawled naked in the bath.

Weirdly, Shadow was the more embarrassed.

Pan merely smirked, widening his legs to make certain that I didn't miss a glimpse of his stunning pale skin, lean and muscled limbs, and a dick so large that I almost choked on my own tongue.

"Sorry," I squeaked, stumbling backward out of the room.

"Don't be," Pan called after me with a laugh.

It's one of the mysteries of Never Hall.

There's no locks on doors that should have them. But locks on the outside of doors that shouldn't have them: Pan and Shadow's bedroom door, for example.

Why is that?

Now, my skin goosebumps in the chill, and water chases down my back from my hair.

I need a second towel for my hair, but the rule is one towel per bath.

It's in *Never's 100 Rules and Guide to Demerits*.

Demerits, I've learned, lead to official punishments.

I don't know what the punishments are.

Less time using the music studio? A curfew?

I do know that demerits can be given for: lack of attention, looking out of the window during class, violence, talking

during lunch, backtalk, disorganization, or *using more than one towel*.

Shit, is this an academy or a boot camp?

Pan tossed the neon green book onto my bed on the second day, which was emblazoned with the academy's clock emblem. "Read it or burn it. I don't care, darling. But the Director insists that everyone who comes here is given one of these fucking things. Actually, you should read this shit because then you'll understand why you should get on that helicopter in two weeks."

I get his point.

The Director, my new stepdad, hasn't even made an appearance yet. Mom's invented all sorts of excuses about his dedication to the students over in the academy and how he needs to live some of his time over there.

I don't buy it.

What's he really doing?

This was meant to be a new family for me. But my stepdad hasn't crossed over that gray wall to see me for ten days.

He's coming back tomorrow to spend some quality time with me on Friday and over the weekend.

I'd have made my mind up to leave, if it wasn't for his sons.

They're every reason why I *shouldn't* leave.

Why I can't.

Pan and Shadow are the sunshine in Never. They're like wild spirits. I've never met anyone like them: magnetizing and mesmerizing.

Plus, Pan meant it about protecting me. No one's ever done that before.

No one.

It means everything that they care.

From the moment that I wake up, the twins don't leave me by myself. It's like they're creating a protective unit around me.

Two hot bodyguards.

I'm also coming to feel that they're part of my Soul, which I didn't know was missing.

Yet I can't allow myself to think about them like that because they're my stepbrothers.

It's confusing.

They're strangers; we didn't grow up together. Yet Mom would be horrified to know that I have any feelings for them.

This secret is tearing me apart.

How could I not feel something, however, when Shadow pads into my room every morning with my favorite coffee, which he's made in his **TEARS OF MY ENEMIES** logo mug (dark and steaming hot without sugar because I'm sweet enough).

Shadow's done that since the first morning I woke up in Never Hall.

He held out the coffee to me. "I didn't know how you took it."

I pushed off my covers and blinked at him sleepily; he was dressed in black pajamas that clung to him sinfully. "Oh, very, *very* seriously."

Shadow's lips twitched. "Same here."

I took the coffee from him. "Thanks. This isn't messing up your routine again, is it? I want to fit in with what you need."

Shadow looked shocked, as if he'd never had someone say that to him, apart from his brother. But then, he smiled. He twirled like he couldn't stop himself.

He'd make an amazing dancer. Was that what he did at the academy?

Except, these movements felt different and more simply how he expressed himself.

Was Shadow neurodivergent?

He leaned against the bed, thrumming with energy. “Get dressed then. We’ll go on a walk together after breakfast. The orchard looks beautiful in the early morning sunshine. You can see the light through the leaves, and the sky is so blue that it’s like being in heaven. Do you think heaven is like that? Flying in the blue? I hope so. Blue is my favorite color, apart from black. But I hate to think of heaven being dark. Would you like me to show you this island’s secrets?”

Fuck, yeah.

Yet it was overwhelming to be the center of Shadow’s attention.

His golden eyes were focused on me. I was pinned by them.

He talked fast and with a startling intensity.

Yet when I reached out and touched Shadow’s hand, he stiffened and looked like he couldn’t decide between running or lashing out.

I knew how that felt.

I hurriedly drew back. “I won’t touch you without permission again.”

Shadow bristled and stalked to his feet. “Right.”

He didn’t believe me.

I understood that too.

“I don’t like touch either,” I replied. I hadn’t spoken about this to anyone. It was a shock how easy it was to talk to Shadow because I knew by the pain in his gaze and the wary way that he was holding himself that he’d understand. “My brother hurt me. A lot. So, it’s hard for me to accept touch now. Even kind or gentle touch triggers the reactions that it’s an attack. I know that it’s only instinct, but it’s hard to fight it. I want to, but you know, there’s more to healing than just

wishing for it, right? It's a lonely place to be because I'm desperate for that touch but I'm not ready for it yet or at least, I haven't found anyone who can I trust to help me through the trauma."

"Your brother?" Shadow's expression gentled, before it hardened into something that was both determined and as scarily dangerous as his twin. "I'm going to help you, if you want me to. No one's hurting you again. You're ours now."

Then Shadow turned on his heel and stalked out of my bedroom.

Theirs...?

From that moment, the twins stuck by my side, on the alert.

We explored the orchard, climbed the trees, ate strawberries and cream in the gardens, and sunbathed in front of the manor.

Pan's enthusiasm was infectious, showing me the bright green frogs in the damp shade of logs near the pond and allowing me to name the one that I found.

I decided that she was definitely a girl, naming her Tink.

Pan and Shadow paled for a moment, before laughing.

What was that about?

Shadow was more likely to draw nature all over himself. He had a pen that he always kept in his pocket, when he wasn't twiddling it between his fingers, fidgeting with it, or breaking it and staining his long fingers with its ink.

I caught glimpses of beautiful butterflies drawn on his wrists.

Were they named as well?

Yet we never went over the wall into the academy grounds.

The only time that Shadow is truly relaxed, is when he's leaning against his brother, and Pan is stroking his fingers through Shadow's curls.

Real butterflies danced in the sunshine, and Shadow danced with them, while I sang.

I learned that Pan usually jumped down to the ground from one branch too high, which transformed his expression with feral delight at the risk and then the pain, when he landed.

He sought out sensation, both good and bad.

Sometimes, he seemed to forget things. It was as if his memory was fading in and out.

It scares him. But he won't admit it.

I learned that Shadow memorized not only everything that I said to him but everything that I did — from how I liked my coffee to my favorite walk beneath the big oak at the bottom of the gardens — so that he could quietly provide it for me.

Never *is* a paradise.

But it's one with temptations: *my stepbrothers*.

Why couldn't I have met them in a bar back in America?

I sigh, carding my fingers through my wet, tangled hair.

I have three days to come to my final decision, and I already know that it'll break my heart to leave the twins behind.

Yet won't that be for the best?

I can't fall in love with my own stepbrothers.

But am I already falling?

I take a deep breath, adjusting my scratchy towel more closely around myself under my bathrobe, before stepping out into the dark corridor.

There's only one antique lantern, which is casting golden light over the corridor at the far end.

I squint through the shadows.

My room is next to my brothers'.

It's hell each night being so close to them, but being divided at the same time by a wall.

I lie in my bed, unable to sleep, resting my hand against the stone and wondering if they're doing the same thing.

Do they think of me as any more than someone who's invaded their world? Who they're trying to get rid of? Who's fucking up their life?

My wet foot slips on the floor, and I gasp.

I catch myself, just before I fall.

My heart's beating fast, and I bend over, waiting for it to slow.

Fuck, that was close.

And that's why the only one towel policy is bullshit.

The flimsy towel barely covers me and stops at my knees. Thank goodness for my trusty bathrobe.

I take careful steps now toward my bedroom. Just as I reach it, however, I'm stopped by a noise from the twins' room.

A moan.

Shit, are they hurt?

In trouble?

In pain?

I glance up and down the corridor, unsure what to do.

I rest my hand on the cold surface of the door.

Should I knock? Call out?

Fuck that, I'm not letting anyone hurt them. The thought of Shadow especially with his soft eyes and shy smile being made to moan in pain makes me want to burn down the world.

He makes me feel protective in a way that I never have before.

I ready to burst through the door.

Another moan.

It stops me in my tracks because this time, there's a different quality to it, threading underneath: *pleasure*.

I flush, snatching back my hand from the wood.

Fuck, that sounds like...

One of the twins is wanking.

My cheeks heat.

I shouldn't be listening to this.

It's night.

They're in their own room.

They're men. They don't have partners and are alone in their bedroom. They deserve their privacy.

I feel frozen to the spot.

My breathing becomes ragged, and hell, I'm wet and not because of my bath.

I should go straight into my room and close my door.

I definitely *should*.

I don't.

Instead, I edge closer to the door and press my ear to it.

Just for a moment.

One moment.

Now that I'm listening this closely, I can hear soft movements, a *thwap, thwap, thwap*, and that delicious muffled moaning.

He's close.

Is it Shadow or Pan?

I don't know which I want it to be more.

Is the other twin asleep?

Or are they awake and watching?

I almost moan myself at the thought, biting my lip hard.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I'm concentrating so hard on what's going on behind the closed door that I miss what's going on outside in the corridor, until a man's powerful arms cage me.

I only just stifle my scream in time.

I can feel the man's lips at my ear and his heat.

He smells of whiskey and danger.

"You wouldn't want Pan to know what you're doing, right? He takes his privacy highly seriously," a teasing American voice whispers. It's smooth but with a dangerous edge to it like a deadly undercurrent. "I've heard a lot about my new sis, the golden girl, but I didn't expect to first meet her half-naked, wet, but yet filthy enough to be listening at doors."

"Sister?" My eyes widen.

This can't be happening.

I have a third stepbrother?

Seriously?

"I would be insulted that no one told you about me," my new stepbrother's voice hardens, and it makes me shiver, "but I'm the adopted one. I learned fast to be quiet, obedient, and invisible. The Director rarely remembers my existence, apart from at staff meetings. I didn't grow up with Shadow and Pan. I'm just the Director's little project. Huh, I guess the asshole heard my name and wanted to add me to his collection. He's all about the dark symmetry."

"Dark...?"

"Everyone has some darkness in them." He shifts even closer. "But then, if you're Victoria's daughter, I don't have to tell you that."

I should be insulted.

I'm not.

"So, you seem to know about me," I murmur. "Who the fuck are you?"

“Peter, of course,” he replies. I freeze. *Well, who else was the bastard Director going to adopt based solely on their name?* “Also, Professor Never.”

I’m so fucking screwed.

I close my eyes and wish that I could bang my head on the door.

My new stepbrother is a professor at the academy. I bet that he’s been over in the academy with James for the last week.

And I have to meet him for the first time dressed in only my bathrobe, dripping wet, and listening at the twins’ door like a creeper.

I bet Peter thinks that I’m a stalker.

Will he tell Mom?

I flush hot with embarrassment, cringing.

As if he can sense this, Peter’s voice drops even lower. “Shall we open the door and show Pan and Shadow what you’re doing?”

My pulse skyrockets.

Please, no...

“Don’t...” I beg.

Desperate, I glance over my shoulder and meet the man’s electric blue eyes.

They’re startling.

Fuck, I could drown in them.

The professor’s at least 6 foot 5, towering over me with broad shoulders. His jaw is square and covered in stubble, and his eyes look even more blue in contrast to his tanned, olive skin.

He has a tumble of raven hair and cheekbones so sharp that I could cut myself on them.

He’s dressed in a stylish, Armani suit.

He's older than me. He appears to be about thirty years old.

I can feel the man's lips smiling against my ear. "No, beautiful?"

"*Beautiful?* Isn't that inappropriate, professor?" I scramble to pull back some control.

"Like listening at the door, while your stepbrother...?"

Peter pauses, and we both wait in the tense silence, listening to the soft sounds of one of the twins wanking.

My cheeks pink.

I clutch my towel tighter around myself.

"Are you imagining it?" Peter asks. "Do you wish that you could watch?"

"No," but it sounds weak even to my ears.

And now, I *am* imagining it.

Those elegant fingers working up and down the large dick, twisting over the head and then using the precum as lube.

How the second hand pushes the pajamas down further to fondle their balls.

The soft intakes of breath, as the pleasure builds.

How rapidly their chest rises and falls, while they arch off the bed, as they build to their climax.

How hard they're biting their lip to try and keep quiet, only they can't because the pleasure is just too much.

Moans, sighs, and...

They're about to come.

They're speeding up and losing their rhythm.

Peter snatches me by the shoulder and twists me around.

I stare up into his eyes in shock.

His cheeks are as flushed as mine. I can feel how hard his dick is through his suit against my hip.

His gaze is searching, as we both stand, never looking away from the other, listening to our stepbrother come in his bedroom.

I shiver with the forbidden thrill.

My heart's wildly beating. I've never been this terrified or so turned on before.

The way that Peter's studying me, it feels like he can see into my soul.

I can't look away from him.

Shadow and Pan are beautiful, but Peter's the most dominantly handsome man who I've ever seen.

Peter smirks like he can read my mind. "I bet that you're wondering which twin that was? Are you hoping that it was Pan or Shadow?"

"I'm not telling you, jerk. Who do *you* hope it was?"

"I'm not the one who was listening at their door."

"But you stayed, didn't you?"

Peter's tongue darts out to wet his lips, and I can't look away from it. "Only because I wanted to watch your face, when they came. You can tell a lot about a woman, when her defenses are down. I'm protective of my brothers, and do you think that I'd let any stalker near them?"

Shit.

I redden even further, which I didn't know was possible.

I tilt up my chin. "So, what did you find out about me, professor?"

"Enough to know that I trust you around my brothers, but also, that you have enough darkness in you not to trust *myself* around *you*."

I shiver at his intensity. "I don't trust anyone."

He tilts his head. "That's a lonely way to be."

I swallow, ducking my head.

When he grips my chin, I flinch. Immediately, he pulls back from me.

Peter's expression tightens for a moment, before his grin becomes wicked. "When you see our twins tomorrow, what you heard tonight is all you'll be thinking about." I don't miss the way he says *our twins*. He tuts. "What a bad girl you are."

I glance over my shoulder at the closed door behind me.

It's silent inside their bedroom.

The twins must be able to hear our muffled voices by now. What if they come out here?

Fuck, I'd die.

Yet I'd be lying if I didn't say that the excitement is adding to the thrill.

I bite my lip. "Are you going to tell your brothers?"

Finally, Peter pushes away from me, crossing his arms. "Do you want me to?"

What kind of question is that?

He's watching me, assessing.

"Of course I don't, asshole," I hiss.

"Then I won't." His lips twitch like he's trying to stop himself laughing. "And that's no way to talk to your professor, beautiful. You're lucky that I don't give you a demerit."

"Fuck you."

"Two demerits. Wow, you rebel."

"You have no idea."

All of a sudden, there's a *click*, then a sliver of light bleeds out from underneath the twins' bedroom door.

Are they about to swing open the door?

Adrenaline and panic spike through me.

"Bedtime." Peter snatches me by the arm and drags me to my own bedroom.

He shoves me into my dark room.

I twirl to stare at him, as he stands leaning silhouetted in my doorway.

His face is swathed in shadows.

Peter raps his hand several times on the wooden frame like he's debating whether to say something or not.

“I'm sure that I'll see you at lunch with the Director tomorrow. Before then, how about you don't start something that you can't stop?” Peter warns. “Also remember that it's dangerous to listen at doors in Never Hall. You never know what secret you'll hear and never be able to forget.”

Chapter Six



Boy, why are you crying?

Kitchen, Never Hall

I squirm on the hard wooden bench, uncomfortable in my new dress. I struggle to draw in breaths through the corset.

The dress is made out of frilly white lace like a doll's costume. It's cinched in so tightly at the waist, as well as being laced with ribbon, that I feel constricted.

Trapped.

It must have cost more than anything I've owned before.

I hate it.

Only, Mom was so excited, when she'd carried it into my room this morning with a flourish and a *ta da!*

How could I turn it down?

It's Friday lunchtime, and finally, I'm meeting my missing stepdad, James Never.

Jim.

The kitchen in Never Hall is as grand as a royal dining hall. It has high vaulted, beamed ceilings, and huge mullion windows.

On the far side is an open fireplace, which a hog could be cooked over, and copper saucepans hang from the stone walls. A deep Belfast sink is sunk into the counter at the back of the room.

A grandfather clock dominates the kitchen. The picture on its face is of three kids holding hands and flying. Its hands move around the clockface with a steady *tick-tock*.

The sound's hurting my head.

In the middle of the room is an antique oak table, which is surrounded by benches.

Rain lashes the windows in a summer storm, which is humid and makes my skin sticky.

I'm sitting opposite Pan and Shadow, whose shoulders are touching.

Peter is sprawled next to me on one side, while Victoria perches primly on the other.

Pan and Shadow have been playing the *wink at me and then pretend to be looking innocently past me* game from the moment that we sat down.

I've been trying hard not to laugh.

I've been trying even harder not to guess which of them it was that I heard last night in their room (just like Peter told me I would), or to imagine them with their hand stroking up and down their cock, as they arch off the bed in pleasure.

I've been unable to even meet Peter's knowing gaze.

I've noticed that all the Never men are dressed more smartly than normal, just like I've been smartened up.

Shadow's not wearing his normal Kohl smudged under his eyes, and I miss it.

James sits at the head of the table like a storm cloud.

His presence is oppressive.

My shoulders hunch, and I play with my cutlery, until Victoria pointedly stills my hand.

I sneak a glance at James.

Then I wish that I hadn't.

He meets my gaze steadily and then doesn't look away.

James is in his fifties with sallow skin, short black hair and matching beard, and too small green eyes.

Pan and Shadow must take after their mom.

What happened to her?

My brow furrows.

Huh, good point.

They've never mentioned her, and there aren't any photos of her up in Never Hall.

I understand about bad breakups. Mom can't cope with seeing pictures of Dad. It still hurts me that he wants nothing to do with me. It doesn't matter that I'm a grown ass woman now.

I guess part of you will always strive after your parents' love, even if you know that you're never going to get it.

James is dressed in a green suit and elaborate waistcoat with clock cuff links that match Never's logo. He's broad chested with thick forearms.

He's a powerful man.

His face looks gloomy, and there's something creepy about the way that he doesn't seem to blink.

I duck my head, hiding behind my hair.

The long silence continues to draw out.

Tick-tock.

Would someone shut that fucking clock up?

James is controlling us with this silence.

It's painful.

Tick-tock.

If someone doesn't say something soon, then I'm going to start rapping "The Real Slim Shady" by Eminem just to break it.

Tick-tock.

"Well," James draws out the word like you'd draw out a sword; his voice is aristocratic and it's as if he's analyzing every word at a scientific level, "we're finally all gathered here together. We have much, for which to be thankful."

Victoria sits straighter in her seat. "We do. Don't we, love?"

She nudges me with her bony elbow.

I arch my brow.

I'm grateful.

But I'm not sure that being grateful for Shadow's tight ass, Pan's cock, and Peter's dominant professor vibes are the type of thing that James means.

I hope that my filthy thoughts don't show on my face.

I suck at family meals. It's not like I've had any practice for the last five years.

Victoria nudges me more insistently.

I cough. "Yeah, I'm overflowing with gratitude."

James' eyes glint, as he leans his elbows on the table and steepled his hands like he can't decide whether I'm being sarcastic or not.

Pan's smirking like he knows exactly how sarcastic I'm being.

Victoria shoots me the disapproving look that I know so well.

"I think we're all grateful to get to know our new family member," Peter says, and I have a feeling that he's saving me somehow. "And I know that she's going to be happy to learn more about us, right?"

I flush.

Asshole.

We both know what he's talking about.

"Right," I mumble.

Peter claps his hands together. "Let's eat."

I look down at the charred beef, hard roast potatoes, and shriveled broccoli on my plate.

Yum.

Wait, there's my sarcasm again.

I wrinkle my nose at the aroma of burned meat, which is mingling with all the other stale dinners in the kitchen.

"I did my best. I tried," Shadow says, quietly. "Sorry."

Wait, Shadow cooked?

I glance at Victoria. Does she have them doing the chores?

Victoria tuts. "Did you wander off and lose concentration again? You're meant to watch a meal, while it cooks. This was your punishment chore. What do you call this disgrace? It's inedible."

Why does she have to talk to them like that?

"I call it delicious." Valiantly, I try to make my lie look convincing, stabbing a piece of tough beef.

I stuff the beef into my mouth and chew on it. It lodges in my teeth. With difficulty, I force myself to swallow.

Shit, that's bad.

Shadow may have many talents but cooking isn't one of them.

Yet the way that Shadow's face lights up, and he smiles, makes it worthwhile. I'm going to force myself to empty my plate just to make sure that he doesn't lose his smile.

"A for effort." Peter copies me, setting about his meal with a gusto that I know is as fake as my own.

"Thank you, Sir." Shadow beams at him.

I choke, and Victoria has to bang on my back.

Pan pushes himself out his seat. “Do I need to leap over there and do the Heimlich maneuver?”

“Eat your meal,” James’ voice has become cold. “She’s fine.”

I twist to Peter. “You make him call you *Sir*?”

Peter’s blue eyes twinkle. “I make all my students call me that. You’re looking forward to my dance class, aren’t you? I take both exercise and dance. Shadow here is my star pupil. He knows how to show respect. I’m looking forward to pairing you two together. You’re going to make the perfect dance couple. I’m planning the choreography already. Hey, why aren’t you calling me Sir?”

“Because we’re not in your class now, tyrant.”

“I prefer to think of myself as dominant.”

I choke again.

“Don’t scare her, *Sir*,” Pan drawls in a way that makes *Sir* sound like he really means *asshole*. “She’s new here. She wasn’t raised on Never.”

Victoria is pointedly sawing away at her beef.

But James...?

He’s watching our exchange with glinting eyes like we’re lab rats in his experiment.

James picks up his crystal goblet of red wine and takes a long drink. “It doesn’t matter where a young person has been raised. They’re all heartless and inspired by the devil. They’re wayward agents with few morals. I find that most respond to the same conditioning and discipline.”

My breath shutters.

What the fuck?

Pan is studiously avoiding my eye.

There’s a deep silence in the room, which is broken only by the *tick-tock* of the clock.

I shiver, as dread curdles in my stomach.

Suddenly, I feel even more trapped in this dress and on this island.

Now, I understand about *Never's 100 Rules and Guide to Demerits*.

My stepdad is a bastard.

Why did Mom bring me here?

Unexpectedly, underneath the table, I feel Pan's foot stroke across mine and then ease its way up my ankle and lower leg. He's slipped off his shoe, and the sensation of his silk sock sliding against my stockings is delicious.

Obscene.

My breath hitches.

It's like a slow fucking.

I never knew that I had a foot kink.

Perhaps, I simply have a *Pan kink*.

Pan's talking in a low voice to Shadow and ignoring me like he's not doing anything underneath the table at all.

Jerk.

I shiver for an entirely different reason now.

Pan darts me a quick glance that's all sin and temptation.

I know in that moment, he's trying to distract me in the way that works for him.

Fuck, Pan can act the bad boy as much as he likes, he's been looking out for me from the moment that he found out I was a student here.

I bite my lip hard to hide the fact that I'm playing footsie in front of both Mom and James.

Except, I can't hide it well enough because Peter catches my eye.

"Demerit," he mouths.

I redden, dropping my hands into my lap. I clench them, trying to will myself not to react further.

To my shock, Peter's large hand edges to mine underneath the table.

I jolt.

"Are you okay, love?" Victoria asks.

"Uh-huh," I force myself to reply.

Both Pan and Peter smirk.

Then they both start up their joint assault again.

Peter turns my hand, before lightly tracing onto my palm, one letter at a time: **BAD GIRL**.

I shiver.

Then he withdraws his hand and continues like nothing has happened, "So, what about this storm, huh?"

"It'll be over by tonight," James replies. "But there may be thunder and lightning later. No going out in it. I know what you boys are like."

Shadow stares at the surface of the table, rocking his knife side to side like he's trying to catch the light. "I love the rain. It washes everything clean. Me clean." I can tell that Shadow's lost in one of his looping styles of conversations, where he talks fast and without really remembering that other people are listening. Is that safe when his dad is here? By the way that Pan pales and stiffens, I don't feel that it is. "There's nothing but the clouds, sky, and wind. The rain's *pitter patter* feels amazing on my skin. I can dance in it and—"

"Enough," James barks.

I hate how Shadow jumps.

Pan rests his hand on his twin's shoulder.

Peter's expression becomes tight.

"No one is to go out into the storm. Listen to your dad," Victoria says. "You'll ruin your nice clothes."

"Don't worry," Pan draws, "we'll just go naked then."

“I said, *enough.*” James reaches out and strokes down Shadow’s cheek in a possessive gesture that makes my skin crawl. Shadow looks like he wants to pull away but knows better than to do that. “You need to listen to me and trust that I know best. I am so fond of you, my sweet Shadow. But that’ll be our secret, won’t it? We don’t want the other students to think that I’m playing favorites with my own son.”

I didn’t think that it could become more uncomfortable around the kitchen table.

But it can.

I want to rip James’ hands off Shadow. Yet I’m not entirely sure what for.

It’s simply a feeling.

Victoria looks uncomfortable too with an edge of dangerous jealousy mixed in. The look that she’s casting Shadow is venomous.

It makes me sick.

Shadow is holding himself unnaturally still. “Yes, Father.”

James sighs, settling back into his seat. “It’s the mad and animals, however, who are affected by storms. You can trace that all through history, did you know that?”

My chest is tight.

The fucking bastard.

Shadow winces.

Peter pulls at his sleeves like he’s preparing to beat someone’s ass.

He looks like a broody mafia heir.

His right sleeve rides up, and for the first time, I notice that he has a gorgeous tattoo on his arm. I can just make out the intricate dragon design, as it curls up his arm.

When I tilt my head for a better look, Peter narrows his eyes and pulls his sleeve down further to cover up the tattoo.

“Do you know how much damage the label of *madness* has done?” Peter’s expression is fierce. “As an objective label, it’s invented. In the past, a woman who read a book or an apprentice who rebelled against their cruel master could be called *mad* and shut up in an asylum. It’s a myth that each society creates to cover anyone who doesn’t conform to norms. No one should throw that bullshit at someone. Words like *mad* or *crazy* are weaponized discrimination.”

“Am I *no one*?” James’s voice is dangerously quiet.

Peter straightens.

He looks just as dangerous as James.

“You’re *somebody* all right.” Peter bares his teeth.

To my surprise, James looks amused like he’s delighted to have provoked this reaction.

Victoria flaps her hands. “Now, now, don’t argue. Can I pass more wine?”

“Not right now. My adopted son, Peter, would like to prove that mental health problems are a myth. Who am I to stop such healthy debate?” James replies, and there’s an edge to it that makes my heart thump fast in my chest.

“That’s not what I said...” Peter replies through gritted teeth.

“Well, his esteemed colleague, Dr. Croc would disagree with him, and he holds a more respected place in Never than teaching *dance*. Please, correct me if I’m wrong (since you so often do), but isn’t *he* the actual therapist?”

Peter’s expression darkens.

Who’s this Dr. Croc?

I guess that it’s another one of these invented Never names.

By the way that Peter’s eyes flashed at the reference to the Doctor, he fucking hates him.

“I’m waiting.” James arches his brow. “Yes or no will do.”

“Yeah, he’s a therapist.” Peter adjusts his tie. “Nope, he’s not an actual one, if you want my opinion.”

Then Peter yelps, and I’m pretty definite that Pan’s kicked him underneath the table.

Peter tilts up his chin in defiance.

James shakes his head in mock disappointment. “Such a nasty rivalry between you two. You’re colleagues now. You should work together for the good of Never. Still, the Doctor has use of those labels that you despise. He’s written me many reports on my students and even my sons, these demon boys.”

I jolt because it’s far too close to the names that I was called growing up.

Pan only looks bored like he’s heard this many times. “I am the villain, after all.”

James studies Pan. “I always believed that they were both possessed. But the good Doctor has more medical terms for them. Take Shadow, for example.”

My stomach drops.

Shit, he’s not going to do this.

He fucking is.

“Don’t,” I plead.

“Neurodivergent,” James says like he isn’t violating his son’s privacy in the worst way and stealing his personal decision on whether he wants to disclose that side of himself. “But of course, being told that your other son would probably have murdered his mother, if she’d stayed on the island... Well, that was a hard thing for any father to hear, but even more convincing evidence of their demonic nature, don’t you think?”

Pan blanches. “How the fuck can you say that?”

My gaze shoots to Pan’s.

Victoria gasps. “I knew it. You poor man, having to hear that about one of your own sons. I’ve said before that it’s not

safe to have a man like Pan in this house. He should be kept behind the wall.”

“Shut up, Mom,” I hiss. “That’s not fair.”

“How do you know?” Victoria counters. “I’ve known them for years. But they’re strangers to you.”

Instantly, Shadow winds his arms around his brother like he’s terrified that they’re about to be separated.

Shadow shakes his head. “He would never—”

“Hurt anyone...?” James snorts. “Of course he would. How many fights has he been involved in? How many injuries were logged because of him? Broken noses and ribs? He has quite the reputation. He gets a thrill out of hurting people.”

Is it true?

I remember the way it was as if a switch had been flipped in Pan on my first day in Never Hall, when he dragged me like prey back into my room.

At the same time, however, I’ve had over a week of memories of his infectious laughter, how he helps me to climb into the branches of his favorite trees, and the way that he’s been guarding me like someone precious who should never be hurt.

He’s been protecting me. No one’s done that before.

If he’s dangerous, then he’s not dangerous to me.

Perhaps, I need someone like him on my side.

Plus, he told me that it’s his role to look out for all the Lost Boys, and I believe him.

Pan can’t look away from me; his jaw is clenched. “I never hurt anybody who didn’t deserve it.”

But he looks troubled like he’s not entirely certain.

“He’s only fighting to defend me,” Shadow insists.

“And how many fights have I been in?” Peter’s eyes narrow. “I’m the badass in this family. You know that.”

“Yet you don’t keep a hidden knife in your boot like Pan does.” When my breath stutters, James’ eyes glint in satisfaction. “Plus, you don’t do it because you’re a psychopath.”

I clench my hands.

“Stop saying this shit,” Pan growls. “Stop making this up.”

James ignores him. “Being a pathological liar is, of course, one of the criteria for being a psychopath.”

“The Doctor is the fucking liar, not me,” Pan bursts out.

“Then do you prefer one of the other labels that he gave you?” James persists. “There’s enough to write a whole new medical journal.”

“You’ve made your point,” Peter says. “I get it. Lesson learned.”

“Is it?” James looks smug. He reaches out, grasping Shadow by the back of the neck and shaking him. It looks friendly but it isn’t. “Have I made my point?”

I glance at Victoria.

She’s staring down at her hands in her lap like this is nothing to do with her.

How can she accept this?

In the past, did she sit around and talk about *me* with Dad like this?

My heart aches.

Kyden used to say that I was the devil inside our family and tell my parents lies about me that they believed.

“Do you want to know who’s the fucking psycho?” Pan leaps up, knocking his plate and cutlery clattering to the floor. His food spills across the stone. I startle. “Croc is a sadistic bastard who torments me. But instead, you make me attend his sick therapy like he isn’t the one who’s—”

“Sit. Down,” James bellows. “And stop lying. *Again*. That’s ten demerits. I am tired of your behavior. I shall be

telling Dr. Croc about this hysterical outburst of yours.”

I cringe back in the face of James’ sudden, terrifying fury.

Under the table, Peter settles his hand on my knee. It’s only its comforting presence that stops me from tipping into panic attack.

Pan’s eyes are anguished, and he looks like he’s struggling not to shake apart.

“Fuck you.” Pan balls his hands into fists.

“You look agitated,” James says, and there’s a warning in it that even I can sense.

I want Pan to sit down but I know that it’s important to him that he challenge his dad in front of me.

I don’t know why.

I don’t understand what’s going on here in Never.

“Sit down, bro,” Peter’s expression is concerned and panicked.

It’s not an order and more a plea.

Pan ignores him.

Of course he does.

I’m beginning to realize that Pan is a bigger rebel than I am.

“This could be the start of a manic episode.” James takes a deliberate sip of his wine. “After dinner, I’ll phone Dr. Croc for his opinion. I believe that he’ll agree with me that a session of ice water hydrotherapy will nicely cool your agitation.”

My eyes widen.

Ice water? Hell, that sounds fucking terrible.

“Please...” I lean across the table, and finally, Pan’s gaze meets mine.

Pan’s defiance deflates. Slowly, he settles back into his seat. I’m pretty certain that it’s only because of the desperation in my *please*, as well as because he can see how much James

has tightened his hand on Shadow's neck and the pain on his twin's face.

It hits me hard because I know exactly how he feels.

His dad doesn't believe him.

Someone — this asshole Croc — is fucking with him.

He's tormenting Pan and gaslighting him.

It's wrecking Pan. I can see that.

Because his dad is making it worse by holding the doctor like a threat over him.

It's the same as happened with my brother.

I hate the way that Pan hangs his head in shame.

Does he think that I believe what James has said? That I'll reject him and not want to be friends, family or...whatever we are to each other...now?

Instead, I nudge his foot underneath the table with mine, running it up his ankle.

He isn't the only one who can play footsie.

Pan's eyes widen in surprise, before he smiles.

It's like a weight lifting off my chest to see some of the wariness drop off his expression.

Underneath the table, Peter takes my hand in his again, turning the palm up.

This time, he spells out **GOOD GIRL**.

Warmth unfurls through me. The words pull at something deep inside me.

I'm yanked out of the happy fuzzy place that I'm dropping into, however, by a cry of pain.

My gaze instantly shoots to Shadow.

James has him gripped by the wrist and is pushing up his mesh shirt to reveal his pale skin and the beautiful drawings of butterflies that are doodled on the inside of his arm.

James' face reddens with rage. "Are you still drawing on yourself like a child? You know that I forbade it after last time."

To my shock, James lurches to his feet in a violent flurry of movement, kicking his chair back. It clatters to the floor. He drags Shadow up by the scruff of the neck and drags him toward the Belfast sink at the back of the room.

Immediately, Peter and Pan stand up like they're Shadow's bodyguards. They both look pale and horror-stricken.

"Director," Peter's voice is tight, "he needs those drawings."

"Nonsense," James says, brusquely. "He needs to learn to control himself."

He turns on the tap, and cold water sprays into the sink.

Shadow struggles. "No, please, *stop...*"

James holds Shadow's head under the spray for a long moment. The water hits Shadow like knives, making him gasp.

Then James lets Shadow up.

Shadow's curls are plastered to his head, dripping into his eyes. He gasps for breath, choking and spluttering. His eyes are red, as he tries to blink the water from them.

I'm frozen in my seat, horrified.

My eyes burn with tears.

My heart is hammering in my chest. *What the hell am I meant to do?*

"Mom, fucking stop this," I snarl.

Victoria is primping her hair, however, and looking out of the window like this is normal or at least, nothing to do with her.

Then I catch the small smile dancing on the corner of her lips and remember the flash of jealousy that she'd revealed, when James had praised his son.

With sudden, terrible awareness, I know that she's never going to help me.

Slowly, I push myself up.

I can't be like her: happy that I'm the *good* one with the treats and rewards, while someone else suffers.

I'll never be like that.

I slip a cutlery knife off the table and hold it in my shaky hand.

"Now," James rests the tips of his fingers in a proprietorial way on Shadow's back at the same time as snatching his arm and pushing it toward the water, "wash off the butterfly."

Shadow makes a sound like a wounded animal.

He shakes his head.

Desperately, he tries to wrench his hand out of James' grip.

"Let him the fuck go. You can't make him do this." Pan dives toward James.

Pan looks like a primal god.

A righteous, wrathful one who's about to smite James.

Peter, however, grabs Pan around the waist and holds him back. I can't hear what Peter's whispering to him in hurried, hushed tones. His arm slips to rest around his brother's shoulders, and their foreheads rest against each other's.

Only, they don't look like brothers.

When tears silently chase down Shadow's cheeks, James' expression darkens further.

"Never cry," he snarls. "You know the rule."

"P-p-please," Shadow whispers. "Don't make me kill it."

And that does it.

"He can't make you do anything." I step around the bench, holding the knife up. "Get your hands off him."

I'm vibrating with fury.

The butterfly is clearly something that Shadow needs, and his own dad is about to take it away from him.

Outside, when it was only Pan, Shadow, and me in the sun-drenched gardens, we were so free.

At least, I felt free. But was it just a fantasy?

A lie?

Before today, I didn't believe Pan's warnings. I was enjoying myself too much, surrounded by the beauty of both the island and the Never twins.

Now Director Never is here, however, I can see the darkness at the island's heart for the first time.

It's terrifying.

Shadow has a right to the autonomy of his own body, however, and even if I've never held a knife to anyone, I will now because I have to do something.

I've had my own autonomy stolen from me too many times. I won't see it taken from anyone else.

James' gaze slides to the knife in my hand in shock, before he chuckles.

I growl, trying to look more threatening.

James only chuckles harder. "Put that down, girl, before you cut yourself. How disappointing that my sons haven't taught you this week the proper rules of Never. Don't worry, I'll let them take the blame. At least, this time. For that, they have a demerit and are confined to their room, until the start of term."

"That's not fair."

"That's the thing about being Director: I don't have to be fair. Now, put it down."

Instead, I take a determined step toward him.

He stops chuckling, and his eyes flash with startled respect. "Your loyalty is misguided but commendable. Still, two demerits and a punishment session."

“What are you going to do with that? You’ve never stabbed someone. And it’s fucking blunt.” Pan wriggles out of Peter’s hold and strides to me. He closes his hand around mine. He prises the knife out of my hand and tosses it to the floor with a *clank* that rings through the kitchen. I wince. “Before you threaten someone be certain that you can follow through.”

Peter scowls, marching to Pan and steering him to the door. “Don’t teach her those types of skills.”

I prowl toward the sink. “I don’t need to be holding a blade in my hands to repeat that he can’t make you do anything, Shadow.”

James narrows his eyes. “Let me assure you that I can decidedly make him do as I wish. In fact, I can control any of my sweet boys. Let me give you a small demonstration.” His gaze flicks to Peter. “Phone Dr. Croc and get his approval, then take Pan and give him an hour long hydrotherapy session in the scullery.”

I gasp.

That’s the freezing water thing, right?

I expect Peter to tell James to go fuck himself.

Instead, he grimly nods.

“Peter...” Pan tries, but Peter merely snatches him by the arm.

Peter towers over Pan, and for the first time, I truly appreciate how tall and powerful he is.

He could be an enforcer.

He could be a fucking navy SEAL.

Why is he here as a *dance teacher*?

“It’s *Sir*.” Peter’s lips are pressed tightly together. “Don’t make me fight you. It won’t help Shadow.”

Then he drags Pan out of the kitchen.

I stare after them in shock.

James wants to intimidate me with his power, as well as his system of demerits and punishments. But he's not going to cow me.

I'm going to stop him anyway.

I dive to turn off the tap but I'm not quick enough.

James grabs Shadow's wrist and thrusts it under the water. Then he snatches up the scrubbing brush and scrapes it painfully across his sensitive skin.

I struggle to reach the tap, but James blocks me.

Shadow wails and struggles like it's a real butterfly being murdered, but James doesn't let go.

It's heartwrenching.

"You can't simply scrub me clean," Shadow howls. "I'm not...not...never will be. I'm dirty, will always be. You know why..."

James backhands him.

That's. It.

I throw myself at James, punching his back, arms, anywhere I can to make him let go of Shadow.

James looks at me in shock, as if dressing me up in this frilly dress has actually turned me into a demure doll, and I should be sitting obediently with Mom.

Yeah, good luck with that.

Not when he's hurting the guy who I'm falling for.

Behind me, Victoria makes a choked off sound, and it's definitely because I'm attacking my stepdad and not because that stepdad is abusing her stepson in front of her.

Because she'd been seriously okay with that.

"Gela, calm down," Victoria calls, aghast.

James twists to me.

"Well, you're showing your true colors now. What a wildcat you are." James buries his fingers in Shadow's curls

and my hair at the same time. We both struggle, but James boots open what looks like a small larder and tosses us inside. I hit my knees hard on the stone floor, crying out. “You need an isolation punishment to help you calm down, control your emotions, and think about the importance of obedience.”

My pulse roars in my ears.

Then James slams shut the door, and I’m trapped in the dark.

Chapter Seven



Stop playing and help me find my shadow.

Larder, Never Hall

Shaking, I scoot as far back in the larder as I can.

I pull my arms around my knees, trying to calm my wildly beating heart. My ragged breathing sounds too loud in the small space.

I'm claustrophobic.

Light from the kitchen slices under the thin gap beneath the door. It shows the shadowy outline of shelves in the dark. I scrunch my nose up at the aroma of herbs and garlic.

Outside, I can hear Mom's upraised voice. She sounds distressed and outraged.

Is she going to insist that I'm let out? Finally grow a fucking backbone?

In the dark, I can make out Shadow's bright eyes. His knees are almost touching mine across the small room. He's mirroring my stance. But he's eerily still, and his wet hair hangs over his face.

Water is running down his hands from his wrists, as well as chasing down his cheeks like tears.

I'm desperate to wipe away the rivulets.

But he's not crying.

He looks blank.

Hollowed out.

I wet my dry lips, listening to the footfalls, as they approach the door of the larder.

I stare at the shadow, which bleeds underneath the door.

I hold my breath.

Is that James or Victoria?

I hate that I feel this frightened. I haven't been this scared, since...

The stench of burning flesh.

The rain striking my face.

Agony.

My heart speeds up. I can feel myself tipping into panic.

Shit, not now.

When I whimper, Shadow's head whips up. His gaze focuses on mine, and immediately, his expression gentles.

He moves around in the cramped space, until he's next to me.

"Breathe," he whispers. "In and out. May I touch you?"

I hesitate.

"Just to touch your hand," he clarifies.

I nod.

My chest is rising and falling too fast now, and Shadow reaches to gently take my hand in his damp one, before pressing it over his heart, so that I can feel the *thud, thud, thud* of his heart and each deep breath that he takes.

It helps more than I thought anything could.

My breathing slows to match his.

Finally, the shadow moves away from the door.

The footfalls and the voices fade away.

I hear the slam of a door.

Shadow's shoulders slump, and I suddenly realize that he's been just as tense as me. "They're gone. You're okay now. I've got you."

For a few long minutes, we continue to sit there, as I regulate my breathing. Then I realize how close we are and how intimate this is.

I like it.

I can't help it; my lips quirk. "Do you come here often?"

Shadow gives a startled laugh, before he glances around at the stone larder. "Yeah, for the ambiance."

"I've been to some shitty bars and clubs," I admit, "in fact, I've worked in some, but I have to say, this is worse."

Shadow blinks. "I've never even been to a bar or club."

"When I get you out of here that's where we'll go first to celebrate then."

"There aren't any on Never."

My eyes narrow. "I meant, when I get you off Never."

Shadow lets go of my hand, and I instantly miss his touch. "It's a nice dream."

It's not a dream.

Fyfe is going to fly all of us off this fucking island.

I don't care what kind of hold James has on the twins. I'm breaking it, no matter what.

I reach to brush a strand of wet hair, which is falling over Shadow's eyes, behind his ear but then hesitate. "Are you okay, if I...?"

I mime stroking his hair.

He looks confused. "Why would you want to?"

"It's kind of what people do. It feels comforting, especially after something like we've just been through. Unless, it

doesn't...?"

I remember how Shadow essentially turns into a cat asking for more strokes, whenever Pan cards his fingers through his brother's hair.

But I don't want to take any chances misreading stuff.

"I don't know. I mean, it does, if Pan does it. But no one else ever has."

"Want me to try and see if you like it?"

Shadow gives a cautious nod. I brush his hair back from his face; it's as silky as I hoped that it'd be.

This close, I can see that his cheek is swollen from where he was hit.

He looks like a beaten angel.

One who's Fallen and been trapped in hell for too long.

He rests his head on my shoulder. The trust in that makes my stomach flip.

I run my fingers through his hair, and he does the same melting thing that he does with his brother.

I fucking love the way that he relaxes, leaning closer against me.

I don't think that he knows he's doing it.

Stroking his hair could become addictive.

"Thanks for standing up for me," he says, quietly. "Nobody but Pan does that. I mean, it was stupid but brave."

I snort. "That's me. Stupid but brave. I'll put it on my resume."

Shadow reaches to pull his sleeve down to cover his lower arm, where it's ridden up because of James' rough treatment, but not before I've noticed something that I can only see because we're this close: several lines of neat white lines.

Scars.

I stiffen.

Then he realizes that I've seen and instantly, pulls away from me.

He looks cornered, slamming back against the shelf.

"Woah," I hold my hands up, placating. "It's okay. We don't need to talk about it. In fact, take it as read that you don't have to tell me anything. I get it. I have a past and scars too. Shit, you just helped me through my own panic attack. You deserve your privacy and you don't owe me or anyone else squat, right?"

He looks doubtful.

"I mean it," I continue. "What your dad did at the table — blurting out your personal info like that — was a shitty thing to do."

Shadow shrugs.

"It was," I insist, willing him to believe me. "I don't know what's up with the butterflies, but he had no right to wash anything off your skin. I thought your pictures were beautiful."

Shadow rubs his wrist. "There's this lake on Never, where all these emerald butterflies swarm. When we were little, Pan would tell me stories about them. He said that they were real fairies, and if we didn't believe in them, then they'd die."

I smile. "Do you still believe that?"

"Sometimes." Shadow's expression is unreadable. "But it made me love butterflies. I don't want them to be hurt or to die."

My brow furrows. "I don't understand."

He holds his wrists out to me, showing me their soft skin, as if in supplication. "I don't want to kill the butterflies that I draw by cutting them."

...Only myself.

He doesn't add it, but it's like he's screamed it.

We both hear what he's not saying.

And James made him wash off the butterflies.

Shit.

When my gaze holds Shadow's, a deep protectiveness washes through me. I'd give anything — *fucking anything* — to change the haunted look in his eyes back to the happy one that's there, whenever it's only us out in the sunshine.

I hate being shut up in this larder but I wouldn't care if it was a gaol cell. I'm only glad that it means Shadow isn't alone right now.

“Have you got your pen?” I ask. “Can I draw a butterfly on for you?”

Shadow's breath hitches. “You'd want to?”

I nod. “You wouldn't kill a Darling Butterfly, would you?”

Shadow's eyes widen. “I'd never hurt her. I'd treasure and adore her.”

I swallow, flushing.

But then, Shadow's gaze slides from mine. “Dad will be on the lookout for any more drawings now. He hates them. He won't like even a Darling one. He won't let me keep it.”

He reaches up to trace over the bruise on his cheek and winces.

I tilt my head. “So, what about a special, invisible one that only we can see? You know, one that only we know is there?”

Shadow's pupils dilate.

Yeah, he likes that thought.

“Yes, please.” He pushes the sleeve of his shirt up, holding his wrist out like an offering.

Shadow's gaze darts to mine again, and I know that he finds it hard to make direct eye contact, but he's making a point to do it now.

He edges closer to me again, until our knees are touching.

Strangely, I haven't flinched from any of his touch. It's as if helping him, is also helping me.

I take his wrist gently between both my hands. When I trace over the skin that James has scrubbed until its red and raw, he shivers.

Gently, I draw a butterfly with the tip of my finger, and somehow, it feels like each touch is a kiss.

“Can you feel her wings?” I whisper.

Shadow’s breathing fast, panting. But there are tears in his eyes.

He nods.

I write underneath my invisible butterfly, hoping that he’ll hold the feel of it on his skin forever, marked as mine as much as any brand, **DARLING**.

“There. Your Darling Butterfly. Look after her. Don’t kill her.”

Shadow meets my gaze with frightening intensity.

He takes a deep breath. “I won’t.”

It sounds like a vow.

At last, some of the tension uncoils in my chest. I hope that it’s enough.

I smile, letting go of his wrist. “So, now I understand about the butterfly stuff, how about you fill me in on why Pan’s been dragged off for an ice bath?”

Shadow’s expression darkens. “Hydrotherapy, but really, it’s a punishment for speaking up for me. He’s never been able to stay quiet. He’s my protector and always has been. You’re...” He shudders in a way that makes me realize that it’s been done to him as well. “...submerged in ice water for at least an hour, mummified in these freezing wrapped sheets and then sprayed with a deluge of shockingly cold showers. Dad had the setup installed in the scullery (at Croc’s recommendation), for treating us.”

I gape at him. “You’re fucking with me.”

Shadow looks confused. “I don’t lie.”

“I just meant what the hell kind of therapy is that?”

“Croc says that it’s for mania.” Then he mutters, “It’s better than the boiling water that he recommends for when we’re *hyperactive*.”

I really hate this bastard therapist.

“Yeah? Then when I see this Croc, I’m going to kick him in his scaly balls.”

Shadow pales. “Then you truly are stupid but brave.”

“Hey, it’s better than being a smart coward like Professor Asshole. I liked Peter, until he dragged Pan off to torture him at the first word from your dad.”

Shadow’s expression becomes cold.

He pulls away from me. “Don’t talk about Sir like that. You don’t understand what he goes through every day, trying to protect his students. He suffers for us but he knows that he has to obey. If he doesn’t, then it leads to communal punishment for the students. We all make our choices, and Pan knows that Peter has to follow through if he breaks the rules.”

“Choices? Fucking bad ones.”

Now, Shadow’s expression shutters entirely.

“Bad?” He echoes. “You don’t want us because we’re *bad*.”

My eyes widen.

Hell, I know what it’s like to believe that no one will want you because you’re bad.

I shove myself up onto my knees and hold out my hands. Shadow takes them.

“That’s not it,” I say. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t want us.” Shadow avoids my gaze. “I tried really hard to get everything right for you, so that you’d want to stay. But Peter explained that you probably wouldn’t and not to hope too hard. He thinks that hope is more painful than anything that can be done to punish us. But I’ve been so

happy, and you have been too, right? Is it because of what Dad said? The rumors? Or is it me? What you saw? I know how I look and act sometimes. But I could be good for the right woman. And if you wanted me — if you owned me — then I'd worship you."

I stare at him in shock. "Owned?"

"Pan can never be owned. But he already worships you."

My head is spinning.

Both of them want me as a lover?

I close my eyes, taking a steadying breath.

This is like everything I crave, but at the same time, can't have.

Can I?

This sweet temptation is tearing me up inside.

Plus, there's so much to unpack in what he said.

I take one more moment to slow my hammering heart, before I open my eyes. I'm startled by how close to me Shadow's moved. His nose is almost touching mine.

This close, I can see how long and thick his eyelashes are and feel his hot breath against my lips.

"You're not bad." My lips graze his on each word. "I will never believe James' bullshit lies about Pan or you. I've also loved our time together outside in the gardens, including how hard you've worked to remember everything about me, from how I take my coffee to my favorite Cage the Elephant song. And you know what?"

Shadow's eyes are wide. He's staring at me like I'm his everything.

Like this is sacred.

"What?" He whispers.

"I don't need you to be *good*. But I believe that you could be for me, if you want to be. We need to talk about consent, before we negotiate and work out our limits and kinks because

any relationship that I have will be fully consensual and informed. But I do want you. Except, I can't choose between Pan and you. How can I?"

Because that's the point. I care about them both now and I'd never divide them by picking one over the other.

It's fairer not to have either of them as a boyfriend.

"Who's asking you to? Peter's crushing on you too, even if he won't admit it."

My mind stutters to a stop.

All three of them? At once?

Hell, it's a lot to get my head around. Yet if they're willing to share, rather than make me choose, then it's perfect.

"I need some time to think about this," I reply. "But here's the important thing: you're a great guy just as you are, you know that?" He huffs like he doesn't believe me, and I frown. "Hey, you are. All that shit you said about how you act and look. What's that about?"

Shadow's gaze darts from mine. "You know."

"I know that your tapping and spinning..."

"Stimming," Shadow says. "I try to stop it because it's what my tutor, professors, and Dad want. But I've never managed to."

"...is beautiful," I finish, firmly.

Shadow's gaze snaps back to mine in shock.

My lips quirk. "Plus, hot because it turns me on when someone's free enough to be themselves and show that to me. You're not hiding. Both Pan and you have taken me under your wing from the moment that I arrived here. It means fucking everything." Shadow blinks in wonder. Then I throw myself back from him, growling in frustration. "I'm open to polyamory, and fuck, do you have any idea how much I want both Pan and you? I'm more than fine with a relationship with both of you. Peter as well. If our asshole parents hadn't

decided to get married, then I know my answer already. I'd be saying *hell, yeah in a heartbeat* to dating all three of you."

Shadow's expression darkens. "What do our parents have to do with it? We're adults. Their marriage is nothing more than worthless words on a scrap of paper. It can be broken like it means nothing, right? It meant nothing to my mom or your dad in their first marriage, did it? They walked away. So, why should this marriage mean that we can't be together?"

He's right.

We weren't raised together. We're not blood relatives.

Our parents may get divorced tomorrow.

It's only social customs and shame that's keeping us apart.

At the same time, what would happen if we break this taboo?

I lick my lips. "What about Peter and you?"

"Peter's not my biological brother but he's closer to family now. The three of us, well, we're each other's found family. We survive together. Pan calls it a bond. He fights with Peter, which confused me at first, especially because they're usually grinning when they do it. But then, Pan explained to me that it can be thrilling to walk the line between love and hate and that Peter allows him to let out his dark side."

I can't help smiling — after the night before with Peter, I get that.

"So, you didn't grow up with Peter either then?" I ask.

Shadow shakes his head, and his curls brush my cheek. "Peter was orphaned and sent here by his remaining family six years ago. Peter's so smart and talented! But Dad only cares about his name..."

"Your dad's a freak."

Shadow doesn't look insulted. "I know."

Then something registers, and an uneasy feeling coils through me. "*Sent?* As in, against his will? Peter was an adult

by then, right? It's sad that he lost his parents, but why would anyone be able to send him here?"

Shadow gives me a long look. "Peter would be cross if I told you. It's his story to tell. Plus, he's the best professor but he can be scary, when he's pissed."

"Scary like giving detention or spraying you with cold water?"

Shadow cocks his head. "Worse. He'll probably challenge me to a freestyle dance battle."

I choke. "Hell, I need to see that."

Because it'd be the hottest thing ever to see my dark haired professor take off his suit jacket and defeat his students on the dance floor.

"When he dances, he may as well be shooting at you." Shadow looks disgruntled. "I feel like I need to be hospitalized afterward. You'd be cheering for me, right?"

"Yes," I sort of lie. "Am I allowed to be neutral in the war?"

"As long as you love both sides."

My breath catches.

I don't miss the yearning hope in Shadow's voice.

Then, all of a sudden, a scream pierces the air.

Chapter Eight



You mustn't touch me.

Larder, Never Hall

I jump, looking around startled by the scream.

Fuck, that sounds like Pan.

Was it him?

Is this hydrotherapy really fucking torture?

Adrenaline shoots through me.

I leap up from the floor, and my eyes smart with tears.

Shit, shit, shit.

I have to do something.

But what can I do?

I'm trapped in this larder that stinks of garlic with Shadow in *isolation*.

The sound's coming through the wall at the back of the larder. I trip over the bags of porridge and catch my ankle painfully on the cans of soup and beans.

I press my ear to the cold wall, trying to squint through the dark.

Silence.

I've never felt so trapped.

In this room.

On this island.

In my own life.

I stroke my fingers over the stone, as if I can stroke over Pan's skin.

"Was that your twin?" I demand.

Shadow hasn't moved.

He doesn't look up at me. "The scullery's behind that wall. Sorry, Pan will be trying to be quiet. He knows that it's against the rules to make noise and he won't want to worry us."

"Why the fuck are you apologizing for him?"

Shadow looks confused. "Isn't that why you're upset?"

There's so much wrong there that I don't know where to start.

"Hey," I yell, slamming my hand on the wall, "leave him alone. Can you hear me, Peter? I'll kick your ass, if you hurt Pan."

"Don't. Stop it." Shadow bursts up, catching me around the waist and hauling me away from the wall.

We stand in the dark, panting hard and staring at each other.

"Why aren't you fighting harder?" I demand.

"Why are you blaming Sir?" He counters.

"I don't get it. Why aren't you? Pan and you are so close. Do you want to know what Pan said about you? That he'd fucking *die* for you. I thought that his Shadow may feel the same for him."

Shadow snatches hold of my shoulders, and his eyes are bright with tears. "I do. I've tried to." My stomach drops. Shit, what have I said? "But Sir has saved both of us over and over. He's protected us and taken our punishments. Should I blame him, when it's not his fault?"

I blush, ashamed. “But when there’s three of you in this manor, why don’t you stand up together against James? You don’t need to let him treat you like this. We could get some weapons, I don’t know... I wasn’t successful with my cutlery from the kitchen before, but still, something to use to defend ourselves. Doesn’t Pan have that hidden knife...?”

Shadow hesitates, and it looks like he’s locking behind his teeth words that he’s desperate to say, before he tells me, “There are things going on here that you don’t know. We can’t leave Never, however, and we’re under a high level of monitoring and control.”

“Like?”

Shadow turns, pulling his hair out of the way.

Then he bows his head.

I stare at the beautiful curve of his neck at the top of his spine. “What am I looking at?”

“A tracker,” he replies. “All of us brothers had it implanted. Pan and I, when we turned sixteen. Peter had it as soon as he arrived on Never.”

What the fuck?

I peer closer, before running a shaky finger over a tiny, thin line that could be the scar from an operation.

But what if he did that to himself?

I flinch away from the thought.

Yet I don’t know what’s real or delusions anymore.

I know that I have to start trusting and believing in someone. After all, I need someone to do the same for me.

But seriously, *a fucking tracker?*

If that’s possible, then what else is going on in Never?

What the hell truly did happen to the first Mrs Never?

“I didn’t think that this tech was even possible,” I muse. “Aren’t things like that injected?”

“Dad’s a billionaire with contacts to the most powerful elites in the world. There’s more secret technology possible than you’d imagine but maybe don’t try to because it’ll give you nightmares.” Shadow reaches back with his hand, scratching furiously at the line like he can gouge out the tracker.

Hurriedly, I reach up and still his hand between mine.

He twists to me, and I stroke over his bloody nails.

“I can’t get Dad out. Then he’s in here as well.” Shadow gestures at his head. “It’s hard to let anyone but Pan close, when I already feel like I have someone constantly under my skin. Yet it’s more than that. Peter didn’t stop Dad hitting me or Pan’s punishment because there are more ways to be controlled than a tracker.”

My mouth is dry. “What do you mean?”

Shadow shakes his head, uncomfortable. “Come on, we’re going to be here all night. Let’s get comfortable.”

He’s right. There’s nothing that I can do about Pan, Peter, or trackers.

The helicopter comes back on Monday morning, and I have until then to solve what I’m going to do about my broken heart, if I must leave behind the Never brothers.

Until then, I have a night of rare privacy with Shadow.

I may as well enjoy it.

Silver linings, right?

Shadow sits down, pulling me next to him again.

I shuffle, getting comfortable on the hard stone. He never looks away from me, and I find that I love being the center of his world in this way.

I’ve never felt as special, as when I’m with Shadow.

What did he say...that he wants to be *owned* by me?

I can give him that, even if it’s not forever.

At least for tonight, I can offer him that in order to distract us both.

“So,” I say, careful to make it sound light, both as a check in and to give Shadow the chance to back out, “you truly want to be owned?”

Shadow’s cheeks tint with pink, and his breathing becomes ragged.

He looks at me from underneath his dark eyelashes. “Only by you.”

“What’s your safeword?”

His brow furrows. “What’s that?”

Fuck, he’s such an innocent — and I thought that with my first boyfriend, *I’d* be the innocent one.

I kind of like that I get to be the one to corrupt him. I’m not sure how Pan hasn’t though because I’m certain that he knows more about safewords than I do.

“It’s a word that you say, when you want me to stop what we’re doing, and I instantly will. There will never be any shame or pressure about using it. I’d be proud that you do.”

I hope I got that right.

I’ve read about this a lot because I’m a bookworm, even when it comes to sex.

Actually, especially then.

Shadow looks even more confused. “I don’t need one. I trust you.”

Does he know how much danger he’s putting himself in? I want to spank him and wrap him protectively in my arms at the same time.

“Not good enough,” I growl. “How about this? If I ask how you are, you say *green* for you’re doing fucking great, *yellow* for you need a break or need the activity less intense or slowed down, and *red* for full-stop and you need aftercare right now.”

“I still don’t know what we’re talking about.”

“Then how about I make it clear.” Experimentally, I reach forward, telegraphing my movements. I rest my hand around Shadow’s neck like a collar, expecting him to flinch away or bristle like he normally does. Instead, he melts against me with a happy sigh. “Are you green now?”

“So green,” he murmurs, leaning into my hold around his throat.

In response to his unspoken request, I tighten my hold.

His eyelashes flutter, and he relaxes even further.

Pieces fall into place.

He’s a submissive.

But has he ever been dommed before? Been dropped into subspace?

I don’t know if he’s had a girlfriend.

I bet he hasn’t.

I love that we’ll both have our first experiences together.

Yet unlike my extensive online research, what if Shadow has no idea about this side to himself because without technology and being raised on this island, this is genuinely all new to him?

By the way that he’s responding to me, it’s obvious that he needs this, desperately.

There’s something about Shadow that makes me feel able to cope with touch.

I flex my hand around his throat. “It’s all right. Just let yourself go. I’ve got you.”

All of a sudden, Shadow stiffens. And not in a good, *I’m hard and need to come*, way.

“Yellow,” he says cautiously like he doesn’t expect me to actually listen.

“Good boy.” I instantly let go of his throat and sit back from him.

He smiles in surprise, holding his hand over his throat like he's trying to hold the memory of my hand there.

Then he glances at me cautiously out of the corner of his eye. "What are we doing?"

Now, it's my turn to look confused. "Well, we're stuck in here for the night. You said that Pan and you had talked about wanting to be with me, and I hope that I'm making it clear I want that too. I mean, we have a lot to talk about and I don't know how it can work long-term, or if it'll only be for a couple of days, but I want to get to know you better."

"You mean that you want to fuck." He looks so alarmed that it'd be comical, if he wasn't also pale with panic.

"Woah, slow down. Consensual, remember? So, we go at the speed that works for both of us. Wait, you're a virgin, aren't you? Is this what this is all about? Have you ever knelt for anyone before?"

He bristles. "None of your business."

"It kind of is. And I'll take that as a *yes* on the virgin question and a *no* on the kneeling then."

He looks away, ashamed.

When I notice him tracing over the invisible Darling Butterfly on his wrist, I hurry to say, "It wasn't a pass or fail style of question. I'm a virgin too. Plus, I can't help that I kind of like that you're all mine. So, I'm possessive."

He stops tracing the butterfly and sneaks a look at me. His breathing slows.

"I want to know all about you too." Shadow's voice lowers, deep and intimate. "I've fallen for you, my darling. But you won't want me because nothing — sexual — is going to happen between you and me. I mean, Pan's a playboy. He'll fuck you in the filthiest ways. Pan and I have both had offers from most of the women in Never to be part of a twin sandwich. But I'm a virgin out of choice."

What does he mean?

“Did you make some kind of chastity vow or something?” Then I look at him, horror-stricken. “Don’t tell me that you’re sworn to become a priest?”

How many taboos can I break in one week?

Shadow laughs, and his shoulders relax.

I could live in the brightness of his laugh, especially after how tense he’s been.

“I’d make a terrible priest,” he says. And he would. He’d tempt his parishioners into the most delicious sin. “I meant that I’m asexual.”

Oh, that makes more sense.

“I need love and soft touches,” he explains, defensively. “I’ve dreamed about being desired, respected, and accepted. It was Peter who helped me understand this side to myself and that it had a name. Before, I just thought that I was faulty. Broken. Now, I understand that I enjoy certain activities and I want to bring you pleasure. I’m desperate for affection and a deep emotional connection but not the physical acts in the same way as most other people.”

He tilts up his chin defiantly, crossing his arms.

He’s looking at me like he’s expecting me to make fun of him and then reject him.

He’s steeling himself for it.

I’m blown away by his bravery.

I’m suddenly starkly aware of the tug of the thick burn scars underneath my dress. I hope that I can show the same bravery as him and reveal all of myself.

Has Shadow ever been accepted for who he is?

I can give him this.

“That’s fine... I didn’t...” I put my hands up. “Got it. Just tell me what you do like.”

Shadow’s looking at me like this must be a trap. “I don’t know. I like *this*.”

He holds out his hand to me, and I take it.

He tightens his hand around mine, squeezing.

Then he smiles.

“What about if I stroked your hair?” I offer. “You seemed to like that before, right?”

His pupils dilate. “Yes, please.”

“I knew that you were the polite one.”

“Well, it’s definitely not Pan.”

I laugh, and Shadow squirms around, resting his head against my shoulder. He presses a kiss to my neck that makes me shiver, and I caress my fingers through his curls.

Like before, he relaxes against me.

“Good?” I check in.

“Green,” he replies.

I’m so proud of him.

Careful, like he’s a startled animal, I massage his head, and he arches against me.

When I scratch the back of his head, if he was a cat, he’d be purring.

I tighten my hold on his hair, giving a series of small tugs, and he moans. He gives me a brief heavy-lidded look that sets my pulse racing.

I know that this isn’t about sex for him, but it’s still making me wet.

More than that, by focusing on his needs, I forget all about my own fears.

I trace my fingertips down, stroking them onto the nape of his neck, and he literally melts.

“No one’s made me feel this good before,” he breathes.

I feel fucking powerful.

Invincible.

When I glance down at him, however, I can see that he's not tenting his pants like I'd have expected.

My brow furrows.

Yet he looks blissed out.

"You're not hard," I blurt.

Shadow arches his brow. "Touch isn't arousing for me. But I don't need it to be. It feels amazing. I still want to bring you pleasure; that's what'll make me happy. Can I?"

I grin. "So fucking green here."

Unexpectedly, his gaze sparks, and he twists around.

I yelp, as he sweeps me up in his arms.

"Then lie down." He spreads me out on the floor of the larder. "May I kiss you?"

I nod.

My heart's beating so fast that I can barely catch my breath.

I've spent every night since I arrived in Never fantasizing about this moment.

He smells of sweet vanilla, and his soft lips taste even sweeter.

He misses and catches the corner of my mouth, before he works up to my lips.

This is his first kiss...mine...ours.

I tremble at how special this is.

Shadow explores me, slow and reverentially.

He licks over my lips, before pressing deeper. I open my lips and gently guide him in with my tongue. He doesn't look away from me, and I bury my hand in his hair.

He groans into the kiss. It's a delicious sound.

The kiss is a slow, tantalizing dance.

I let him lead.

At last, he pulls back.

He looks dazed. “Was that okay?”

I smile. “Perfect.”

He’s perfect.

He looks like no one’s said that to him before.

Instinctively, I reach down to stroke over Shadow’s erection, but he catches my hand.

His voice hardens. “I don’t need that. I loved how you stroked my hair, and now, I want to make you feel good as well, how you like it.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I want to. Show me how to bring you pleasure.” Shadow’s voice lowers; it’s seductive and rumbling. “Train me.”

How can I resist that?

“Then pull up my dress and let me show you where else I enjoy being kissed.” I settle myself more comfortably on the floor, as my heart speeds up.

Immediately, Shadow obeys.

He drags that frilly monstrosity up to my waist, and his clever fingers also pull down my equally frilly matching panties.

I blush.

I keep my hold on his hair as I push him down toward my pussy.

He did say that he wanted training.

I’ll show him how I like to be pleased.

“Just let me use you,” I murmur.

Shadow kisses, licks, and sucks, the best he can, as I hold him against my pussy.

It’s the first one that he’s seen, and I want him to have a good taste.

Then I take pity, pulling him back so that he can breathe.

“Are you looking at where you need to worship me?” I demand.

He nods

He is.

It’s intoxicating to have someone study me in such an intimate place and with such focus.

My pleasure is the most important thing to him right now. He strokes over my sensitive thighs with his fingers,

I pull him by his curls to my clit. “Slowly graze my clit with your tongue. Fuck, that’s it.” My breath stutters at the sudden burst of pleasure. “That feels so good. Now, circle my clit with your tongue. Slowly, *more slowly*. I’m going to pull on your hair when it feels good.”

I tug on his hair hard, and he whines against my pussy.

When I shiver, he looks up at me through molten eyes.

It’s the sexiest thing that I’ve ever seen.

I tug his hair hard again just to hear that delicious whine and feel the vibrations from it.

“Now, flick your tongue back and forth like the sweet little snake you are.”

He huffs a laugh and doesn’t that just feel fucking amazing?

“Flatten your tongue and swipe it down my pussy in long strokes. Come on, don’t be lazy. Show me what you’ve got,” I order.

When I feel how much effort he’s putting in, eating me out like he’s proving his devotion, ecstasy slams through me powerfully enough to make me shake.

My toes curl, and I thrash side to side.

This encourages Shadow to work even harder.

This is better than any fantasy.

I tug on his hair, frantically. “Good fucking boy.”

I feel Shadow’s smile against my pussy.

Well, I mustn’t let him get complacent.

I take an even firmer grip on his curls. “Now, let me fuck this pretty face.”

Then I use him like he offered, as if he’s a toy: My plaything.

He tries to keep up, licking and sucking, as I move him where I want him. “There, *right fucking there.*”

He takes my clit gently between his teeth and sucks.

And just like that the pleasure snaps, and I come.

My back arches, as I scream.

My fingers loosen on Shadow’s hair, and he surges up to swallow my panted breaths.

I taste myself on his lips.

How have I gone my entire life without this?

“I’m yours, my darling.” Shadow kisses me again, hot and eager. His golden gaze is the only light in the dark. “Will you be mine?”

Chapter Nine



Sometimes, though not often, he had dreams, and they were more painful than the dreams of other boys.

Stag Tower, Never Hall

The following night, I awake to screaming.
I shoot bolt upright in bed.

My heart pounds, and I clutch at my chest.

I scramble out of bed in the black, catching my feet in my blankets. Tangled in my bedding, I fall hard to the floor.

“Shit, shit, shit.” I fight with the sheets like they’re an attacker, still caught half between waking and sleeping, and finally manage to break free of them.

Trembling, I scoot to the corner and wedge myself next to the wardrobe, trying to shake myself free from my dreams.

Is someone being murdered?

The screaming sounds like such intense fear.

As I blink in the black, since the heavy drapes are pulled over the bedroom windows, the fuzz of sleep clears enough for me to realize two things: the screaming is coming from the room next to mine and that I recognize it.

It’s Pan.

I heard the same scream, when I was trapped in the larder, only then it'd been thick with pain, but now, with terror.

I swallow, clenching my fists.

When James finally came to release Shadow and me from larder after a night of isolation, he immediately locked Shadow in his room.

Victoria looked shamefaced but she politely asked me to stay in my room like I was a fucking kid.

I considered leaving the house on principle but where was I going to go?

I'm trapped on this island.

At least I now realize why there's a lock on the outside, rather than the inside, of the twins' bedroom.

I shiver, chilled.

The bright side is that I'm not locked in.

Yet.

I push myself to my feet.

In the summer heat, I'm only wearing a small pair of red lace panties. But I don't care. I could be naked.

I'm still going to help Pan.

This time, I'm not separated from Pan like I was in the larder. I'm not going to stay in here, while he's screaming like that.

I dive for the door, before edging out into the dark corridor. When I creep out, I peer at Peter's bedroom, which is at the bottom of the corridor.

There's no light on in his bedroom, and he's not appearing.

How can he sleep through this?

Is Shadow wrong about the professor? Is he a jerk, after all?

I dive to the bedroom next to mine and pull back the lock. Then I rush inside.

It's black in the twins' bedroom, and I can see even less than I could outside in the corridor. I don't expect the room to be smaller than mine, but it is.

My foot catches on the end of a bed, and I stumble, falling forward.

I let out an *oomph*, bouncing on the soft mattress.

I raise my head and meet Shadow's startled eyes.

Instantly, his gaze travels down my body to my equally bouncing tits and then lower, where I'm naked, apart from the tiniest of panties.

I blush.

So does Shadow.

Despite it being too dark to make out my scars, I'm still uncomfortable.

Then Pan screams again, and my gaze snaps to him.

Pan's lying curled in Shadow's arms. In the hot summer night, they're also both stripped to only their underwear: tight boxers.

They're a tangle of long limbs and muscles.

They're both sprawled in the same bed, and I'm guessing that Shadow slipped into his brother's bed, when...whatever this is...started.

Is it a nightmare?

Yet I've never seen anything like this before.

Is Pan even asleep?

Shadow tightens his arms around his brother.

"What's happening?" I demand in a harsh whisper. "What's wrong with him?"

"I'm sorry that he woke you up. He tries hard not to." Shadow bites his lip. "He didn't want you to know."

Know what?

What's behind these secrets in Never Hall?

“Well, I’d say that ship has fucking sailed,” I reply.

Pan’s stopped screaming, but his arms are flailing uncontrollably. It’s like he’s trying to fight off an invisible enemy.

I reach out my hand to help Shadow keep him still, but Pan pushes me away almost like he’s awake.

He’s not, right?

He’s breathing frighteningly fast and sweating.

Is he ill?

My eyes widen in alarm. “Is he having a seizure or something? Should I go and make your dad call a doctor?”

Shadow shakes his head, frantically. “Please, don’t. Dad hates it when this happens. Pan’s not meant to still be doing this. He’ll be in trouble tomorrow morning. Look, I know what to do. He’s fine.”

“I’m not a doctor, but he’s not fucking fine.”

“It’s a night terror.” Shadow thumbs away the tears that are now falling down Pan’s cheeks. “He gets them sometimes. He’s stuck halfway between the waking and sleeping worlds. I know that he’s breaking rules, but he can’t help it, when he’s like this. Don’t worry, he won’t remember it in the morning, probably.”

“Don’t worry...?” I hiss. “Why do I think Pan says that to you a lot? And what fucking *rules*? Why would anyone care about that when he’s in distress? Look, I reserve the right to fucking worry. Plus, to wake him up.”

I try to shake Pan

Shadow makes an alarmed sound, however, hugging Pan closer to his chest. “Don’t. It’s terrifying to be woken out of a night terror. You’ll make him think that you’re an attacker, then he’ll lash out and fight you. If he hurts you, then he’d never forgive himself. Don’t do that to him.”

I pull back because this is the guy who breaks people’s noses and keeps a secret knife stashed down his boot.

“Don’t do what?” A sleepy voice asks.

“Pan,” Shadow says, relieved.

My gaze shoots to Pan’s face.

His eyes look glassy, and he’s staring up at me, confused.

“I think that I’m still dreaming.” Pan’s gaze scans down my body through the shadows. I cross my arms over my breasts, reddening. “I don’t mind this one though because in it, our Darling is sitting on my bed and she’s only wearing this incredibly tiny pair of panties.”

Hey, they’re not *that* tiny. Plus, it’s not like his boxers are any less revealing.

Shadow nudges him. “It’s not a dream.”

Pan licks his lips, before clearing his throat. He makes no effort to straighten himself from his sprawl in his brother’s arms.

For the first time, it strikes me that this is what they’re offering me: *both of them together like this*.

It makes my throat dry with desire.

“Then I’m glad that I’m awake.” Pan blinks, glancing around himself. “I’m not complaining, but why are you in our room, darling? It’s quite the risk, while the Director is intent on putting down our rebellion. He has it locked for a reason.” Then his expression brightens. “Wait, did you come to a decision on Shadow’s offer? He told me about your adventures in the larder. So, do you want us both?”

I stare at the twins.

They’re the most impossibly beautiful men who I’ve ever seen.

Yet Pan’s just awoken me with his screams and now is acting like he truly can’t remember it.

“I want both of you to be my boyfriends,” I reply because it’s true. There’s no point denying it. “If things were different, I could love the hell out of you. But I don’t know what’s going

on here. I do know that it's fucked-up. Tonight, I came in here because you were screaming."

Pan's expression shutters. "I see."

"Just that? *I see.*"

Shadow ducks his head. "I told her."

Pan's head whips around, and his eyes flash. "What the fuck, bro?"

"Hey," I lean forward and tap Pan on the nose, "leave him alone. I didn't know what the fuck was going on, and if you want to protect me, then I want to protect you as well."

"You can't." Pan avoids my gaze. "I've had night terrors since I was a kid. The last few years, they've become worse again. It's like I'm trapped and all I remember is that it feels like there's a horror looking for me. It's stalking me in my dreams. Sometimes, I sleepwalk. I'm searching for an enemy in the shadows. I'm shouting for him, but he's out of reach, hiding. When I wake up, the feeling of trying to find a killer never goes away. Because he was never in the dream. He's inside me."

Pan shudders.

"You know that's only what they want you to think," Shadow says. "They've made you believe that. It's a trick."

Who's *they*...?

Troubled, I ask, "Is there anything that I can do to help?"

"Well, appearing in my bed almost naked is a good start." Pan's eyes are crinkled with exhaustion, and he wipes the tears away with the back of his hand, but he still winks at me.

"So, is this screaming going to become a habit — first last evening and now tonight...?"

He glares at me with a cold look that two weeks ago would have intimidated me but now, only makes me chuckle. "Well, I don't want to disturb your much needed beauty sleep, darling."

"Hey," I protest.

Pan tries to hide his sly grin, before nodding at me. “Sorry, bro, but I have prettier arms to be comforted in.”

“Traitor,” Shadow mutters.

Pan gracefully shifts his position on the bed, so that his back is facing me and he can rest his head on my shoulder.

He kisses up my neck.

I shiver, enjoying the feel of his soft lips on my sensitive skin.

He’s milking this now but then, I’m letting him.

When Pan realizes this, his lips curve into a wicked smile and he licks up my neck, before dipping to suck on my collarbone.

“Do you remember what you were dreaming about?” I ask.

Then I regret it because his delicious kisses stop.

“Peter Pan.”

“Yourself...?”

He shakes his head, and his curls tickle my neck. “The one from the stories: the original demon boy. Dad thought that it was funny to bring us up to think that this was the real Neverland. Here, Peter Pan was like Santa Claus or something. We thought that he was real. It’s ironic because Dad also believes that I’m the demon come to life. Most of the time, my night terrors have been of Peter Pan, flying in my window. But he’s not good. Yet the fucking truth is that if he flew in and asked me to fly away with him, then I would. Because that’s not the nightmare.”

Waking up here is goes unsaid.

I’m going to make Pan forget that for the rest of tonight at least.

I reach for his hand and direct his fingers to close over my tit.

Pan’s pupils dilate, as he caresses my breast, before circling my nipple.

He's tenting his underwear already.

Shadow lies back on the bed, pillowing his head on his arms to watch us together.

Pan gently flicks my nipple, before panting and pushing up to capture my lips with his.

Pan's lips are soft, and the kiss is gentle but passionate.

It's everything that I hoped it'd be.

It's my second ever kiss and it's perfect.

I sigh, and Pan hooks his arm around my shoulders, dragging me onto his lap.

I moan, feeling his dick dig into my hip.

He deepens the kiss, entwining our tongues.

All of a sudden, there's heavy footfalls outside the door, and Shadow only just has time to snatch Pan by the arm dragging him away from me, before the bedroom door slams open.

James crashes into the room.

Fuck.

My heart slams hard in my chest, and I'm vibrating with tension. Everything that Shadow warned me about yesterday is spinning around my head.

I hold my hands over my chest, scrambling to the back of the bed.

James is dressed in smart striped pajamas and dressing gown. He looks exhausted and irritable.

We're screwed.

"What the hell is going on?" James thunders. "Didn't you think I'd know that you'd unlocked this door and tried to escape? I can tell by the sensors on the door, idiots. *Never escape.* That's the fundamental rule of Never. Do you think that I like being woken up to have to come and deal with you?" Then his gaze scans to me, and his eyes widen at my state of undress. "You little whore."

I flush at the same time as I vibrate with rage that he'd throw that slut shaming word at me.

Yet I'm scared too because my relationship with the twins is secret.

"Wait, wait," I wave my hands. "It's not what it looks like. I was just sleeping and then..."

James strides to me and slaps me.

My face cracks to the side, and I let out a startled cry. Pain explodes across my cheek. A sudden coppery taste explodes in my mouth.

I tumble off the bed to the floor.

My eyes burn with tears. "Bastard..."

Then James' hand is in my hair.

I can hear the twins' furious voices, but all I can concentrate on is kicking and trying to twist out of James' hold.

I can't.

Pan growls in rage, launching himself off the bed at James.

To my horror, James slides a small needle into his free hand and rams it into Pan's upper arm.

Pan lets out a hissed breath and staggers. His eyes become glassy.

James drags open a closet at the far side of the room. I wail, as James drags me by my hair and throws me inside.

I'm shivering. I feel numb.

Is this shock?

Then James rams Pan's head hard into the wall, before shoving him to the floor next to me.

Pan appears paralyzed or at least, tranquilized.

What the fuck was he injected with?

James slams closed the door, shutting Pan and me in the dark.

A lock clicks into place.

My breathing is loud and ragged.

My cheek throbs.

I want to hurl.

I reach for Pan, running my hand down his head, and my fingers come back wet with blood. “Fuck, Pan, can you hear me?”

Silence.

Panicked, I listen hard.

I can hear his breathing, shallow and weak, but at least it’s still there.

“Lie down,” James’ voice comes muffled through the closet door. “And stop crying, you know the rule. I don’t want to hear it. My sweet Shadow, what were those two whores doing, hmm? What trouble was that demon brother of yours leading my angel into this time?”

My stomach lurches.

Shadow is still out there with James.

I boot at the closet door with my foot, until it throbs, but the door doesn’t budge.

Tears chase down my cheeks, when I understand why Peter told me not to listen at doors in Never Hall.

“Stop that, my dear,” Pan’s soft voice comes from the dark. “It’s giving me a remarkable headache, since I’m already bleeding and drugged. It will only make that bastard hurt Shadow more. It’s interesting that you’re still trying to prove that your sweet act is real.”

I freeze. The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

Someone else is in this closet with me.

Someone who isn’t Pan.

It’s so obvious, now that I know Pan better.

Taking careful breaths, I edge closer to this man who looks like Pan, but with his elegant menace, doesn't sound like him. "Who are you? And it *is* fucking real."

Blood dribbles down his handsome face, staining his platinum curls crimson. "So, you're not a supreme idiot, after all. It's delightful to meet you, my dear. I'm Hook."

I stare at him. "You're fucking with me."

His smirk is wicked. "If I wasn't incapable of much right now, I possibly would be."

"I don't understand."

"Is that a common state for you?"

I narrow my eyes. "Is rudeness for you?"

"Frequently because unlike Pan who cares so much what others think of him, I truly don't. That cursed doctor has called it DID, Dissociative Identity Disorder. Pan believes himself to be the core identity, and I'm his alter."

My eyes widen. "You're his alternate personality."

I don't know what to think, only that this doesn't make me not accept Pan or love him any less.

All of us are fractured in our own way.

Pan — I should call him *Hook* because he feels like an entirely different person — inclines his head. "Don't go thinking that I don't have my own opinions or make my own decisions. Pan can't control me. We argue all the time but we're also shipmates. Still, a ship can only have one Captain, and as I've reminded Pan enough, my name is literally *Captain Hook*."

"Why...?"

"Am I like this? Is Pan?" He scowls, before looking significantly at the closet door and at what's happening out there, which we're both trying hard not to mention. "Because he needed me. Because both the twins did and still do. I protect them or try to, when I'm not so drugged that I can't

move. Funny pretty bird that you are, it appears that Pan wants me to protect you too.”

I gently touch his cut head, and he winces. “It seems to me that you’re the one who needs looking after.”

Hook bares his teeth at me. “Blast it, Pan was drugged. The idiot. No one looks after Hook.”

“Maybe they should.”

He snaps at my hand with his teeth, and I only just pull my hand back in time not to be bitten.

“Asshole.”

He chuckles, and the look that he casts me is so wicked that I shrink back against the side of the closet.

“You don’t know me, my dear,” he says with a dangerous silkiness. “I’m not the man who you’ve come to trust as Pan. I’m not the same man who climbed trees with you or ran with you by the coast to show you the beautiful, wild ocean and where the smugglers and pirates once plied their trade out of Never. Pan thinks that he’s the villain of this story. But that’s the pretty lie he tells himself. *I’m the true villain.*”

I hug my knees to my chest, studying Hook.

He’s part of Pan: an unloved part who’s spent their life trying to save Shadow.

“Does Pan remember what you do?” I ask. “You seem to remember what he does.”

I’m beginning to understand what Pan’s memory problems are and why he looks so lost sometimes.

“Bits and pieces, but usually not. We can talk to each other, if I decide that the fool has something worth listening to.”

“So, these violent fights that *Pan* gets into and enjoys... that’s you, right?”

Hook looks proud. “I see that my reputation proceeds me. I am a remarkably skilled fighter. Shadow needs my protection. He always has. I told you before, I’ll kill to keep him safe.”

I swallow. “Uh-huh, I’m getting the touch him and die kind of vibes.”

“Luckily for you, after our last chat, Pan has decided that you also fall under the category of people who should be protected.” He tilts up his chin, studying me. “He truly does love you, my dear. You’re pretty, but he’s a romantic, obsessional fool.”

My expression hardens. “And you’re rude.”

“You’ve already accused me of that, and I’ve already agreed.”

Damn.

“I don’t know if you’re worthy of being in my twins’ lives,” Hook continues, “but prove that you’re not, and I’ll tear you apart with my teeth.”

“Wow, teeth...visceral.”

“I like to make threats nice and graphic. People remember them better that way.”

Despite myself, I grin.

What’s wrong with me? Hook is an asshole.

He’s violent and dangerous.

But also the protector.

I squint at him across the dark, as he wipes at the blood that’s staining his temples. “So, what do you think of me?”

“Fiery, red-haired, and cuss like a sailor. You’d make a good pirate. Would you like to join my crew?”

I blink. “I meant...”

“I know what you meant,” Hook replies, coldly. “But you and I don’t know each other, do we? You don’t *want* to know me.”

I set my jaw. “You’re an alter of the man who I’m falling for. So, I’m pretty sure that I do.”

“Brave, my dear. And *falling for* are strong words. Let’s see if you can handle me. First, let’s see if you can handle the

terrifying truth that Pan's been shielding you from. He's been rather naughtily keeping secrets from you. He's playing the hero by trying every trick in the book to get you to leave this island. Well, every trick bar telling you the truth. He thinks that it puts you at too much risk, once you leave. I advised him that telling you the truth was the only way that you'd leave him behind, but we don't always agree. So, now I'm taking this decision out of his hands."

My heart's beating fast, and I ball my hands, until my nails bite into my palms.

What's this *terrifying truth*?

Is Hook lying to me? Can I even trust him?

I straighten my shoulders, meeting Hook's dark stare levelly. "Be as dramatic as you like, I'm not scared of you, Hook."

He arches his brow in surprise. "Bad form, my dear. Don't tell someone that you're not scared of them in that tone of voice, unless you intend to duel them."

I edge closer to him in the closet. Unless he can duel me without any of his limbs working properly, then I'm not scared.

I'm going to win.

For the first time, he looks delighted. "I like your spirit. I can't tell, if you intend to kiss or bite me." He gives a sharp smile. "Both are acceptable options."

"I'll do both, if you'll only listen," I say, fiercely. "I don't know what this terrible secret is about Never. At least, more terrible than what's happening to Shadow right now or what I've already witnessed happening over the last few weeks. But what's important, Hook, is that you're not alone anymore. I'm here in the dark with you."

He hisses in a shocked breath. Then his eyes widen, as he studies me with an unexpected awe.

We both know that I'm not talking about the dark of this closet.

Hook scrutinizes me like he can see through to my soul and tear it apart piece by piece. “If only I could tell that you’re sincere.”

“I’ll prove it. While I’m on Never, I’ll be right alongside you, looking out for the twins. They’re my guys now like you are, and I intend to stand up and fight for my men. So, how about we plot and scheme to figure a way to get out of... whatever the fuck is going on here? Because after what the Director’s done...” I grit my teeth, and my eyes burn with tears. I hate that James has isolated me by taking away my phone and technology. I can’t even call for help. “I’m going to bring him down. I’ve already escaped one monster. I can escape another.”

Hook gives me a long look, which makes me shift, uncomfortable. “So sure, are you? You have no idea what you’re saying. You should simply run like Pan wants.”

I shake my head.

Hook’s lips curl up at one side. “Then hear me, cursed fool. What do you think is kept on the other side of the gray wall at the bottom of the gardens? Where do you think the Never twins are students? What college have you been enrolled in on Monday?”

My brow furrows. “Never Academy for the Gifted.”

Hook’s eyes blaze. “And there’s the lie, the fantasy that hides the horrors of Never. It’s all a front. Never Academy is really a private psychiatric hospital. A mental health clinic, which is known for its discretion between the super, global elite as a secret setting to hide away their sons and daughters. They use it to discretely vanish or punish them for a certain length of time. You see, my dear, all they need is a psychiatrist to say that their troubled daughter needs to be detained for their own safety and by the laws of Never, they can be. They’ll be sectioned here as a patient because that’s what the students are. Then they’ll never fly away again. If you don’t get on that helicopter, my dear, you’ll become another patient of Never Clinic.”

I’m shaking. I can’t stop.

Mom wouldn't do that to me.

She wouldn't.

Except, she fucking would.

“So, they're detaining people who don't even have mental health problems?” I whisper.

“Who doesn't have them?” Hook replies. “I mean, if you look hard enough. There are, however, some people on Never who were sent here simply because it's a way to make someone disappear. Peter, for example, was sent by his family to keep him buried. But I don't imagine that the lad is entirely undamaged now that Croc has had his teeth in him for so long.”

I can't help it.

I start to cry, deep and gut-wrenching.

I wrap my arms around myself, wiping at my cheeks.

My world is tumbling around me.

I thought that this was my shot at college and to make a career in music.

It was only ever a trap.

This is hell and not paradise.

Hook tilts his head, watching me. “You need to get all your tears out now, while you're hidden with me in the dark. As soon as you get to the clinic, you mustn't show weakness, if you're going to survive. Don't you know the rules of this island? *Never cry. Never scream. Never escape.*”

Chapter Ten



The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it.

Stag Tower, Never Hall

It's Monday morning. Today, Fyfe will be returning with his helicopter. It's my last chance to fly away from Never: this secret clinic for the broken elite.

Never cry. Never scream. Never escape.

I shudder, horrified.

Except, I've been locked in my room since the night that I was discovered by James in the twins' room and then locked in the closet with Pan.

The next morning, I thought that Mom would take my side, when she saw my busted lip and bruised cheek.

Instead, she stood in the doorway to my bedroom and studied me disapprovingly.

Her eyes were red-rimmed.

I was wrapped in a ball in my covers, shaking.

Victoria sighed. "Your stepdad is so disappointed."

I raised my head, shoving my hair out of my eyes.

I stared at her in disbelief. “Well, I’m pretty fucking disappointed in Jim too.”

“Don’t call him that,” Victoria snapped. “Why are you acting out like this?”

“Because I’ve been lied to? Tricked? Imprisoned? Pick one.”

Finally, she winced. “It’s for your own good.”

I pointed at my swollen lip. “This is?”

“What were you doing in your stepbrothers’ room in the middle of the night without any clothes on?”

I flushed, avoiding her eye. I wasn’t ready to have that conversation, especially not like this.

“I wasn’t naked. I was wearing underwear but not pajamas because it was so hot last night. Pan had night terrors, and it freaked me out. I wanted to know that he was okay.”

Victoria’s expression gentled with understanding. “You’re too soft hearted. That one should have grown out of his childish nightmares by now. He doesn’t need you to hold his hand. He already has Shadow doing too much of that already.”

I bristled. “Aren’t stepmoms meant to care about stuff like this? Isn’t it your job to come and check that he’s okay, when he has night terrors? Maybe he has something to have nightmares over.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Are you kidding me? I was hit. *Pan* was drugged. Then we were both shut in a fucking closet, while your loving husband...while Shadow was—”

“Shut up.” Victoria went paper white. “I don’t need to hear more lies. I’ve heard enough from those brats already. They misbehave and then they try to cry about it to me. Pan needs to be medicated sometimes. Whatever they get, they deserve. You shouldn’t have been in their room to see any of that in the first place. Just stay away from them from now on, especially as it upsets you like this.”

I stared at her in shock.

She'd already known.

About all of it.

The twins had reached out to Victoria, probably hoping that she'd help them.

Instead, she'd victim blamed them.

Just like she had me.

No wonder they'd been wary of me to start with. I was in awe of their bravery to trust me now.

"Is it easy to close your eyes and pretend that the asshole you're married to isn't a monster?" My gaze hardened. "But hey, you've had practice. You already did it with my brother."

"Don't ruin this for me." Victoria took a furious step toward me, clutching at the string of pearls around her neck. "I lost my first marriage because of you."

I shrank back from her. "Don't."

"You got burned, but I lost my husband, son, and daughter in a single night. More than that. I lost my home and entire life. This is my second chance with a wealthy man who can offer you a college place and therapy. Don't you dare throw this away."

"*Burned?*" I whispered. She had no idea what being truly *burned* felt like. Victoria would never face what had happened to me. She packed me off to therapy but wouldn't talk about it. Well, I didn't want to talk now. *I wanted to show her.* I threw off my blanket. I was still only dressed in my panties, and it revealed the thick pink scars down my arm. "I live with what Kyden did to me every day. I can't live with myself, however, if I stand by and do nothing, while some asshole hurts someone else in the same way."

Mom recoiled, as guilt flashed across her face.

She reached out her hand to me. "Gela..."

"Don't say sorry. Just say that we can leave Never and take the twins with us."

Instantly, Victoria's expression shuttered. "You'll realize that this is your new home soon, love. If you won't take my word for it, then you'll find out the hard way that the Never boys are damaged. *Trouble*. You heard what the doctor says about them. They're psychopaths. If I can't trust you to stay away from them before the start of term, then I'll have to keep you locked in for your own safety."

And she did.

I guess that's how these things start.

I'm only locking you in for your own safety.

I'm only restraining you for your own safety.

I'm only drugging you for your own safety.

How fucking peachy to know that it's all for our own good.

I drag on my pair of jeans and violet t-shirt, running my hand through my hair.

My stomach rumbles, and my throat is dry.

Pale morning light streams through my window, spearing across my bed.

When I hear a light knocking on the wall, I smile.

I drop back onto the bed and rest my hand on the stone. I wonder if that's Pan or Shadow knocking.

We've been playing a game for the last hour.

It's helped with the loneliness and makes me feel warm how easily we connect, even in captivity.

No one can separate us, no matter how hard they try.

The twins have been rapping out rhythms to me for the last hour, and I've been singing back the answer.

One hard rap, if I get it right.

I listen hard, before I grin.

Got it.

I bet this is Pan.

I start to sing a slow, jazzy version of “A Little Wicked” by Valerie Broussard.

I lose myself in the song. This is where I’m happiest.

One hard rap, following by clapping.

I stroke the cold stone, wishing that I could be back sitting on the twins’ bed, tangled in their hold.

My lips tingle with the memory of both their kisses.

They’re identical twins. Their lips feel the same. But their kisses are so different.

I know it now. I’m not only falling any longer.

*I love them both...*but not in the same way because they meet different needs of mine.

How have I lived without being kissed like that?

What would it feel like? *To truly become their Darling?*

Then I remember Hook’s dark grin, and it’s electric, making my skin prickle with anticipation.

What would it feel like to kiss *him* as well?

Is it possible for him to become my third partner?

All of a sudden, there’s a loud rapping but not on the wall — on my closed window.

I startle in shock.

What’s the shadow outside?

There’s someone in the branches of the tree outside my window.

I yell, scrambling to my feet.

Rap — rap — rap.

I take a cautious step closer to the window, pulling the drapes fully open.

Then my eyes widen in shock.

Peter is balanced precariously in the tree. He’s crouched on the end of a narrow branch, which is still a little distance from

my window.

He's dressed in an elegant suit, which has been snagged and torn on the branches, and his hair is tousled.

The smart professor is transformed. Now he looks roguish.

He's going to kill himself, if he falls.

I stare out at him in shock, before hurriedly pushing my window open as far as it can go.

This tower is a long way up. The ground is a dizzying distance below.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I demand.

Peter grins. “Your rescue awaits, beautiful. I had to bypass the door's sensors. Come on, you're not afraid to fall, are you?”

He winks.

What the fuck?

I draw back. “I'm angry at you.”

Peter's expression soberes, and his blue eyes become troubled. “I know. Does it help that I'm angry at myself?”

“Do you hate yourself for hurting Pan?”

Peter's jaw clenches. “Every fucking time.”

We stare at each other.

Then his eyes narrow, as he takes in my bruised cheek. “The asshole hit you. I'm going to kill him.”

“So, now you care.”

Peter's eyes flash. “I always care. Don't make that mistake.”

He was a patient here originally, right? His parents sent him to the clinic.

Why are they hiding him away?

“So, I also met your other brother last night. Hook's a nice guy. He cusses most eloquently.”

Peter freezes. “Shit, did the asshole do anything?”

“He told me the truth about the academy. In fact, he was more honest with me than the rest of you have been. I like him.”

Peter gapes at me. “No one likes Hook. I don’t think even Hook likes Hook.”

“Tough. I do.” I lick my dry lips. “And you’re telling me everything right the fuck now.”

“I love your dominant voice, beautiful, but you can’t top a dom.” Peter’s gaze becomes scorching. “Well, you can try...I encourage it...but you’ll have to accept the consequences. I’d love to show you how I deal with the twins, when they talk to me like that. I bet that your ass would look gorgeous over my lap, bouncing and reddening under my hand.” *Shit.* I shiver and I’m not certain if it’s the idea of being over his knee or of watching the twins being laid there. *Actually, both.* “Right now, the only thing that I’m doing is making sure that you don’t miss your helicopter ride out of here. I promised Pan that I would in our session, which you’re so pissed about. We made a deal. He’d pretend to scream his head off, if I helped you to escape.”

“*Pretend?*” I whisper.

Peter shrugs. “To con the Director that I was being extra harsh on him, rather than merely putting him in a tepid bath for an hour. I can’t always get away with it, but the Director was distracted. You piss him off almost as much as Pan does. You’re a real rebel, aren’t you?”

My expression softens.

Perhaps the professor isn’t as big a jerk as I thought he was.

It appears that he has deals and loyalties with his adopted brothers.

I cross my arms. “Well, thanks. But I’m not leaving.”

Peter shifts carefully, and for a horrifying moment, I think that he’s about to fall. “I know that I make this look easy but I

can't hang around in this tree all day. You know, lesson plans to get ready for the start of term. So, get your ass over here."

"Didn't you hear me?"

"This is your only chance for who knows how long. It's now or...well, *never*."

"Ha-ha. Then it's never. You can't get rid of me that easily."

"I'm not trying to get rid of you." Peter's jaw clenches. "I know about my brothers' obsession with you. And yours with them, right? You all want to be together, and since this is the time for confessions, I've wanted you since the moment that I saw you listening outside their door, such a mix of innocence and wickedness. My good *bad* girl."

Frustrated, I demand, "Then why are you...?"

"Making sure that you're safe?" He looks away. "Setting you free? Trying to let you live the life that we can't? Huh, I wonder why I'd want that for a woman who I...? Look, it's tough for me to look out for my bros and you at the same time. They're close to getting themselves killed with their fixation on you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

And I do.

Shit, I wish that I didn't.

I nod.

I crave to stay here and face the monsters with Pan and Shadow. I promised Hook that I'd scheme with him and work out a way to fight back against James.

But am I simply making things more dangerous for them all? *Worse?*

Mom isn't going to help us.

Once term starts, I'll to be shut up during the daytime in a clinic, which sounds even more frightening than Never Hall.

This setup has been going on amongst the most powerful billionaires in the world for decades.

How can I fight that?

I need to get off Never and find a way to do it. Out there, I'll have the resources and contacts. I can go to the cops.

Then I can find a way to come back and save these Lost Boys.

I'll free them like they're setting me free now.

I blink back tears.

"Hold on, I need shoes." I turn away from the window, searching out my sneakers from down the side of the bed.

I slip them on over my bare feet.

Then I hear rapping on the wall, which is either Pan or Shadow.

My chest is tight. I wipe away the tears in my eyes.

I can't even say a proper goodbye to them, and if I call out, then I risk someone hearing inside the manor.

I tilt my head to the side, thinking for a moment.

Then I rest my hand on the wall, before I sing a chorus from Lewis Capaldi's beautiful but agonizing "Before You Go."

A tear trickles down my cheek, and the words die in my throat.

Silence.

Then there's one tentative knock.

They understand.

This is their goodbye.

I take a steadying breath, hanging my head to get my emotions under control.

I'm coming back for them. Then I'm getting all of them — Peter included — out of this fucking place.

I turn and march toward the window. It's only when I squirm through it, sitting on the ledge, that I truly understand how high up we are.

Instantly, I'm hit by a terrifying flashback.

Shit, I can't do this.

My hands are clammy. My neck drips with sweat.

I stare down at the grassy ground beneath the window.

I remember the pain of burning, the sensation of Kyden placing his strong hand in the center of my chest and pushing...flailing backward out of the window like a phoenix with broken wings.

...Howling up at the moonless sky...

Believing that I was going to die.

I whimper and freeze. I clutch onto the window ledge.

"Hey, eyes up here on me," Peter commands. It's stern enough to cut through my flashback. My eyes snap up to his. I feel out of control, but his dominance is like an anchor. "Don't look down. Don't look anywhere but me. Don't listen to anything but my words. You're here, now. You're safe."

Slowly, feeling returns to my body.

Peter's electric blue gaze is piercing. It holds me caught but safe at the same time.

I don't look away.

He holds out his hand to me, encouragingly. "I'm only here. You can do it."

"You're too far away," I say. "I can't reach."

"Come on, don't you know that I can fly? Just believe in fairies and pixie dust and all that shit like Pan and Shadow do, then you can fly as well."

I laugh, and all the tension bleeds out of me. "You're an asshole."

Peter's grin is wicked. "Of course, but do you trust me?"

My smile wavers. "I don't know."

"I'll rephrase. Do you trust me not to drop you out of a tree?"

“Yeah, I trust you to save me.”

“Then jump, and I’ll catch you.”

I hiss in a sharp breath.

“Oh, is that all?” I bite my lip, trying to uncurl my fingers from the ledge.

I can do this.

I can trust a guy again.

I can take this literal leap of faith.

I steady my breathing, as fear coils through me.

If I can trust Peter to catch me and not let me fall, then that changes...*everything*.

My gaze becomes steely.

I let go of the ledge and shove myself up, leaping toward the tree. Peter leans forward with difficulty, holding out his arms.

Fuck, I’m not going to make it.

My eyes widen, and my arms flail.

I’m going to miss the branch.

My feet hit the trunk with a bang that jars me, and I scream.

No, no, no.

I’m falling again.

Falling and falling and...

I’m truly going to die on Never.

Chapter Eleven



There's many different kinds of bravery. There's the bravery of thinking of others before one's self.

Gardens, Never Hall

I scream as I fall.
This is it.

This is how I die.

I always knew that my life would end like this. I hit the ground once and survived. Part of me, knew that I wouldn't escape a second time.

That shadow has haunted my life. I've been waiting for it.

I close my eyes.

Then warm arms are clasped around me, hauling me onto the branch.

I'm no longer falling.

My eyes snap open in shock.

Peter!

He saved me.

He's so fucking strong.

He's lying on his stomach with his arms outstretched and he looks ashen. He pulls me up firmly, as my legs flail, and we tumble together onto the branch.

I pant raggedly.

Peter caught me.

He didn't let me fall like he promised that he wouldn't.

I don't know what to do with that.

Adrenaline surges through me, and I'm tingling with the sensation of still being alive.

I laugh, as we're pressed together on the branch of the tree.

I'm suddenly intensely aware of how closely our bodies are pressed together with mine on top of his: his muscled chest, athletic legs, and hard dick against my hip.

"You did it." Peter smiles, and leans up to bury his hand in my hair, pulling my face even closer to his, until our noses touch. "I told you that you could fly, when you were with me."

"You did it. I should have believed in you over pixie dust." I study him in wonder. "You caught me."

"Of course I did. Pan would've murdered me if I hadn't."

He's not even joking.

He tugs my hair, forcing my head to the side.

Through the branches, I can see through the hazy summer sunshine across the manicured gardens and toward the wall that bounds the estate and contains the Never Clinic.

I'm going to have to get used to calling it that.

"You can see where the helicopter will be landing from here," Peter explains. "This was Pan's favorite spot to wait for it as a kid. It's safer to stay here, until it arrives. The less time that we have out in the open, the less chance that the Director has to find you."

Suddenly, the thought of leaving behind this man is agonizing like leaving behind part of my soul.

I struggle against Peter's hold in order to turn my head back to face him. "Why aren't you coming with me?"

"Didn't Shadow tell you about the trackers? Anyway, I have a job here."

"Seriously? This may blow your mind but you can teach anywhere in the world."

"Not that job. The one where I keep my Lost Boys safe. The students need me."

My brow furrows. "You sound like Pan."

Peter smirks. "What can I say? He's learned from the best about what's important. He hero worships me. I'm the leader around here."

"Huh, I thought that was the Director. It sure looks like it."

Peter's expression darkens. He shifts back, until we're cradled against the trunk of the tree.

"The Director owns Never but he doesn't know everything. I've been working for years to extend my control here. Everywhere but in the walls of Never Hall or with the Doctor, it's working."

"When I get off Never, I'll go to the cops and—"

"Woah, don't you fucking dare." Peter's breath is hot on my mouth, and his chest is rising and falling rapidly in panic. "The Director would burn it all down — all of Never with us in it — rather than see us rescued and our secrets exposed. He made that deal with the global elites, who've buried us and their dirty pasts here. Promise me that you won't go to the cops."

I cup Peter's cheek. "But if you do this, he'll know that you helped me. You'll be in trouble. You're risking your life to do this, aren't you?"

Peter's gaze is piercing; my breath catches. "Did I say that *my brothers* are obsessed? I forgot to mention that I can't get you out of my head too, beautiful. You're worth the punishment."

“But...” My voice wavers. “What am I meant to do?”

“By the incredible voice that I just heard, become a singer. Live a real life in America. Look, you didn’t know that we were trapped here before you arrived. So, now you choose to go on living and pretend that we don’t exist. The rest of the outside world has forgotten us. The Lost Boys in the clinic are invisible to their own families. So, imagine that these last few weeks have been a dream.”

I’m shaking. I can’t stop.

“I can’t fucking do that.”

“Kind of tough.”

“You’re a hardass.”

“My students say that a lot.”

“I bet that they do.”

Peter slides his hand from my hair to my face, stroking down my cheek. “Look, what if your mom decides to get a tracker put in you as well? Right now, you’re only enrolled as a voluntary student in Never Clinic. But if you get detained, then that changes, and you’re never getting out. That’s how it works. So, fly away now while you can, grow up, survive, and live for the rest of us.”

“I want to kiss you,” I breathe.

Peter’s thick, black eyelashes flutter. “Why now?”

“Because I’ll never be able to again.”

Peter’s tongue darts out to wet his lips, and I can’t look away. “Would you have said yes to being our Darling? Mine as well? Pan and Shadow want us to be a polyamorous group together. We’d have loved you so fucking much. I need you to know that.”

I wish that I could have had all three of them as boyfriends so fucking much. I want it as much as they do.

He must be able to see the answer in my eyes because he kisses me.

His kiss is hard and demanding. His stubble rasps against me, and his hands slide to my back.

He pushes up my t-shirt, and his clever fingers make me shiver, as they trace up and down my sides.

I melt into the kiss, which he deepens.

Peter's tongue intertwines with mine, and he growls, kissing me even more insistently.

It's mind-blowing.

Peter's masculine scent of whiskey is heady.

It's thrilling, being claimed like this in the branches of a tree, with the danger that if we move too much, we could fall.

Peter's suit jacket is pushed to the side, and I love the way that I can mess him up.

I don't feel safe in Peter's arms but I also trust him to keep me from harm.

Finally, when he draws back, his pupils are dilated, and he's breathing as fast as I am.

He's so fucking gorgeous.

I quickly glance to the side, but the helicopter hasn't landed yet.

I rest my forehead against Peter's, and my gaze locks with his intensely blue one.

I could lose myself in him.

Can Pan and Shadow see us out of their window, if they look out?

The thought excites me.

"I want you, Sir," I murmur, loving the way that Peter's gaze becomes glassy and he humps against me on the *Sir*. So, that's a definite kink for him then. "Before I lose you, I want to know what it feels like to have you inside me."

I never thought that I'd be able to want a man like this.

I have one chance.

“Tell me that you mean that. *Beg.*”

My breath hitches. “*Please*, Sir, I want your cock inside me, stretching me. I want to still feel you, when I’m flying away from Never. Make me sore enough that I’m taking part of you away with me. Make me remember this.”

It’s my first time. I need it to be with Peter.

“Hell, you’re perfect.” Peter’s eyes darken with desire. Then he leans up and kisses me again. “I’m going to fuck you so that you can never feel any man inside you but me again.”

My eyes widen. “Please...”

“I knew that you’d beg prettily.” He drops his hands to my pants. “Now hold on tight to me.”

I clutch onto his shoulders, white-knuckled. The branch isn’t wide.

This is dangerous.

I’ve come to learn on Never, however, that some things are worth the risk and that sensations, which can be scary, can also be what makes you feel alive.

For years, I’ve been numb.

Yet these Never brothers have brought me to life.

Peter undoes my jeans and pushes them down to my knees. Then he shoots me a devilish grin, before he takes the sides of my panties and rips them like they’re tissue paper.

I let out a shocked yip.

Hell, that’s hot.

I’m already so fucking wet.

Then he drops my panties over the side of the branch, and they flutter to the ground.

“A souvenir for Shadow to keep.” Peter strokes over my naked ass. “I have this memory.” Then he tightens his arms around my waist. “Your turn. Take me out.”

Hot and cold flushes through me. I can feel how hard he is in his trousers.

I nod.

“First reach into my right hand jacket pocket,” he orders.

I work my hand into his pocket, pulling out a condom packet. “Unexpected.”

He quirks his brow. “Is it? Hold it up to my mouth.”

When I do, he rips it expertly open.

Someone’s had a lot of practice.

I snort. “So, do you have a fellow professor as a partner over that gray wall or are you just that cockily confident?”

“Demerit, beautiful,” Peter says like a threat and a promise. “Aren’t you meant to have read the rulebook by now? It’s compulsory for all men on the island to carry condoms, even the professors. The Director doesn’t want the risk of babies to care for.”

I work my hand between us, opening his trousers.

My breaths are coming fast.

I’m eager to feel the heavy weight of Peter’s dick in my hand at last. It’ll be the first time that I’ve touched one.

But then, a thought strikes me. “Wait, the smokescreen leaflets about the academy—”

“Yeah, they’re what’s sent out to the families who are considering Never.”

“It says aged sixteen to thirty. What happens when you turn thirty?”

Peter’s expression clouds. “You have a reassessment. Some families decide that you’ve suffered or changed enough and take you back. You still have the tracker, and no one would risk talking about Never’s secrets, once they’d been welcomed back into the elites. Some...” he glances down at himself, and my heart aches for him, “...don’t. If you’re talented enough, then you’re made a professor or some other staff member like gardener or cook. If you’ve caused too much trouble, however, or been given too many demerits, then there’s somewhere worse than Never, and you’re sent there.”

I hate the way that he's been rejected by his family, not once but twice.

I'm going to make him feel wanted in every way that I can, even if it's only for this one time that we're together.

I'm going to make him remember this too.

I tighten my hand around his large dick, and he groans. I pull him out of his trousers, stroking him.

"You'd better let go, beautiful," he says, tightly, "or I'm going to come way too fucking fast."

I smile, smugly.

Then I slide the condom onto his dick, while he holds me around the waist, keeping us both safely on the branch.

"Raise yourself up," Peter commands, "and ride me."

"I thought that I didn't get to top you."

Peter's smile is dangerous, and I swallow. "Naïve, beautiful. You're on top but you're not doming me. If you try, you've forgotten about those consequences..."

He waits a beat, and I realize that he's checking in.

Our faces are intimately close.

"Perhaps, I'm craving those consequences..." I push my hips against him so that he can feel just how true that is.

How wet I already am.

Peter's eyes widen with understanding.

Then he raises his hand just enough to bring it down crisply against my ass.

I gasp more at the sound of the smack because the sting of his large hand almost instantly bleeds into a warm sensation.

It's delicious.

The vibrations shake through to my core and make me even wetter.

"*Again,*" I beg.

“Perfect,” he breathes.

Then he smacks me on the other side.

I moan.

I hope that I have two red hand prints on my ass.

I raise myself up, resting my hands on the branch, either side of Peter’s head.

I don’t break eye contact with him.

He looks back — *hungrily*.

I’ve never had anyone look at me like that before.

Then I lower myself slowly, but to my shock, he pushes up into me in one long, hard thrust.

The air is knocked out of me, and I fall forward onto him.

There’s a small amount of pain, but it fades almost instantly into pleasure.

“I told you, I’m in charge,” Peter growls.

Yet he’s feathering kisses down my jaw with a deep tenderness.

Then his hands tighten on my hips hard enough to leave bruises.

Good — I will have marks to remember him by.

Proof that I’m Peter’s Darling.

Peter’s thrusting into me, slow and lazy, giving me a chance to adjust now. He’s hitting just the right angle, and pleasure is washing through me in waves.

My breathing is ragged, and my heart is pounding.

Peter’s breathing has also become heavy and fast. I adore that he’s just as affected as I am.

Also, that this feels like making love.

My eyes flutter shut.

“None of that.” When Peter bites on my lower lip, my eyes snap open again. He licks over my lower lip, soothingly.

“Keep those beautiful eyes on me.”

I struggle through the haze of pleasure to focus on him.
“Fuck, fuck...”

“That’s the idea.”

I try to glare at him but I can’t hold onto it, as ecstasy coils through me. “Harder, faster, *fucking move*.”

Peter arches his brow. “What did I say about giving me orders and topping? *Consequences*.”

His expression hardens.

Oh, fuck.

Instantly, his hands tighten on my waist. Then he begins to slam up into me.

How’s he able to move his hips like that?

“Always sleep with dancers.” Peter smirks. “It’s all in the hips.”

I moan, floating and losing myself in the sensation, as I’m fucked like a ragdoll.

I’m at Peter’s mercy, and it’s the most liberating experience of my life.

It’s intense, rough, *glorious*.

My mind is fuzzy.

He’s becoming more erratic.

He’s close.

And so am I.

Peter’s pushing me toward the edge.

I’m not in control.

He is.

“Fuck, I’m going to come...” I throw back my head.

“Then come for me, beautiful.” Peter pistons into me even harder, and my mind whites out.

It shocks me.

The pleasure hits me like a tsunami.

I scrabble at the branch, feeling like I'm going to be washed away.

Peter presses his mouth to mine to swallow my scream, as he comes, arching up.

My cheeks are wet with the intensity. I'm gasping for breath.

But when I come down from the high, I find that I'm laughing.

Peter is studying me like he's checking that I'm okay. "I didn't break you, did I?"

Weeping and then laughing...?

Hey, I don't blame him for checking.

I smile in wonder. "I think that you just healed me."

Peter's expression softens, as he kisses me but this time gently. "Then I have one talented dick. Now, hold on tight again."

I clutch onto his shoulders, as he works his hand between our bodies. He encircles his dick, before pulling it out of me. Then he slips the condom off and drops it over the side of the tree.

When I wrinkle my nose, he shrugs.

"A souvenir for Pan," he offers.

"Mean." I rest my head on Peter's shoulder, loving his warmth.

I understand now about the competitive dynamic between Peter and Pan, which keeps them battling each other.

They both need it.

I can't think about the fact that I've found this amazing feeling, and it's the last time that I'll experience it.

This was a goodbye fuck.

“What?” Peter struggles to tug my jeans back up my legs, before doing them up.

I’ll have to go commando, since he ripped off my panties.

It’s worth it.

Peter pets my hair, and the fuzzy feeling begins to clear.

“You’ll look out for Shadow and Pan, right?” I whisper.

“I always have.” Then he caresses down, massaging my shoulders. “If I had my way, I’d wrap you in a soft blanket now. I’d feed you chocolate and orange juice, giving you everything that you need for aftercare. I hate this.”

“Me too.”

Suddenly, there’s a whir above our heads.

Peter and I look up.

In the blue sky, obscured by the trees’ branches, the helicopter is circling.

A strange mixture of excitement and grief churns in my guts.

This is my rescue and my destruction.

Will I ever recover from escaping Never?

“Don’t make me do this.” I grasp hard onto Peter’s shoulders. “Force me to stay here. Tell me that I’m yours, and you’ll...I don’t know...do some toxic shit like chain me to a bed to keep me here, rather than let me climb onto that helicopter.”

“You’d look phenomenal in chains, and it makes me fucking hard to imagine that. But only in roleplay. Any man who does that without consent is an asshole and not a hero who deserves love. He deserves a woman to chop off his dick. In my heart, you *are* mine. But that means saving you and letting you go.”

“But what about what *I* want?”

“Do you want to save us?”

“Yes!”

“Then get on that damn helicopter,” Peter orders. “If you stay, the Director will use you against us. We’ll end up wrecking ourselves to keep you safe. We’ll die for it.”

I draw in a shocked breath.

I take a steeling breath, before I nod.

“Okay, we need to get you to that helicopter. When we climb down from the tree, I want you to run. Don’t look back. Just run. As soon as you reach it, tell Fyfe that you want to fly back with him. Don’t let anything change your mind. Got it?”

I swallow. “Do you expect me to be able to run, after you fucked me that hard?”

Peter smiles, looking smug.

He’s earned the right.

“I expect you to climb too, remember?” He carefully starts to sit up, and I pale. “You can do this. Don’t look down. Coming down a tree is harder than climbing it, but I’ll show you how. Be careful, follow me, and watch what I’m doing. I’ll go first.”

“Okay.”

Peter edges close to the trunk, before sliding his arms around it. His feet rake down the bark, as he swings down to the first branch.

My pulse races, as I follow him.

The bark makes crumbling sounds under my sneakers and is scratchy on my palms.

The sunlight shines through the translucent leaves.

I’m hyper focused on becoming Peter’s shadow on each branch that we descend. It reminds me of the tree in my childhood yard and all the times that I’d climb it to hide from Kyden.

This tree is at least twice as tall.

But I can do this.

I’m not alone now.

I have Peter.

He leaps to the ground, landing elegantly. His suit jacket swirls out around him. Then he looks up at me.

Finally, I'm on the last branch too.

I'm breathing hard, and my hands are sore with splinters and cuts.

It's still so high up.

I can't jump it.

I hesitate.

"Fly." Peter glances frantically at the helicopter, where it's landed in a grassy expanse of lawn at the far side of the gardens. "I'll catch you."

Now, I don't hesitate.

I leap from the branch.

For a moment, I'm truly flying.

Then Peter catches me in his strong arms. He stumbles backward, before clutching me tightly to his chest.

Did he just murmur *I love you*?

Then he's setting me back onto my feet. My knees buckle, but he steadies me. His expression is grim.

He turns me toward the helicopter. "Run."

And I do.

I don't look back.

But hell, it kills me.

I sprint across the manicured gardens, past the fountain with a clockface, which gushes water into the air and acorn shaped hedges around the edges.

I avoid looking at the hazy blur of the high wall in the distance.

Instead, I focus on the helicopter on the lawn.

I drive myself on, until my legs are burning.

I'm gasping for breath.

Will James spot me from his baronial mansion, running across the gardens?

Can I make it in time?

I can see Fyfe.

He's sitting in the cockpit. He's not moving, as I draw closer.

I'm almost free.

Please...

Desperately, I reach the helicopter and bang on its side. "Fyfe, I'm here. You said that I could come back in two weeks to fly to the mainland with you. Open up. You have to take me with you..."

He doesn't turn to look at me.

He ducks his head, avoiding my eye.

What's wrong?

"Come on. This is me, Angela. Remember? I'm Jim's new stepdaughter. I've decided that I don't want to start at the academy," I plead. "You promised..."

James steps around the far side of the helicopter, and I scream with shock.

He's flanked by two large men who are dressed in neon green uniforms that are the same color as the Never logo. Their expressions are somber.

I stumble back, terrified. "Get the fuck away from me. I'm an American citizen and I'm choosing to leave. I came here voluntarily. You have no right to keep me here."

"What is it with Americans and their constant hope that their *American citizenship* or *rights* will protect them? Peter was just the same, when he was first here. But he learned, even if it was the hard way. Those mean nothing on Never." James' eyes glint with a darkness that makes me shudder.

"Then what does?" I demand.

“The fact that you’re legally my stepdaughter and you’re currently on the island of Never, under my laws and jurisdiction.” James gestures at the two men. “Restrain her.”

No, no, no.

I become ashen.

I turn and try to run back toward Peter. The two men are quicker, however, like this is a practiced routine that they’ve done many times before. They grab me by the arms.

I struggle to escape, but they brutally pull my arms behind me.

I howl, frantically twisting like a wild thing.

Then I try to bite them to get them to let me go. “Get the fuck off me, assholes.”

James gives a fake sad smile. “See how out of control she is? She’s having a bad episode. It’s lucky that she didn’t hurt Fyfe or herself.”

“You’re a liar,” I yell. “I’m enrolled willingly. You have no right to stop me leaving.”

James walks closer to me, and his expression is severe. “*Never escape.* That’s the rule. So, now I do have that *right*. Aren’t you fond of people exercising their *rights*? I’m permanently detaining you, Angela, under the Never Mental Health Act. Take her to the clinic.”

Chapter Twelve



She could get well again if children believed in fairies.

The Farm, Never Clinic

It's a swelteringly hot Tuesday morning, and I should be happy to be finally allowed out of *isolation*, which was my punishment for the escape attempt.

Only, I'm not.

Because it's my first day in what I thought was an academy for the gifted. I'd been so excited about my shot at a free college education, where I'd be able to practice my music.

It'd been a fantasy.

Mom only cared about controlling me and slashing my therapy bills.

After all, they'd been the sole cost that she'd covered of mine for years.

Perhaps, she truly believes that this clinic can help me.

Bullshit.

I don't know how she's been charmed by James, but this has never been about giving me the time and space to recover. I bet it isn't for any of the Lost Boys who are shut up here.

It's about getting rid of anyone who's causing trouble or not fitting in with a family's ideal reputation.

Did someone back in America report to her that I was singing in one of those bars that also used exotic dancers? The offers for me to become a lap dancer?

Was it one of her friends who'd been a customer? Because men often were hypocritical enough to think it fine to be customers but then, not to let their daughters become a dancer in them.

Fuck that.

It doesn't matter what happens. I won't let the staff here change me.

I bite my lip, hoping that Peter's okay.

I haven't heard anything about him, and no one will tell me where he is.

My guts churn with dread.

He knew that he was risking everything by helping me. I didn't admit that he'd helped me, after I was caught.

In fact, I lied.

I told James that I'd found a way to climb out of my window all by myself, but unfortunately, he laughed.

“And that *way* was called Peter, I assume?” James sneered.

What's been done to Peter?

Is the professor still alive?

I wipe my hand across my brow, smearing mud across my forehead.

Yuck.

I grimace, remembering too late that my hands are covered in dirt.

Shadow laughs, and I shoot him a glare.

Shadow kneels opposite me in the vegetable patch.

Like me, he's dressed in a neon green uniform with a gold clock emblem on the front with bare feet. His curls are pinned

back, and his eyes are smudged even deeper with Kohl than normal like he's making a point.

He's equally as covered in mud as I am but looks delighted by the fact.

Together, we're holding steel gardening forks and sitting amongst rows of onions with yellowing leaves.

We're in the shadow of the large clock tower.

At last, I can see what was behind the gray wall.

Never Clinic is a vast stone building with tiny, barred windows, which is built around a central courtyard that's been transformed into a miniature farm.

The farm is complete with a barn and stables. Hay is strewn over the compact mud floor of the courtyard.

It's so hot that the air shimmers. We should be wearing hats to protect us from sunstroke but we're not.

My head throbs.

I scrunch up my nose at the stink of manure and sweet hay.

A goat bleats, and chickens squawk.

This isn't what I was expecting.

There are around ten other *patients* — Lost Boys — who are a mix of ages. They all wear the same uniform, and include women as well as men.

I don't understand why they're either casting me suspicious or fully hostile looks.

The women glance between Pan and me like they're trying to figure out why he's working so close to me.

I notice the flash of jealousy in a couple of their eyes, which is more dangerous than anything.

The twins are the best looking men here. They're magnetic, and both men and women can't seem to stop glancing at them for cues.

Peter may be the leader, but here in class, it's the twins.

How will the other Lost Boys like someone new coming in and taking the place by their side?

I edge closer to Shadow.

My heart beats faster.

So, I'm making friends on my first day then.

Pan looks bored out of his fucking mind.

He's barely containing the energy that's spilling out him. He wrenches at the onions with his bare hands, yanking the bulbs up and tossing them into the pile on the far side of the vegetable patch like he's murdering each one personally.

When Shadow starts to hum "A Little Wicked" by Valerie Broussard under his breath, I smile.

I catch Pan's eye, and he leans across, gripping my chin.

My breath hitches at the possessive way that he turns my head from one side to the other, assessing me for injury.

"None of those orderlies hurt you, right?" Pan asks.

I shake my head. "My arms are kind of sore where they restrained me, but I'm okay."

Shadow stops humming and looks at me, concerned. "They always hurt you, if you run."

I frown. "Yeah, it's one of those bullshit rules. I know."

"Hey, not so loud." Pan's gaze slides across the other patients, who are keeping their heads down around us, to the nurse. The woman is dressed in a crisp white uniform with the clock logo emblazoned on it. She's prowling around, keeping an eagle eye on the Lost Boys and snapping at anyone who's not working hard enough. "You don't want to attract Tink's attention."

I let out a startled laugh, staring at the tiny woman who's in her thirties with punky pink hair and a nasty sneer.

Her eyes are silver, and her chin is pointy.

"She's small enough to be a fairy," I say.

“Her name’s Nurse Tinknell.” Pan shudders. “She bullied us through most of our childhoods. We don’t know why she was first sent here, but she’s made the most of it. It’s like this is her calling. Some people thrive here on the island and under Dad because if they follow his orders, then they are permitted the authority and power. They can be as fucking cruel as they like.”

“Well, then,” I arch my brow, “*I don’t believe in fairies.*”

Pan looks at Tink, before pulling a sad face. “Unfortunately, she’s still alive. Shame.”

“What are you three whispering about?” Tink puts her hands on her hips as she storms towards us. Her voice is Irish and definitely harsher than tinkling bells. “Why aren’t you working?”

Pan pushes himself to his feet, standing in front of Shadow and me protectively.

“It must be my fault,” Pan drawls. “I’m a terrible influence.”

“Aye, you are.”

I’m shocked, when she pulls a buzzer out of her pocket, and Pan pales. “Now, do I need to call for the orderlies and have them come to restrain you because you’re being violent in my lesson again? I’m certain that your da would be unhappy to hear about that happening on your first day.”

Pan shakes his head. “I’m working hard. Look at that huge pile of lovely onions that I’ve personally harvested for your dinner. I adore your lessons on this farm. Can’t you tell? It’s the highlight of my life.”

“I can understand sarcasm, you know.”

“I’m shocked.”

I raise my hand, and Tink’s sharp gaze zeros in on me.

“It looks like we have a polite student at last,” Tink says. “You can learn something from your stepsister, Pan. Aye, what is it?”

“What is all this?” I gesture around at the farm. “I was expecting...actually, I have no idea what I was expecting. I was *hoping* for an academy, but since this is a clinic, then maybe sitting around in group therapy and bitching about how shit our parents are.”

Several of the Lost Boys snicker.

Tink sends them a quailing look. “Aye, you can do that too, if you feel like it. You’ll get therapy with Dr. Croc. But the Director has enlightened views and includes art and dance therapy. Also, this.”

I stare down at my dirty fingernails and the pile of onions. “Gardening?”

“We need to grow what we cook and eat on Never,” Shadow explains. “This is my vegetable garden. I dug it out and designed most of it, when I was a kid. I’ve been tending it ever since.” Then he twists and points at the chicken coop. “They’re mine. I’m in charge of the eggs in the incubator, the hatchings, and then I care for them as chicks. They’re my pets. The cock is named Shady.”

I bite the inside of my cheek — hard — not to say what I’m thinking.

Pan catches my eye and winks.

Damn him.

I bite even harder.

Tink looks smug. “The basis of everything here in the clinic is called *back to nature*. This is how we help you. Honest hard work in the elements, come rain or shine, good sleep, basic food, and no nasty technology.”

By the way that some of the Lost Boys groan, they’ve heard this speech a lot.

She glares around at them. “You ungrateful idiots. You don’t know how lucky you are to have this paradise. No contact with the outside world is the most healing medicine for a suffering mind that there is. It has been for thousands of years.”

I stare at Tink in shock.

Is she serious?

She sounds like she's brainwashed.

"So, you want us all to become monks and nuns?" I demand.

"Whoever said anything about chastity being part of the regimen?" She points at Pan. "Ask your new stepbrother."

If she means to embarrass Pan, it doesn't work.

Instead, Pan takes a bow. "It's always nice to have your talents — and efforts — recognized. But Dad raised us on that *back to nature* fucking propaganda. You know what I think?" He drops his voice like he's sharing a secret. "He simply needed a way to keep this island self-sufficient. After all, everything can't be airdropped in. Plus, it works to keep us too busy and exhausted to cause much trouble, not to mention the fact that it provides easy punishments. If we don't obey, then we can be given chores out here, added hours of work, or be left out in the sun or snow."

Tink's expression is tight. "Lucky for me because you've just earned yourself a punishment session."

"Hey," I push myself up.

Tink has already turned on her heel, however, and is storming to yell at a teenage patient with pretty waist length hair on the other side of the farm, who's eating more raspberries than she's gathering in her basket.

Shadow slinks to his feet next to me, rubbing his hands down his thighs. He twirls his fingers in front of him, fidgeting.

"Evil fairy," I mutter.

To my shock, Tink's head snaps back toward me.

Shit.

"I heard that," she snarls. "Demerit."

Sadly, I don't get the same tingling feeling, as when Peter says it.

Pan drops his arms around my shoulders, and Shadow bumps me with his hip.

I shiver.

I don't think that I've ever felt so cared for, simply through those small gestures.

"Watch yourself, darling," Pan whispers, "she has the hearing of a bat, rather than a fairy."

"She could have magical hearing," Shadow ponders.

I smile, feeling safe held between them.

For the first time, since James caught me at the helicopter, I allow myself to relax.

Until Pan tightens his arm around my shoulders. "We thought that we'd lost you. When you sang your goodbye, it killed us. Even though we'd made Peter promise to get you off this fucking island, thinking that we'd never be able to hold you...kiss you again...something inside us died."

Us...?

Is he talking about Shadow and himself?

Or Hook...?

"Peter...!" My heart races in my chest, when I catch a glimpse of Peter, as he limps toward me across the farm.

I break away from Pan to run toward Peter. My heart is in my mouth, and I'm shaking. I fling my arms around him.

"I was so scared," I gasp. "I thought...I don't know what..."

I hear Tink's outraged yell, calling me back.

I ignore her.

Peter's alive. He's here. He's...

Beaten black and blue.

I pull back, staring up into Peter's bruised face in dismay.

My stomach is tight, and I clutch my hands on his shoulders, regretting it when he winces and then tries to hide it.

Pan and Shadow run up behind me, clasping their arms just as tightly around the two of us.

I'm taken by surprise, before I relax into their embrace.

I've never been hugged like this in a group.

I've never felt what it is to be loved.

The sensation is overwhelming.

Shadow is repeating something over and over under his breath, and it takes me a moment to work out what it is: *he's safe, he's safe, he's safe...*

My chest is tight.

The twins have been just as scared about what had happened to their professor and the man who they've clearly come to love. All morning, however, they've focused on me and my needs, rather than scaring me about what could have happened to Peter or bombarding me with questions about the day before.

I don't know if I could have had that kind of self-control.

"Hey, I'm okay. I knew that there'd be consequences, and we all have to remember those, right?" Peter's gaze meets mine. It's troubled. "I don't want to sound rude, beautiful, but I'm sorry to see you here. I wish that you'd been able to get away."

I shrug. "Never has its appeal."

Three intense gazes swing to meet mine.

I work hard not to look away from these men who make that sentence true.

For the first time in my life, I feel seen, believed, *accepted*.

And loved.

"The Director didn't do anything to you, right?" Peter's expression darkens.

I shake my head.

“I already asked. If he had, then this knife wouldn’t have stayed in my boot.” Pan taps his right boot. “We all know that Hook wouldn’t have let it stay there.”

Peter clasps his hand for a moment around Pan’s neck. “*Don’t.*”

Just that one word.

It hangs heavily between us.

Pan wets his lips. “Yes, Sir.”

Peter lets him go with a shove.

“But he did something to *you.*” I reach out, tracing gently over Peter’s busted lip.

His eye is swollen, and his cheek is so bruised that it looks like he may have been kicked.

“Well, he demoted me from professor for three days, took away my privileges for the week, then handed me over to Dr. Croc for a personal therapy session. We have an old rivalry.” He attempts to smile but then winces. “Look at that, I’m cured of my non-existent issues. It’s a miracle.”

I ball my hands into fists. “I’m going to kick this crocodile’s ass.”

Shadow gives me a look out of the corner of his eye. “Are you?”

I gesture at Peter. “Why wouldn’t I? Look what he did.”

When I look up, I realize that several of the other Lost Boys are circling us, probably trying to listen in to our conversation.

I can see it in their faces.

They’re testing me.

The new girl.

“I don’t think that I’m popular,” I whisper. “What did I do? Did I mess up some kind of first day initiation?”

“You didn’t do anything.” Shadow’s lips tighten. “Word has spread that you’re the Director’s daughter and other things, probably.”

Other things...?

“You can’t blame them for resenting that,” Shadow continues. “That’s why you mustn’t go anywhere here by yourself. Stay on the alert. You don’t cry or show weakness. They’re going to be working you out. We’re the only ones who get to go home at the end of the day, as long as we’re not being punished. The only ones who still have our family. They don’t understand how things are at Never Hall.”

I shudder.

I get that. They must think that the twins have been privileged and lucky all these years.

They’re fucking wrong.

All of a sudden, one of the Lost Boys rushes me. He’s a large, burly man, who appears to be in his late twenties, with black, springy curls. He bumps into my shoulder, sending me tumbling to the ground.

I yelp, catching my hand and twisting my wrist.

I don’t cry though.

And I don’t scream.

Instead, I hug my wrist to myself, breathing hard to keep my expression blank.

It’s Peter who hisses a sharp breath.

“I may not be here in my capacity as a professor right now,” he bellows, “but anyone who goes within a meter of Angela is going to be regretting it for the remainder of this term and on permanent punishment duty in my class.”

The students pale and draw back from me, apart from the burly man who stares Peter down.

That is, until Pan bares his teeth and snatches the man by the front of his uniform. “That was a mistake, Curly, because

now I have to take you apart with my teeth, right down to the bone.”

I freeze.

Is that Pan or Hook?

Definitely Hook.

Finally, Curly blanches, even though he’s twice as broad and older than Hook.

It’s as if he recognizes the shift too.

“S-sorry, I didn’t m-mean anything by it,” Curly pleads with a deep Spanish accent.

Hook slams Curly to the ground, pinning him by his throat; his eyes are dark and deadly.

He snatches Curly’s wrist and tightens his grip, until Curly whimpers. “Oh, but I will mean something by it, when I break your wrist for hurting my dear’s. You will scream for that. Hear me, none of you damn Lost Boys will touch her again. She’s ours.”

“Is she?” A calm voice says behind me. One that I’ve only heard in my nightmares for five years, which I never thought that I’d hear again. *Kyden’s*. “Because I thought that she was *my* sister first.”

Chapter Thirteen



I taught you to fight and to fly. What more could there be?

The Farm, Never Clinic

My heart stops.
I can't breathe.

I stare up at the man who has silently joined the crowd in the courtyard farm behind Curly.

Curly is still pinned on the ground by his throat by Hook, Pan's alter.

This can't be happening.

Can't be real.

Am I dreaming? Is this a nightmare?

Or is this a hallucination of Kyden? Have I actually lost my mind?

I feel like I'm back in my bedroom five years ago.

I can smell my skin burning. I can feel his fingers bruising me.

Then I break the rules of Never and I scream.

Peter looks startled.

“I don’t know what’s going on but I suggest that you stay away from her.” He steps between Kyden and me.

At the same time, Shadow drops to his knees next to me and wraps his arms around me. This much touch in this way isn’t natural for him in public, but it’s all that’s stopping me from falling apart.

I cling to him, as he rocks me.

I’m violently trembling, hyperventilating. I’m frozen in a panic attack, and only through Shadow’s anchoring hold, am I able to draw in shuddering breaths at all.

Terrified, I still force myself to glance over Shadow’s shoulder at where my brother is standing.

Then I wish that I hadn’t.

Kyden looks older but still how I remember him (but have tried so many times to forget). He’s handsome with neat copper hair and beard. His hazel eyes match mine in a way that I’ve always wished that they didn’t.

He’s not wearing the uniform of a Lost Boy but rather, a black turtleneck under a brown velvet suit.

How the hell is he here?

Has he always been here all these years?

I pale.

Is this how Mom first met James? Is this how they started a relationship, when Mom admitted Kyden into Never Clinic?

Did they have a deal for him to come here, if he worked as a psychiatrist?

I have to know.

“What’s going on,” Kyden continues, shoving his hands into his pockets, “is that my sis is *mine*. She always has been. I once made her a promise that I’d hunt her, if she went through a window to get away from me. She didn’t listen. Better late than never, right?”

I can’t stop myself.

I turn my head to the side and hurl.

Kyden sighs. “Look at the mess that you’ve made. You always were a drama queen. I’m an important man here, a doctor. You’re not giving a good impression of our family. Such hysteria.”

Shadow gently helps me to sit up, placing himself between Kyden and me. He holds my hand between his and squeezes.

Then he glares over his shoulder at Kyden. “Don’t talk to her. Don’t even look at her.”

Kyden’s eyes darken in a way that I know to fear. “That sounds like a loss of control over your emotions. I prescribe a restriction of movements to your room for the next week to help curb such outbursts.”

“Were you tricked here too?” I whisper, unable to raise my gaze to meet Kyden’s. “Is that why you’re teaching here?”

Will his ego even allow him to admit that?

Kyden puffs up his chest. “I’m not the same as everybody else here. Okay, I didn’t know that I was being detained. But I was offered a job. I get to be in charge.”

Peter’s glancing between us like he’s putting the pieces together. “So, she didn’t know that you were here. How long has it been since you’ve had contact with each other?”

“Five years, since she made up lies about me.” Kyden’s eyes flash, and he takes a step forward. “She does that. It’s pathological with her. She always had problems regulating her moods, then one day she decided to jump out of her window —”

“You mean, you decided to burn me alive and then push me out of my window.” I untangle myself from Shadow and shove myself to my feet in my fury.

I’m vibrating with it.

I hate the way that the other Lost Boys are watching, in fact, everybody is now.

I’m the entertainment.

Yet I won't be gaslit again. I'm not the same teenager who I was five years ago.

I'm a woman now.

It's tearing me apart to think that my new lovers, who I've only just found, may believe what Kyden's saying about me.

I lost my first family because of him. I can't lose my second one.

What if they don't believe me either?

Kyden shakes his head. "Always such an attention whore."

To my shock, Hook launches himself off Curly with a blood-curdling howl. He reaches for the knife in his boot.

The sun catches on the blade.

Kyden stumbles back a step. "Nurse, control that savage."

Hook flashes a dark and dangerous smile. "I'm going to slash your neck to gizzard and then feed your innards to the crows. I know about being a villain, and you're as foul as they come. But I'm a villain too. Perhaps, you didn't think that you'd have to face someone with as twisted a heart as your own. But you tried to kill my dear heart, so I'm going to kill *you*."

Dear heart...?

Does Hook care for me as much as Pan does?

"Stop this," Peter tries, attempting to block Hook, "and let me deal with it my way. I'll protect Angela, I promise."

"I'll let my trusty blade do the protecting." Hook dodges around Peter, before backing Kyden toward the vegetable patch.

He slashes his blade, and it cuts through Kyden's suit sleeve.

Kyden hisses out a shocked breath.

I shouldn't want Hook to do this.

Pan will be in trouble, when he's in charge of his personality again.

He'll take the punishment.

It's incredible, however, to see someone stand up for me.

It's even more incredible to see my normally in control brother look like he's about to piss himself.

“Pan, will you come out please?” Kyden swallows. “I’m assuming that we have Hook here with us now. You’re always the violent one, aren’t you? I don’t know why you think that you’d ever be wanted. None of us are your friends. You’re not welcome. You’re the one who all of us want to die. Let Pan out — he’s the real host. I don’t want to see you.”

I gasp.

My brother’s a psychiatrist. He has to know that what he’s just done is the most violating thing he can do to someone with DID.

I’m not an expert but even I know that.

How can he try and force a switch, demand to know who it is, or try to *kill* an alter?

And *I* want to see Hook.

I fucking want him.

Hook startles, looking distressed.

He lowers the knife.

It’s just enough of a hesitation for Tink to stalk behind Hook with the pair of orderlies. She jabs a needle into his neck at the same time as one orderly kicks his legs out from under him.

Hook drops to his knees, and his eyes flutter closed, sedated by whatever they’ve drugged him with. Both orderlies wrench his arms behind his back, binding his arms with restraints and then his legs.

“*No.*” I try to leap forward, but Shadow snatches me, holding me back by the elbow. “Let him go.”

Shadow’s expression is grim.

Kyden flicks imaginary lint off his slashed sleeve. “Take him to a padded cell for his own protection.”

Hook slumps in the orderlies’ arms, as he’s pulled to his feet and then dragged away toward the clinic.

The Lost Boys are eerily silent.

“You really are a fucking piece of work, Dr. Croc,” Peter grits out.

I jolt.

Dr. Croc?

This is the asshole who’s been tormenting the twins, as well as Peter...?

My brother?

Fuck, when I first arrived on the island, the twins must have been bracing themselves for another bullying jerk to be living with them.

If I already knew Kyden and then had heard that his sibling was coming to both live with me and become my professor, as they’d first assumed, then I’d have been cold and watchful as well.

They thought that I knew Dr. Croc was my brother all along.

How were they to guess that Mom had kept that little secret from me? Because she fucking knew that I’d never have agreed to any of this, if I’d known about Kyden being here.

“Peter, you’re currently demoted to the status of a student without privileges.” Kyden prowls toward Peter. “We’ve only just got through teaching you a thorough lesson, but as you know, I always enjoy teaching you those. So, it’s your choice if you’re stupid enough to keep insulting a staff member. Apologize.”

I suck in a breath.

Say sorry.

Just say it.

Instead, Peter shakes his head.

Kyden's expression darkens. "I said, *apologize*."

Now, the other Lost Boys are shifting and looking between both men. I can tell by the tension that Peter is clearly liked as a professor.

They don't want him to back down but they also don't want to watch him hurt or drugged like Pan has been either.

I nudge Peter in the back, "Say it."

Peter's gaze is steady as he doesn't look away from Kyden. "What do you want?"

"A reunion with my little sis."

"You've had it. What else?"

"A proper one. In private."

My pulse is roaring in my ears. I can't hear the bleating of goats or smell the stink of manure.

There's nothing but the flat, hardness of Kyden's eyes and the possessive meaning of his words.

I'll die, before allowing him to torment me again like he used to.

Peter raises his chin. "What you want even more than that is to knock me on my ass in front of my Lost Boys, while I'm not a professor. To lord it over me how much stronger, better, and more powerful you are. To rub my face in the dirt at your feet."

Hell, he *does* know my brother.

Kyden's pupils dilate, and he licks his lips. "What's stopping me doing that anyway?"

"It doesn't prove anything about your power, if it's not a fair fight. Come on, we've been rivals for years. Don't you want to see who would win, while we have an audience?" Peter shrugs off his jacket and tosses it onto the ground.

Then he loosens his tie.

"What do you get out of it?" Kyden demands.

He's hooked him.

But why?

"The deal is that if I knock you on your ass, then you stay away from Angela." Peter suddenly looks more dangerous than my brother. "You don't touch one hair on her head and you don't threaten her. You know that there's a tradition that we can claim someone as *our Darling*. Well, I'm claiming her. So, deal?"

Kyden cocks her head. "If you apologize."

This is the Kyden I know.

He has to be right.

He has to be in control.

He has to be most dominant.

Only, *you can't top a dom*, as Peter told me. I understand now why the two professors clash and are such rivals.

Peter takes a deep breath, before his eyes flash. "I apologize for calling you a fucking piece of work for abusing one of your students."

"Your apologies suck as much as your lessons, but that's to be expected. Deal." Kyden throws his own jacket to Tink, who catches it with a simper like it's a bouquet at a wedding.

Yet Kyden's thrumming with excitement.

He's bouncing on his toes and swinging his arms. I know the gleam in his eyes: he's excited by this.

Probably by having an audience too.

I can't help noticing how flushed he is and the way that he's fixated on Peter's plush but split lips.

Wait, is the thought of humiliating Peter like this turning him on?

Suddenly, I can't let Peter do this.

"Don't," I call out, scared about what I'm going to do but determined to protect my guys from this monster in the best way that I can. "I'm not letting my bro beat anyone up because

of me. He wants me as his plaything and always has. I know him better than you. I can handle him.”

It's a lie. But they don't need to know that.

Somehow, Peter seems to know it anyway.

He raises a stern eyebrow at me, which makes me quail. “We'll talk about how important I consider people telling me the truth later. It's the basis of all healthy relationships, even in a hellhole like Never. Luckily for you, bad girl, I have a whole Fight Club thing to concentrate on right now.”

He rolls up his sleeves, revealing his beautiful dragon tattoos.

Shadow tugs me by the hand to join the circle of Lost Boys, who are fanning out in a gladiatorial ring, as if professors settling their deals by hand to hand combat is normal here.

Maybe it is.

I turn to Shadow.

“Is Peter going to be okay?” I whisper. “He already looks half-dead. I think his ribs are broken.”

“Watch,” Shadow replies. “Croc believes that he's the best at everything, and Peter hides some of his talents. But not everybody knows his background like I do.”

What does he mean?

Who is Peter?

Or I guess I mean, who *was* he, before he was sent to Never?

Kyden shoots me a dismissive glance. “I bet you never imagined in your stupid head, sis, that two men would be fighting over you. Enjoy the attention, while it lasts.”

I wince.

“Don't listen to him.” Shadow tightens his hand in mine, before he murmurs, “We don't need to fight over you because

we're sharing you. You have three men who deeply care for you. If you'll have us."

Warmth floods through me.

Only a couple of years ago, Kyden's words would have wrecked me. They'd have wormed deep inside and poisoned me.

Now, they've lost their power.

I created a life of my own, even if it wasn't perfect, while he was trapped on Never. Now, I have three men who are prepared to stand by my side and fight for me.

Four, counting Hook.

Kyden can't make me doubt that.

Peter shares a quick smile with me over his shoulder, before he turns back to Kyden.

Then his expression becomes cold. "Come on then."

Kyden smirks, slowly circling Peter. Peter carefully watches him but doesn't make a move.

I can hardly stay still myself, and next to me, Shadow's rocking on his heels.

My breathing's ragged, and I'm biting my lip.

Kyden's going to take Peter apart.

Again.

Then Kyden makes his move.

He dives toward Peter, wrapping his muscular arm around his neck from behind, before punching him in the kidneys.

I wince. It must be agony.

Kyden punches Peter again and again.

To my shock, Peter barely registers the hits.

His face is an icy mask.

Then lightning fast, he shoots his elbow back, catching Kyden in the sternum.

Kyden lets out a pained *oomph*, stumbling back a step and leaning over with his arms around his middle.

When Peter twirls in a move that's halfway between that of a dancer and an assassin, my breath hitches in my throat.

He's a trained fighter.

A fucking god.

I must be watching him with the same awed amazement as the rest of the Lost Boys.

Truly, who was he before he flew to Never?

Finally seeing Peter unleashed for the first time, Kyden appears to realize his mistake. He takes another step backward, but it's too late.

In a single move, Peter snatches Kyden by the front of his shirt, dragging him upright and holding him there, while he knees him in the balls.

"I want to marry that man," I murmur.

Kyden makes a sound like he's dying.

Then Peter backhands him, hard enough to make the blood spurt from his nose and drip down to stain his lips and beard.

Peter shoves Kyden back in a move that's so fast, I hardly see it happen, before Kyden is sprawled amongst the mud and onions.

The Lost Boys burst into clapping and cheers.

I grin, and Shadow picks me up to twirl me around.

Yet there's part of me that thinks there will be consequences for this.

Kyden will never allow himself to be humiliated or lose his power without payback.

Peter stands over Kyden, looking down at him. "And that's me knocking you on your ass, Doctor. Now, uphold your side of the deal and stay away from Angela. She's under my protection. I'm claiming her as my Darling.

Chapter Fourteen



They do seem to be emerging out of our island, don't they, the little people of our play?

The Wild Island, Never

It's been two weeks since I was trapped in Never Clinic and Peter knocked my brother on his ass.

I've been waiting for retribution to fall on our heads every day since then.

So far, it hasn't.

Yet I'm still preparing myself because I know Kyden.

He thought that by insulting, breaking, and trying to burn me to ash, then he'd make me weak.

He was wrong.

Because it's made me strong.

He's been doing the same to the Never brothers.

Now together, we finally have a chance to stand up to him in a way that I never had as a kid.

Will I finally get the closure that was denied to me, when he pushed me out of my bedroom window?

Or now that he's been challenged, will he make sure that I really die this time?

I've been keeping my head down both in Never Hall and during Tink's therapy sessions on the farm, while my anxiety has been at an all-time high. It would have given me insomnia, even if I wasn't spending most of my nights in the twins' room anyway, helping Pan through his night terrors.

Being restrained after his knife attack has made them worse.

Yet I've also loved the protective unit that the twins have formed around me, holding my hand, as they walk me around the clinic.

Pan practically snarls at anyone who glares at me.

When Curly scowls, it's enough to trigger Hook to come out and play.

My snatched moments with Hook excite me.

Together, we scheme, plotting escape or at least ways to defend ourselves.

Hook thinks that Peter is playing a long game and knows more than he's letting on.

I agree.

What's he hiding?

Of course, Hook's plans tend to be more violent than mine and involve torn off cocks or the Director's head on a spike.

Plus, a lot of getting drunk.

The greatest thing to give me strength, however, is what Peter said to me, when he summoned me to his dance studio.

I thought that I was about to receive a demerit for singing too loudly in the corridor.

Instead, Peter pushed me against the dance bar, caging me.

I gasped, as his hot body pressed against mine.

"The twins and I spoke last night," Peter whispered. His stubble grazed my ear. "You know that they trust me with everything, right? We need to survive here and we'd never fight over a woman. We love each other with a connection

that's hard to explain. You know that we want you to be a part of it. We've discussed this before, but if we're really having a polyamorous relationship, then we're talking through our limits and kinks fully later." He glanced hurriedly at the open door through to the corridor to check that we were alone, before capturing my lips in a kiss. "Also, we each want to take you on a proper date."

Wait, he was kissing me in his classroom in the filthiest way, but at the same time, asking me out in the sweetest way..?

I pretended to fake pout. "What? This isn't only going to be lots of hot secret fucking then?"

Peter chuckled. "There's going to be a lot of fucking. But we also want to date you as our partner. We want to know you, our beautiful Darling."

I shivered. "I want to get to know you all properly as well. I mean, who you were before you came here. You're not simply someone who deserves to be adopted because their name matches a fictional character or to be rejected by their asshole parents. Who you are and what you like, hate, or makes you laugh matters to me."

Peter looked at me, awed.

Then he reached down and grabbed my hand.

He raised it to his lips and kissed the back of my knuckles. "Let us show you that if Never is hell, then sin is worth the suffering."

So, it's Sunday morning, and I'm on my first date with Shadow.

I grin with excitement, shaking the water out of my hair like a dog. I'm dripping wet and stripped down to only my shirt and pants. They cling to me, virtually transparent.

I swam across the lake in them to this small island, which is thick with a grove of trees.

It's cooler here.

Wild fowl swim on the mirror-like surface of the lake, and sheep graze on the other side in the long grass.

The sun shines against my skin, warming it. I raise my face, loving the rays of the sun against it.

The sky is azure.

Cloudless.

“This is Wild Island.” Shadow’s arms are held wide at his side, as he spins. He’s vibrating with excitement. I’ve never seen him this relaxed before. “It’s the island within the island. It was our hideaway when we were kids.”

He’s also naked apart from his tight black pants. We both stripped down on the other side of the lake, before we swam out here.

I can just make out the small pile of clothes, but it’s hazy like another world.

I almost feel free here.

I glance at Shadow, who looks more beautiful than normal with his pale expanses of lean muscles, curls bouncing as he spins, and his golden eyes glowing with joy.

The Kohl underneath his eyes has bled with the water.

He looks like an angel grieving his Fall.

“I wanted to share this with you.” Shadow stops spinning, before grinning at me. “I’ve never brought anyone here before. Pan swims over with Peter, but otherwise, it’s just been us Never boys. This is where we grew up as kids: our private island within an island. Our refuge. I want it to be yours too.”

I swallow.

I know how much that must mean to Shadow to share it with me.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

A wild island for wild boys.

All of a sudden, there’s a flutter of movement, and the lake looks green, as a vast swarm of emerald butterflies descend on it.

I gasp in wonder.

The sight is breathtaking.

“This is your butterfly lake, which you told me about in the larder,” I gasp. I feel so fucking privileged that Shadow has brought me here. “The ones that Pan told you were fairies.”

They’re so stunning that I know why Shadow believed Pan.

I almost believe in fairies now.

“Look, they’re welcoming you.” Shadow smiles. “They want you here too.”

He raises his wrist, and I notice the white lines there.

I remember the feel of tracing my invisible Darling Butterfly onto his skin.

He holds my gaze, before he raises his wrist to his plush lips and then kisses over the exact place that I drew the Darling Butterfly.

He’s worshiping her like he promised. He’s not going to kill her.

My breath stutters.

Fuck, I love him.

“Pan made up a lot of stories about this island for me as well.” Shadow laces our fingers together, before pointing back over the dark waters of the lake. “He told me that there was a drowned forest at the bottom of the lake and that when we came here at night, we could see the stars at the bottom too.”

“It sounds beautiful.”

“Like you.” Shadow studies my face. “I’d like to bring you here at night and show you the sunken stars.”

My lips curl up. “Me too.”

I mean it.

“What stops other members of staff from coming here?” For the first time, I feel chilled. “You know, like Kyden?”

Shadow's expression clouds. "No one ever has. They know that it's abandoned, and no one cares about nature the way that Pan and I love it. Dad and Tink are only driven to hunt or tame, and Croc just wants to control everything. They don't like the wilderness. But Pan revels in it. Nature, its spirit, you can feel it on your skin. The air smells and tastes different, can't you tell?"

It does something to me, when Shadow talks so fast that he stumbles over his words. I know what he means.

I can feel it out here too.

I nod. "I love it."

I've always been a movie and pizza kind of girl.

Yet standing out here with Shadow on a wild island in the middle of a lake with no other human in sight is exhilarating.

It's already the best date that I could have imagined.

"So, no one comes here," Shadow says. "They're too afraid. We're safe. It's nice."

Unexpectedly, my mouth becomes dry. "Woah, what? *Afraid?*"

They don't have bears in Scotland right? *Wolves?*

Fuck, I wish that I'd paid more attention to the native wildlife that lives here.

"There's a rumor that Wild Island is haunted," Shadow says.

"Uh-huh, and you're only telling me this now?" I demand. "Is this a kind of *take her to the haunted house* style of date? Are you hoping that I'll put my arm around you in fear and snuggle closer?"

He looks at me in confusion, and I remember again that without seeing movies he doesn't have the same cultural references as me.

"Would you like me to put my arm around you?" He asks.

"Go on then."

Shadow slides his arm around my shoulders, tugging me against his hard chest.

“So, why the fear of this place?”

“It’s not true.” He looks at me out of the corner of this eye. “Ghosts aren’t real. Once you’re dead, you stay dead. You don’t come back. It’s only because Dad told everyone that this is where my brother drowned. He was the good one, who Mum loved. We were triplets. We were meant to be forever together. He promised.”

I stare up at Shadow in shock. His expression is unreadable.

What the hell do I say?

So, there was a third brother.

Shadow and Pan weren’t the twins. They were *the triplets*. Until one of them died.

I pale.

Shit, I see how close Pan and Shadow are. I can’t imagine what it’d feel like to lose a triplet.

“Shadow,” I hesitate, “you don’t have to tell me this. It’s up to you what you share with me and when. But I’m here, if you want to talk. And fuck that *never cry* rule. If you want to cry, then go for it. Hell, you need to scream, you go right ahead with that too. There’s no one to hear you but me and the fairies.”

Shadow tightens his arm around me. “His name was Peter, but we all called him Peto.”

My eyes widen.

Then I bristle. “So, your dick of a dad adopted a new brother called Peter...? He makes you act like our Peter is a replacement for your dead brother?”

“It’s not Peter’s fault.”

“I didn’t say that it was.”

“Come on,” Shadow turns away like he doesn’t want to keep looking at the water anymore and tugs me toward the grove of trees, “I’ve got more to show you, and it always makes me sad to remember the feel of vanished hands.”

I nod.

My mind is spinning.

Is this connected to the mystery around Mrs. Never Mark One?

Has she also died? Did she drown too?

Yet there’s a small thought worming in my mind, which I can’t silence: Was the death even natural?

What if this Peto was murdered?

The trees become denser, and I’m swallowed up by shadows. The sun is lost to the canopy. It’s cooler now.

I pick my way carefully between logs, as sharp twigs dig into my soft soles.

I wince.

Shadow glances at me. “Was it wrong of me to have mentioned Peto? Pan has spent the last week coaching me to prepare me for this date. He told me that I should keep it fun and romantic. He told me that I must treat you with respect and like a goddess. I intended to anyway, but it’s the talking side of things that I’ve always had a problem with. At least, it’s what Dad and Croc say. I’ve already screwed up this date, haven’t I?”

“I’m not on this date with Pan. When it’s his turn, he can do his own brand of fun romance, with I hope, a large dose of the kinkiness that we negotiated last night. Today, however, I’m on a date with you. I don’t want you to mask who you truly are, trying to be someone else.”

Shadow’s eyes widen with wonder. “Nobody has ever wanted me to be myself. I’m meant to put on an act. Because I’m never enough.”

My brow furrows. “You are enough. Just as you are.”

A slow grin spreads over his pretty mouth. “Then I’d like to tell you the secrets that I’ve never told anyone else. Pan is like part of me, but sometimes, I can’t talk about things because I don’t want to upset him. Peter too. It feels special to know that I can tell you. I’ve never been close to a woman before and I’ve never wanted to be. But this feels like we were always meant to fit together. Will you tell me all the stuff you can’t tell other people too?”

My heart leaps. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Shadow licks his lips nervously like I’ll change my mind. “Peto was the leader of the three of us. He was strong. Perfect. I never knew what was my idea or his. It was only after he was gone that Pan helped me to work that out. I don’t know why Peto came out to this lake by himself. He was twelve. But what happened to him changed all our lives because Mum just went to bed after he drowned and she wouldn’t see Pan or me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I broke the rules that day.” Shadow’s expression is tight. “I cried, curled all day and night outside her door. Pan wasn’t with me because he’d closed himself up in our room. He blamed himself for not being with Peto. Dad came by and took one look at me and then brusquely snarled: *Get in there and remind her that she still has two sons.*”

My stomach is cold with dread.

I hate that I’m sure I know where this is going.

“You know that whatever she said came from a place of pain and grief, right?”

Shadow pulls me to a stop, pushing me against the trunk of a tree. I stare up at him, as he scans my face.

I don’t know what he’s looking for.

My t-shirt is almost dry already, but I still shiver.

“She said, ‘Peter!’” Shadow’s eyes are anguished, as his hands claw into my shoulders like he needs to anchor himself and he’s decided to trust that I’m his safe space. “I shook my

head, replying, “No, it’s Shadow.” Mum sank back into her bed. She looked disappointed and just turned away her head. “Go away,” she said, “my Peter’s dead.” After that, she ignored me and never spoke to me again.”

My eyes smart with tears.

What can I say?

Mom has chosen my brother over me time and time again. She’s failed to believe or support me.

But Pan’s brother has died.

Even after his death, his mom still chose his brother over him.

“I’ve never told anyone that,” Shadow adds in a small voice.

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” I reach up and cup his cheek.

“She didn’t want Pan and me. A week later, straight after the funeral, when Pan and I were still falling apart, she got on a helicopter and flew away. We’ve never heard from her since.”

My stomach drops.

He’s been abandoned by the only real woman in his life, and I almost flew away from him too.

I kiss him.

I don’t know how else to tell him everything that I’m saying.

Sorry that his brother died.

Sorry that his own mom abandoned him, when he needed her most.

Sorry that he’s never been able to talk to anyone about feeling like a shadow all of these years, one which was rejected.

Sorry that I nearly ran from him too.

I trace my fingers down his cheek. “Well, I’ve flown to Never now. And I want you, *Shadow*. I know who you are and

I've chosen you. You don't need to be good or perfect. Just be mine."

"I am." His thick, black eyelashes flutter. "Forever yours."

Then he takes a steadying breath, before taking a sharp step back and prowling further into the grove.

I rush to follow him.

"Where are we going?" I call out.

"Death, beauty, and hope." Shadow looks like a trickster fae now. His skin is translucent in the cold light of the grove. "It's the motto of the ancient community, which once lived on Never. People pretend that they were a fishing community, but that was the cover to hide the secret of their illegal activities. Really, they were smugglers and pirates. The coves around here are riddled with their secret smuggling caves, where their boats would land. I don't know why they all died, but it could have been some kind of power struggle or perhaps, they were finally caught by the authorities and taken back to the mainland to be hung."

Well, that's dark, but at the same time, *pirates*.

My eyes light up. "Wait, is there hidden treasure buried somewhere?"

He laughs. "Not that I've been able to find, but we can always search. Pan will approve of a treasure hunt."

Not the innocent sort, he wouldn't.

All of a sudden, we burst out of the treeline into an open clearing, and I stumble to a stop.

Shadow twirls back to me, holding out his arms. "This is the heart of Wild Island: Death, beauty, and hope."

I stare at what must once have been a graveyard for the community that used to inhabit this island. There are tumbledown stone markers, which are covered in moss.

My heart beats faster, and I ball my hands at my side.

Some of the graves have been disturbed. There are piles of skulls at the back of the clearing.

Yet it has a dark beauty.

Nature has taken over this ancient place. Tall trees rise up between the forest graveyard, and scarlet roses like drops of blood wind around the graves. Thorny brier bushes twist between them.

Emerald butterflies flutter between the roses.

It's peaceful.

Shadow looks at me, uncertainly. "This is our secret. No one else knows that this is here. It helps me remember that there was once more than the clinic. I know that you have your memories from the world outside here but I only have this. I have evidence that there's more than Never Hall — a way out."

I follow Shadow, as he picks his way between the graves to a soft patch of forest floor on the other side. He takes my hand and pulls me to sit down next to him.

Butterflies settle around us.

I hold my breath.

I've never felt caught between life and death like this.

"How does this help us?" I ask.

Shadow frowns. "I'm not sure yet. I simply know that as much as Dad works to make us feel that Never has always existed as it does now and will never change...that's a lie. Look at this place. Once these smugglers were alive and living in this big community. They were outlaws. I bet that they also never thought that things were going to change for them."

I twist to Shadow pushing him onto his back. I love the feel of his silky skin and the way that his breath hitches.

"You're brilliant," I whisper. My heart's racing. "And you're right. Everything in that clinic is done to make us too fucking exhausted to think straight. They take your power and the sense of time and reality. Yet they're not as all-powerful as they like to think. We need to find a way to take back the control. So, who holds it?"

“The Director,” Shadow quickly replies. “Dad always has.”

“Does he?” I cock my head. “Maybe.”

I’m not so sure.

Why wasn’t I told about Kyden? Why was he made into a professor?

For now, I’ve had enough scheming. I want to reward my lover for everything that he’s shared of himself with me today.

For the risks that he’s taken and the trust that he’s shown.

It means a lot, and I feel even closer to him.

All of a sudden, I’m desperate to smooth my hands over his beautiful skin and make him feel good. I know that this isn’t sexual for him, but he told me that he liked affectionate touches.

He needs to relax.

Plus, he loved having his hair petted.

I want to do that again.

“Roll onto your front,” I say with a smirk. “It’s a shame that we didn’t bring any oil.”

Shadow’s eyes widen.

He looks ready to leap up. “Oil...? What...? I want to bring you pleasure but I’m not ready for *that*. Pan fantasizes about a woman doing *that* to him. He told me this whole roleplay thing of you bending him over and pegging him, while he begs you for mercy, but you don’t stop because you’re his Queen and it’s his duty to serve you.”

I blush.

Fuck.

Also, *yes please...*

At the same time, I need to reassure Shadow that as much as Pan can serve me in any way that his kinky heart desires, I don’t expect more from either of them than they’re ready to give.

“I get it,” I say. “I respect you, Shadow. I want to make you feel good too. I’ll never pressure you for more than that. I meant *massage oil*. After the stress of the last few weeks, I thought that a massage would feel good. What do you think?”

Shadow bites his lip. “I’d love that.”

He’s stiff and wound tight as he rolls onto his front.

I’m going to change that.

It’s my mission.

He still looks poised to bolt.

“I’m going to straddle your ass,” I tell him. Then I lean to whisper into his ear, “As much as I enjoy feeling your tight ass squeezed between my thighs, I’m only sitting on it to reach your back.”

“Fine.” He glances over his shoulder through half-hooded eyes. “And I admit to enjoying looking at your tight ass, when I can.”

I laugh. “We’re equal then.”

I straddle his ass, trying to ignore how fucking incredible it feels. Only tiny scraps of material separate us.

I skim my fingers along his tense back, and he forces himself to pillow his head on his arms.

“Okay, I’ll start,” I say, “since this is our first proper date: chocolate or strawberry ice cream?”

He hesitates. “Am I being restricted to only one dessert?”

I roll my eyes; I forget that he hasn’t even watched dates in the movies. “This is me trying to find out about you in a relaxed way. It’s what people do. Hell, I have no idea why. But call this me easing you into it. I read about this in *Teen Vogue* or something.”

“Chocolate every time.”

I grin, stroking my palms more firmly up and down Shadow’s spine. “Good answer.”

“My turn to ask a question. I like this. Why do you love music so much?”

He hasn't quite got the hang of this because that's a big, soul searching one. Still, my family never bothered to ask it.

“I don't remember a time that I didn't. It makes me feel more alive, I guess in the same way that nature does Pan. I can escape into it. Then when I sing, it's like I can lose myself in becoming someone else. Sorry, that doesn't really make sense.”

“It does.”

I can hear the relaxation creeping into Shadow's voice and work harder on his back.

I want him to become putty in my hands.

I want him purring for me.

It turns me on so fucking much to be able to affect him just by light touches.

“So, what makes you attracted to someone?” I ask.

I hold my breath. If he can ask big questions, then so can I.

There's a long moment.

I massage more deeply into the back of Shadow's neck, and he sighs contentedly.

In this beautiful cemetery, it feels like worshiping a primal god.

“I've never been attracted to anyone before you,” Shadow replies. “I didn't think that I could be. Then I saw you and I was confused by what I felt. Since then, I've been attracted to your kindness, bravery, and smartness. By the way that you've stood up for and accepted me. I don't think that I can be attracted to anyone else. It's only you.”

My chest is tight. Emotions swell powerfully through me.

I reward Shadow by mussing his hair.

He moans, sensually.

My own breathing becomes more rapid. I tighten my hold, giving his hair a tug, and he moans again.

“Do you like that?” I check in.

“Don’t stop,” Shadow’s voice is slurred. He sounds like he’s dropping fast. “Please...”

I love how he begs.

I make a slow fist in his hair, once and then again. His whole body twitches now beneath me, and for a moment, I think that he’s going to buck me off.

He doesn’t. In fact, he pushes his ass slowly up against me, inviting more touch.

He’s breathing fast.

He truly does love having his hair played with.

He’s the most relaxed that I’ve ever seen. All the tension has bled from his shoulders.

Finally, I let his hair go with a final stroke of his curls. Then I stroke all the way down the length of his back, from his neck to the beautiful dip of his lower back.

I play with the waistband of his underwear.

“Can I take these off and massage lower?” I ask.

Shadow hums his agreement, moving his hips in a way, of which I’m certain he’s not aware.

I shuffle to sit on his strong thighs, edging my fingers into the sides of his boxers.

I need to keep the focus on Shadow. My mouth is dry, however, as I slide down his underwear and reveal his gorgeous, sculptured ass.

It’s a battle not to grind against him, as I massage his pale globes in slow circles.

His delighted moan is sinful.

I’m the first woman to touch him like this.

Every inch of this silky skin is mine. I want to sink my teeth in and mark him. I could lick him.

Only, he's not ready for that, and it's fine.

This is treat enough.

His courage at allowing me to massage him like this makes me love him even more.

I press firmly with my finger on the skin of his right buttock, before tracing out **DARLING**.

Shadow shivers.

Then he glances over his shoulder at me. "I love you, our Darling. Kiss me."

"Anytime you want."

I lean over him, pressing our bare skin together. He feels warm, even in the chill of the clearing.

We're surrounded by skulls, roses, and butterflies.

Death, beauty, and hope.

And we kiss like it could be the last time or like we'll die, if we don't.

It's everything.

Our love is.

This date has proved one thing: Shadow and I have fallen for each other.

And our hearts are fragile and could be broken.

Chapter Fifteen



I don't want to go to school and learn solemn things.

Dr. Croc's Therapy Room, Never Clinic

It's Monday morning, and I'm squirming on my hard plastic chair in Kyden's therapy room.

My heart pounds.

This is a horrifying start to the week at the clinic.

Kyden stands smugly at the front of the room, which smells of intoxicating incense. The blinds are pulled over the windows, and the only light comes from the flickering candles, which illuminate the corners of the room.

The walls are covered in pictures of optical illusions and people who look to be in different stages of trances.

It makes me uneasy, and I shift even more.

Antique bookcases line the back wall, which are filled with leather-bound tomes. A filing cabinet stands to the front of the room beside a large desk, which is covered in brilliantly colored crystals and piles of paperwork.

Opposite me, sprawls a chocolate leather couch.

Shadow is sitting next to me in an equally hard chair to mine, while Pan sits on the other side.

Except, Pan's arms and ankles are tied down by wide leather straps.

I guess that's what happens, when you attack your professor with a knife.

Who knew?

Kyden strokes over his beard, building the suspense.

Shadow edges his leg closer to mine, until our thighs touch.

I smile.

I wish that I could still see bruises on Kyden's face from his fight with Peter. But they're healed now.

Is he going to honor the deal that he made with Peter? He's not meant to hurt or threaten me, but there's a lot of loopholes in that.

For example, this is a *therapy session*, which James ordered for Pan, Shadow, and me.

Kyden couldn't refuse and nor could we.

What kind of therapy does he even offer in this freaky room? If he expects me to pour out my heart about our past, then he's going to be disappointed.

Although, it'd be fun to sit here, forcing him to listen to my childhood stories about my bullying brother...

When Kyden swaggers toward Pan, I stiffen.

Kyden's flat eyes scan Pan's face. He sweeps his finger over the leather strap that holds Pan's right — blade — hand down.

Pan bares his teeth.

Even though Pan is the one who's tied down, I'm not sure that Kyden is the most dangerous one in the room right now because I can see Hook just underneath the surface, struggling to get out.

Kyden taps over each of Pan's fingers lingeringly, as if he's considering breaking them.

Exactly like that.

Shadow makes a broken sound low in his throat.

“The strap isn’t too tight, is it?” Kyden asks.

If you didn’t know him as well as I do, you could be tricked that he meant that in a caring way.

It’s frightening how calm his voice can be, even when he’s threatening to break the bones in your hand.

“It feels great,” Pan drawls back, equally as calmly. Hell, this must be a game that he’s played many times before. Only, how does it normally end? Is there even a winner? “You’re skilled with bondage. So, what’s the safeword?”

I let out a shocked laugh.

Kyden flushes, drawing back sharply. He slaps Pan hard enough to knock his face to the side and make the chair wobble.

No fucking way.

I leap up. “The safeword is *Peter*. And I’m saying it *right fucking now*.”

Casually, Kyden turns to me, and I freeze.

My chest is tight under his scrutiny.

My mind is screaming at me to hide or run.

But I can do this. I have to.

“Only *you* have that out,” Kyden replies. “So, scream *Peter* as much as your like for yourself, since you always were weak, but not for your stepbrothers. Plus, it doesn’t work inside this lesson because the Director himself ordered the therapy.”

“Therapy doesn’t mean hurting,” Shadow says, staring down at his hands.

“Doesn’t it?” Kyden’s tone is neutral, but I know that there’s something terrible underneath. “Someone’s suddenly discovered their balls.”

Shadow blinks. “I always knew where my balls were, thank you.”

I chuckle.

“Sit down,” Kyden barks.

I hurriedly drop back into my seat.

Pan winks at me.

I relax. He’s okay.

“So, is this therapy by insult, K?” I ask.

Kyden’s cheek twitches. “Call me *sir* in these sessions.”

I shake my head. “Only Peter is my Sir.”

“You follow him, brainwashed.” Kyden sits stiffly on his couch, and the leather creaks. “You’d think that he’d hypnotized you all.” Then he smiles. “So, let’s talk about that: *trances*.”

Pan pales.

My brow furrows. “Are you going to make us think that we’re chickens, have our asses stuck to our seats, or that we’re suddenly ticklish and...?”

Kyden slams his hand down on the couch’s arm, and I jump. “I’m not a stage comedy hypnotist. This isn’t an act. Look, we all go into self-induced trances naturally throughout our lives. Emotions are dangerous things. They cut you off from your thinking brain, whether negative like hate and rage or positive like joy and love. Singing, dancing, or gardening is no different to belonging to a cult.”

“I don’t understand.” I cock my head. “You’re saying that creatively being in the zone feeling...”

“Is a blissful trance,” Kyden replies, and this is a new side to him that I’ve never seen before. He’s serious and earnest. This matters to him like we’re new converts. “Most people spend their lives in and out of trances, only they don’t realize it. The more imaginative you are, then the more time you spend in them. So, that means the more suggestible you are

because the deeper you fall into trance, then the easier you can be accessed for therapy.”

“*Therapy.*” Pan snorts. “You mean controlled by bastards like you who don’t have emotions.”

“Who needs feelings?” Kyden stalks to his feet. “You go into a trance when you wear a mask because no one can see your face. It’s freeing. Of course, dreams are the deepest trance of all. Trances can also be induced through drugs, shock, sex, or being unexpectedly touched...”

He dives toward Shadow, grabbing him by the neck.

I cry out at the same time as Pan does.

Pan struggles wildly, tugging at the straps that are holding him down.

“Fucking stop it,” Pan howls.

I topple my chair over, as I jump up. I wrench at Kyden’s hands. He’s too strong, however, as he holds Shadow by the neck.

Then I realize that he’s not strangling Shadow. There’s no pressure on his throat.

Kyden’s only placed his hands like a collar around Shadow’s neck, while he strokes over his pulse point.

Shadow is shaking at the shock of such an intimate touch. His eyes are glassy, and he looks like he’s retreated somewhere in his mind.

I scratch at Kyden’s hands with my nails, and at last he lets go and takes a step back.

“Just a hands-on demonstration to show you what I mean.” Kyden points at Shadow. “Unexpected movement and touch is enough to put him into a near trance state. He’s highly suggestible right now. If we were alone, I could get him to do almost anything.”

My stomach drops.

“Don’t fucking touch him,” I hiss.

“Darling, look after him for me,” Pan’s voice wavers, even as he tries for casual.

It must kill him that he can’t do it himself.

“Always,” I reply, crouching in front of Shadow. “Hey, can you hear me?”

There’s a long moment, before Shadow’s gaze focuses on me. He swallows, before raising his hand to his own throat and flinching.

He nods.

“May I touch you?” I ask.

He nods again.

I take his hand in mine.

He’s protected me for weeks. I’m going to do my best to protect him now.

He’s neurodivergent and asexual. He has issues with touch, and my asshole brother has used that against him in the worst way to have a fucking learnable moment.

I’m going to kill Kyden.

Kyden claps his hands together, and I startle. “Now you’re prepped and ready, it’s time for your Island Therapy.”

Pan groans.

Sounds like fun then.

“Why don’t you just break my fingers instead?” Pan wiggles his fingers in encouragement. “It’ll be less painful.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Kyden mutters. “You two, come and lie down on the floor. Come on, hurry up. Tick-tock.”

I stand, still holding Shadow’s hand. Together, we walk in front of the couch. Self-consciously, I lie on the floor next to Shadow.

I refuse to let go of his hand.

I don’t know which of us needs the support more right now.

My muscles are coiled tight, and my pulse roars in my ears.

I feel vulnerable like this, as Kyden stands over us. The light from the candles flickers hellishly, and I scrunch my nose against the cloying sweetness of the incense.

“Relax,” Kyden says, “actors use this all the time because it helps to open their minds to improvisation. Now, breathe deeply. In and out.”

Relax?

Is he fucking serious?

I’m lying at the feet of the man who’s terrorized me all of my life and is probably plotting his revenge against me right now.

When Shadow squeezes my hand, I realize that my breathing has actually sped up, rather than slowed down. I focus on taking slow breaths, copying Shadow.

“Good,” Kyden continues in that flat voice that I hate so much, “now close your eyes.”

“Nope, that’s one step too far.” I pull my hand out of Shadow’s, crossing my arms.

“I’ll watch over you,” Pan promises. “I may be tied down, but I swear, if he does anything, then Hook will slice off his balls and hang them off that fucking stupid turtleneck of his as a decoration. And the Doctor knows that, right?”

“I know that if you threaten me again, then it’ll be *your* balls that I’m wearing as a decoration.” Kyden narrows his eyes. He walks to stand close to my head, and his shadow covers me. “Now close your damn eyes.”

I swallow, before shutting my eyes.

Trapped in the dark, all I can hear is the hypnotic lull of Kyden’s voice. “Concentrate your mind on an island. It’s surfacing from the middle of a lake. It’s rising up, bit by bit. The more that appears, the more details that you can see. There are wild fowl and sheep are grazing in the long grass.”

Shit, it's Wild Island!

It has to be.

Is Kyden telling us something? Does he know that I went to the island for my date?

Did he see me there?

Does Kyden go to Wild Island as well, despite what Shadow thinks?

I want to open my eyes, and see if Shadow is shocked by this too.

Yet Pan acted like this is a therapy that they often do.

Why does Kyden focus on the island?

"You're closer to the island now," Kyden's voice has taken on a slow cadence; I fall into it. "Relax. You can see the groves of trees and the emerald butterflies that are flying between them. Concentrate hard. What details can you see?"

I can make out the Wild Island in my mind now: the grove, forest cemetery, and the roses.

Despite myself, I relax.

I feel safe and happy.

I'm back there, on the island with Shadow.

"Good. The island is your inner focal point. Don't look away from it and listen to my voice." There's something self-satisfied in Kyden's voice that should be a red flag, but I'm feeling calm for the first time since I arrived on Never and I don't want to let go of this floaty feeling.

"Angela," Pan calls, breaking into my sensation of floating and bringing me bumping down to earth, "open your eyes."

"Keep them closed," Kyden's voice commands harshly.

It makes me jerk, but I don't open my eyes.

Wait, I *can't* open my eyes.

I'm sunk, deep under my brother's control.

I'm screaming on the inside, but outside, I'm smiling.

Is this Island Therapy?

I hate it.

I don't want my brother in my head. It's the last place that I want to allow him again.

Help...

Is Shadow as lost as I am?

How many of these sessions has he done with the Never twins? How many suggestions has he made to them, while they've been hypnotized?

And would they even know, until they were triggered?

"Keep walking through the island, feeling the sun on your face," Kyden's voice is mesmerizing. "You're becoming tired, and your breathing is becoming heavier. You're desperate to *sleep*. Your throat is dry and you're swallowing."

All of a sudden, I'm parched.

Desperately, I try to beg for water but I can't get out the words.

I'm exhausted.

"You can't keep your eyes open," Kyden continues. "You can't stop yourself yawning. So, you lie and curl up under the trees. Don't you feel sleepy?"

Next to me, Shadow's breathing is slow and deep.

He's fallen hard like I knew he would.

I'm struggling to hold out, but it's no good.

I'm hypnotized, and my deadly brother is in control.

He's inside my head.

"Now," Kyden murmurs darkly, "sleep."

Chapter Sixteen



I'm youth, I'm joy.

The Wild Island, Never

I rub at my aching head.

It feels like it's being burned from the inside out. I twitch, as memories flash across my mind like I'm reliving them in a waking nightmare.

Kyden's heavy footfall outside my bedroom door...

The flickering flame of a candle...

Falling and falling...

It's been like this all week, ever since my daily therapy sessions with Kyden started.

He's hypnotized me for seven days in a row, and I can feel him inside me.

As soon as I'm lulled through the Island Therapy to *sleep*, I can't remember what happens next.

But still, *I want him out of my head.*

I scrunch up my eyes in distress.

"Are you okay, beautiful?" Peter's rich, rumbling voice cuts across my pain.

I crack open my eyes and peer up at him.

I'm seated on his lap, resting my head on his hard chest. We're sitting together on the edge of the lake on Wild Island.

It's Friday night — date night.

It's my first proper date with Peter.

Well, we've already kissed each other, slept together in a tree, and we've been living together for weeks. Perhaps, we've got things out of order, but I still appreciate that he's gone to all this effort.

He's lit a bonfire, which crackles and lights the shore of this island within an island. Rose petals are strewn around us, and he's even smuggled a portable music player from the music rooms.

Frank Sinatra croons in a way that makes me feel that I should be in a smoky mob diner and not a secret island off the Scottish coast.

We swam across the black waters at night.

The danger added to the thrill. Am I becoming addicted to danger?

Peto drowned in that lake.

I shiver.

I'm only dressed in a pair of white lace panties and a matching blouse.

Peter is stripped to a pair of boxers that are as bright blue as his eyes.

They're as tight as I hoped they'd be.

Peter's shoulders are broad. His chest is powerful with strong muscles, leading to defined abs. My eyes widen, when I study the scar on his side.

Is it a bullet wound?

Shit...

If that'd been only a few inches in the other direction, then he'd have been shot in the stomach.

Did someone want to kill him? Did that happen on Never?

The night is humid. The air shimmers with a type of electricity like just before a storm hits.

This date would be perfectly romantic (and I've been excited about it for days), if my head wasn't throbbing.

Since Monday, I've been heavy with exhaustion, moving around in a sort of uneasy haze. I've had two panic attacks (both during Tink's lessons on the farm, which I only got through with Shadow's support), my concentration has been shot, and I've felt dizzy.

Yet Mom won't cancel the therapy. She thinks that I'm trying to get Kyden into trouble again.

I'm certain that it's his hypnosis causing my problems. Mom thinks that I'm lying and it's my PTSD.

"Is it your head still hurting you?" Peter massages my temples, dropping a kiss to the top of my head. "That asshole made a deal not to touch you."

"He thinks that he's found a loophole. You know, that whole only *hurting you to heal you* thing."

Peter's expression is grim. "He's not healing anyone. It's bullshit. He's using hypnosis to put students into suggestible states and then influencing them to do what he wants or what the Director wants."

My eyes widen. "Shit."

Peter's lips thin. "For assholes with a god complex, it allows the ultimate power trip. You can create false memories or induce hallucinations. I'm certain that he's done that to Shadow."

"Fuck," I mutter. My heart is racing. "He's in our heads. How do we stop that?"

"It's what I've been trying to work out. I reckon it's why Pan's night terrors have been getting worse. Our unconscious isn't wise. It's terrifying and fucked-up, if it's conditioned that way. And Pan and Shadow have been conditioned the longest."

Desperately, I twist in Peter's lap.

I capture his gaze with mine. “We have to free the twins.”

“We have to free *you*, beautiful,” Peter says, firmly. “We have to free the whole of Never. I’ve been working on it.”

“But how?”

He hesitates.

What is he hiding?

I run my hand down from his cheek to his chin, and my fingers rasp on his stubble. “If you’re trying to protect me, then don’t. You’re my family now: Pan, Hook, Shadow, and you. I’ll fight for you as fiercely as you will for me. So, that means no secrets between us. I may not be able to kick ass like you can but I’m smart. I can help.”

Peter’s gaze softens, and his eyes crinkle at the sides, as he smiles. “I know. I trust you.”

My chest tightens at that. “Then what’s your plan? I know you have one.”

He grins. “Hey, as you said, you’re smart. You know that a professor who looks as sharp as I do in a suit, must have a plan. The trick is appearing to still have some fire in me because if I ever act like I’m truly broken, then the Director will become suspicious. You, on the other hand, need to assume the role of the new golden child in this family because that way, you’ll be the one who’s rewarded and praised. They’ll lower their defenses around you and not see you as a threat. I play the part of the volatile but still obedient, good professor. Yet I’ve been plotting from the moment that I was sent here.”

I knew it.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“It’s not that simple. When I first arrived, I realized quickly that everyone looks at the whole thing wrong in the first place.”

My brow furrows. “I don’t understand.”

“It took me several years to accept the truth. It was Pan who helped me with the mindshift. I was trying to explain to him about cities, and just...the size of them...and he couldn't grasp it. Then Shadow began to freak out, when I explained about the Internet and an entire world at your fingertips, so I dropped it because I felt like the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Then I got it. This — Never — is real to them, and the rest of the world is an illusion. To them, anything outside these bleak cliffs, forests, and lakes would be terrifying.”

I lick my dry lips.

Hell, I'd never thought of it like that.

“Are you saying that they shouldn't escape?” I say, slowly. “Just because they don't know anything but cruelty, however, doesn't mean that we should leave them behind trapped in it forever.”

Peter shakes his head. “It means that there are alternatives to escaping. Pan knows this island better than anyone, and I've been quietly spying on the Director for years. He lets his guard down around me because when he tells me to take Pan to hydrotherapy, I do it.”

I narrow my eyes. “So, is that why you obey him? Hurt your brothers?”

“It's why my brothers *allow* me to hurt them.” He arches his brow. “This is what their bravery has helped me to learn. There are fail-safes in place. We can't merely kidnap the Director, forcing him to get the helicopter to come back and fly us off here. He has check-ins with far more powerful people. If something goes wrong, then the elites around the world who have their families locked up here will be alerted. We're fucked if he fails to call in and use a bunch of passwords and other security features.”

“Does Kyden know them?”

“Maybe, but if he does, then he's onto too good a thing here to want to ruin or upset the system. He's already the second-in-command. What does he have outside Never?”

Nothing anymore.

Kyden's a god on Never. Why would he give this up?

I lick my dry lips. "So, if we're not getting off Never, what does that leave?"

Peter's smile is sharp. "I've come round to Pan's view. We're each other's family, so wherever we are is home, right?" I warm with love. "So, we need to find a way to rise up and take back the control, and your brother is at the heart of that."

I brush my fingers down Peter's cheek, and he tilts his head in surprise at my sudden softness. "What happened to your real family? I mean, the one outside here? Won't you be losing them? This is our date, and I want to know about the man, before Professor Never."

Peter's gaze is searching. "Yeah?"

I nod.

"What if you don't like him as much as you like your professor?"

My heart aches.

Is this to do with his scar?

Why did his family abandon him here?

Is he a criminal? He can fight like one.

I lean forward and capture his lips.

Peter fists his hand in my hair, holding me in place and dominating the kiss. I moan, and he thrusts his tongue more firmly into my mouth.

When he allows me to draw back, my eyes are glassy.

"I will love him," I whisper. "Whoever he is."

He sucks in a sharp breath, and his eyes gleam.

He avoids my gaze.

Peter's hands are shaky, as he drops them into his lap.

He entwines his fingers with mine. "My family are one of the most influential in the mob. The tattoo connects me to them, but I've lost their name now because they disowned me,

so it doesn't matter what they're called." My adrenaline spikes, and I fight not to react. *He's mafia?* "My dad died because of me."

I freeze.

Wait, he *murdered* his own dad?

I bite my tongue hard.

I promised that I wouldn't judge him and I won't.

I owe him that.

Peter's breathing hard; it's a struggle for him to get out the words.

I can tell that this is triggering for him.

I squeeze Peter's hands, trying to ground him in the present and pull him back from the dark place in the past that he's fallen back into.

Instantly, his gaze shoots to mine.

Peter's eyes widen like he's forgotten that he's with me, and he glances around himself in shock, as if he doesn't know where he is.

For a moment, I wonder if he's going to lash out at me. Instead, his shoulders relax, and he shoots me a tight, grateful smile.

Then he clenches his jaw. "It was a Saturday night. I was meant to be giving a dance demonstration at a club. There'd been all this tension between Dad and my older sister who worked with him. I was the playboy. My sis had fought for me to be allowed to go to dance school, even though Dad had called me every slur under the sun for it. Mom died when I was too young to remember her, and my sis was amazing. Tough as shit, but still, she raised me. I'd seen a dance career as a way to escape from the family business. I still worked alongside my sister when I had to, but she mainly kept me out of it. That night, the club canceled, so I came home early and..."

My heart is in my mouth.

Hell, I don't want to hear this. But this secret has been poisoning Peter for years. I have to get it out of him.

"What?" I breathe.

Suddenly, his insistence that it's dangerous to *listen at doors* becomes more powerful and poignant.

What did he hear?

"First, I heard shouting. I was confused because it was coming from Dad's study, and it was between my sis and him. Dad never raised his voice to her. *Never*. I shouldn't have listened at the door but I was so shocked. Then I heard that the argument was because my sister was staging a fucking takeover of the mob business. She'd betrayed Dad, and I didn't understand because she idolized him. At least, I thought that she did. Furious, I burst into the study. I didn't expect to see her pointing a gun at Dad." Peter's lip trembles, but the tears that are welling in his eyes don't fall. He looks haunted. "My sis looked more shocked than me. Dad told me to leave. It's the only time in my life that I was certain he loved me. And me? I didn't even draw my own gun. I fucking froze. I just stood there, as she shot him."

"That's not your fault," I say, gently.

He bites his lip hard enough for blood to bead and drip down onto his chin. I swipe it off with my tongue.

"I was trained to react and not freeze. I took my gun everywhere, even when I had a dancing gig." Peter vibrates with shame. "Then when faced with the need to protect my family, I failed."

"How could you expect that? It was your own sister, who you trusted. Anybody would freeze."

Peter's smile is grim. "You're kind for saying that, but it's not true. I never fitted in with my family. Everyone said it. I proved them right in that moment. My sister didn't hesitate, even when faced with the baby brother who she'd raised like her own kid. She just refocused her gun on me and fired for a second time."

The bitch.

I hesitate, before forcing myself to ask, “Did she mean to miss?”

Peter shrugs. “If my sis wanted me dead, then I’d be dead. She intended to warn me. When I came round from the morphine, I’d been airlifted to Never. I haven’t heard from her since. But the message is clear. I wasn’t meant to witness the murder, and if I’d been anyone else, then I’d be dead. I bet she thinks that she’s been merciful by sending me to Never.”

Yeah, funny kind of mercy.

I get now why Peter can’t think of leaving here or going to the cops.

There are powerful people out there who are invested in the Never students not leaving.

If Peter tried to escape, then he’d be permanently disappeared.

So, what if we change Never, instead?

What if it could become a dark paradise?

“May I...?” I move our joined hands toward the scar on Peter’s hip.

Peter’s breathing is ragged, but he nods.

I stroke over the old wound, and his eyelashes flutter. “We all have our scars.”

“Not you, beautiful.”

I swallow. Can I show him?

He needs to know that he’s not alone. I have as many demons in my past and in my head.

I let go of his hands, scooting backward off his lap and closer to the fire.

The light dances across Peter’s face, casting his handsome features into harsher planes, as he watches me intently.

I start to undo my blouse, but my hands are shaking too badly. I’ve never revealed my scars to a man before.

This is hard.

“Here, let me do that.” Peter’s voice thrums with a caring dominance, as he brushes my hands aside and takes over undoing my buttons.

I let out a relieved breath, allowing him to unbutton my blouse and then slip it from my shoulders.

His touch against my skin is electric.

Then the blouse flutters to the ground, forgotten.

Self-conscious, I try to cross my arms over myself, but Peter stops me.

“None of that.” His voice is tender, as he guides me to lie on my back. I’m acutely aware of the way that he’s studying the pink scars on my arms. “All of you is beautiful. It makes you who you are: A survivor.”

“It was Kyden on the night that he...”

I don’t need to finish the sentence.

We both remember what I said on the day in the farm, when Peter fought to keep me safe from Kyden.

I should have known that Kyden would find a way around that deal, even if it’s to get inside my head without laying a finger on me.

Peter’s eyes darken, and I shiver at the danger, as he curls back his lips. “I’m going to fucking end your brother for what he’s done to you.”

Rage floods through me, and out here, amongst the elements with the storm swirling in the clouds, it feels thrilling. “*Good.*”

“My fierce, beautiful Darling.” He strokes my cheek. “I’ll kill him for you.”

He means it.

It’s like a sacrifice for a goddess.

And I don’t mind.

Now that I’ve seen how Kyden has tormented and hurt the guys who I love, and I know that he’s only going to continue

to use his position to do worse to everyone who's trapped here, I can't fucking wait to take him down.

When the fire cracks and pops, sending sparks flying high in the air, I jump. My heart speeds up.

"You're safe," Peter reassures me with a deep compassion and understanding.

Lying in his arms, finally I think that I may be.

"Lie still," Peter's voice becomes huskier. He leans over me to pepper kisses across my cheeks. "This is my date, and I'm going to seduce you now. How's that for a distraction?"

I gasp, bucking my hips against him.

I can feel how hard he is in his tight underwear already. He's ignoring that, however, because all his focus is on me and my pleasure.

He tuts, but his eyes glitter with wicked delight. "I said, be very still, beautiful, or I'll have to take you over my knee, rather than reward you."

How is that not a reward?

I only just manage not to say that by biting my lip. It must have shown on my face, however, because Peter gives a filthy chuckle.

"Did I tell you that the reward is orgasms?" He rubs across the front of my panties, and my eyelashes flutter at the intense sensation. "You're coming three times tonight."

"Three times?" I squeak.

Also, *fuck yes*.

Peter's expression becomes stern, as he slides down me, pulling my panties off me by frustratingly slow degrees. "Put your hands above your head."

Immediately I do. "Yes, Sir."

Peter's pupils dilate, and he flushes.

I love making him look like that.

“Do you remember your safewords? Because I’m determined to rebel against Never’s rules tonight and make you scream in pleasure.”

“Traffic light system,” I reply. “And I’m a fucking rebel.”

“But not for me.” Peter traces his finger along my inner thigh, and I widen my legs questing after more of the intense sensation. “You’re so good for me, beautiful. You’re going to lie there and let me give you pleasure. You should see how beautiful you look like this.”

I blush from the praise.

It makes me feel squirmy inside. I feel drunk on it.

“I’m going to make you feel so fucking amazing.” Peter drags his strong fingers upward along my thigh toward my pussy, then he’s dipping inward. “Focus on how this feels and describe it to me.”

My mouth is dry.

Why is it so hard to say the things that he’s doing, which are making my toes curl and tendrils of pleasure wind through me?

“You’re circling my clit,” I whisper.

“Louder.”

“You’re stroking my clit.” I feel aflame and more seen than I ever have been before. “Now, you’re dipping your fingers lower and...one...two...fingers into my pussy. You’re working them in and out. Fuck, that feels incredible. The way you’re crooking them is...*fuck*.”

My back arches.

I’m almost there already.

It’s fast.

Faster than I’ve thought it was possible to be brought to the edge.

It bewilders me and makes me shake.

Peter is an expert at playing people's bodies. I should have known.

I look up and catch his dark gaze. Yet I'm not scared because I'm submitting to this control by choice.

I relax, melting into his touch.

Fully letting go.

My mind begins to feel fuzzy like I'm floating.

"Good girl." Peter strokes down my thigh.

And just like that, I come.

I scream, and the sound echoes around the island and across the dark, silent lake.

My back arches, and Peter works me through it.

I don't move my hands or try to touch myself. My eyes close, and I sigh, contentedly.

I feel relaxed and sated.

Only, I'm shocked when Peter immediately leans down and murmurs, "That was one. You're going to give me two more."

My eyes fly wide open.

Hell, I'd forgotten his promise of three orgasms.

I've never had more than one.

Is it even possible?

Peter raises his eyebrow at me in challenge. "Are you green?"

I assess myself for a moment, before I nod. "So green."

Who am I to turn down an orgasm challenge?

"I love how hard you're trying for me," he says, and a soft warmth bathes me, along with the way that he plays with my hair, stroking it back from my face.

I push my face into his hand, and he indulges me for a moment longer.

Then his touch becomes more dominating, as he slides his hand to my neck and holds it there.

He's not choking me but there's the hint of a warning, and I don't move.

Satisfied, he slides down me, before looking up at me from underneath his eyelashes. "Spread yourself open so that I can see you."

Fuck.

I blush even deeper, but I eagerly spread my thighs as wide as I can. I tingle all over, as he stares at my pussy like it's the most gorgeous thing that he's ever seen.

Then he licks a stripe up my pussy, before flicking his tongue in and out of it.

I shudder, already overstimulated from my first orgasm.

Before I can even think, he sucks hard on my clit, and I wail.

Too much, too much, too much...

My mind whites out.

I'm so oversensitive that I'm on the tightrope of *pleasurepain*.

My second orgasm winds through me so fast that it hits me like being slapped.

I howl, breaking apart.

Why are my cheeks wet?

I shake but I don't move from position.

I feel like I'm losing time or am outside time.

I'm floating above it and myself.

It's warm and safe here.

I never want to leave.

Then Peter's hand is in my hair, wrenching my head to the side.

“You’re my beautiful girl,” he whispers into my ear. “Good and wet for me. But I’m not done with your pussy yet. Now, it’s my turn to come.”

Then he yanks down his boxers, and his hard dick springs free. He slams into me with one hard thrust.

Our gazes meet, and he rests his forehead against mine. His fingers dig into my shoulders.

I hope that there will be bruises.

I study his face in awe.

Peter’s the most handsome man who I’ve ever seen.

Then the heavens finally open, and a summer storm breaks around us.

The cool rain runs down my cheeks, mingling with my hot tears.

Shadow was right about how amazing the rain feels stinging my bare skin.

I feel like a wild spirit out here with Peter, naked and fucking in the rain.

I loop my arms around Peter’s back, clutching onto him. Then Peter pounds into me, and I can’t think.

Can barely breathe.

All I know, as he drives me toward my third and earth shattering orgasm of our date is that no one has ever made me feel like he does.

I’m lost in him.

“*Three*,” Peter whispers, just before he captures my scream of ecstasy with his lips.

Then he curls his body around mine protectively, massaging my arms and stroking my hair.

“Perfect,” he whispers. “You were so good for me. I love you so fucking much.”

Yet love is dangerous on Never, even if I know now that I’m in love with Peter.

Indulging in this relationship is the best thing I've experienced in my life.

Both James and my brother suspect about our feelings, I'm certain, but they have no concrete evidence.

What would happen, however, if my relationship with these Never brothers is discovered?

Would we be destroyed, before we can save ourselves?

Chapter Seventeen



Just always be waiting for me.

Stag Tower, Never Hall

I moan in delight, as hot water sprays down on me from the ancient shower above the Victorian bath. I tip back my head, allowing it to ease my stiff muscles.

The bronze pipes groan and splutter.

It's Friday night, and my back's fucking killing me from the punishment chores (mainly shoveling manure), on the farm. Tink has had me on the chores all week.

She says that I'm a distraction to the other Lost Boys.

She means the twins.

She's right, especially Pan who's been as eager as I am for tonight to come around, so that we can have our date.

It'll be my third and final date.

I can't wait.

Plus, since Pan is always strapped to a chair and can't stop my brother tormenting me in the hypnosis sessions, which leave me with headaches and flashbacks that make me shaky about what's real or not, Pan's become even more protective outside them.

If Curly or anyone else so much as bumps into me, Pan takes them apart.

Well, until the orderlies take *him* apart.

Pan's spent as much time in restraints or isolation, as I've spent racking up demerits and on punishment chores.

We need to work out our scheme to take control of Never, before one of us breaks.

I think that it'll be me.

Already, at night I've twice thought that I've seen Pan or Shadow in the tree outside my window, watching me.

Only, when I ran round to their room to check what was going on, worried in case Pan was sleepwalking, they were both fast asleep.

What the hell is Kyden doing to my mind? Is he causing me to hallucinate?

I sigh, closing my eyes.

The sound of the water is soothing, and I welcome its pounding against my skin.

The steam rises up around me, wreathing me.

I edge my hand down toward my clit.

I love these rare, private moments.

Peter urged me as part of our scheme on my last date on Wild Island to become the new *golden child* in the family.

Hell, it's been hard.

I've played the role, however, at the formal dinners with James and whenever Mom wants to have *girlie moments* with me, as she calls them. I think she's trying to pretend that I'm still a teenager, and we can sit around doing each other's nails, as if she hasn't had me detained against my will.

My mouth aches with all the fake smiling.

So, in the day, I'm a good girl.

My stepbrothers are treated as the villains.

It's only acting, but it's hard to watch.

I try to remind myself that we're enduring this as part of our plan, but still, the harsh words and fists thrown at my twins at meals or later, in their bedroom, always hurt.

And they are — *my twins*.

We're conning our parents, but they're brutalizing us.

At night, however, I transform into the bad girl.

I crawl into the villains' beds.

Their taste is so seductive. They could get Eve to eat the apple for a second time.

I can't resist them.

It's dizzying.

I groan, circling my clit faster.

Then I startle, as I feel a man's naked, muscled body join me in the shower. He's pressed against me. I can feel his dick hard against my ass.

My eyes snap open.

"Would you like me to help you with that, darling?" Pan's voice is as soft as honey.

His lips brush my ear.

My heart races, and I shiver.

I can't speak but I nod.

I push my ass against Pan in encouragement.

Pan's elegant fingers settle on my hip, before he brushes my hand out of the way and he takes up the job of circling my clit.

I shudder, reaching around to grip onto his hip.

"Pan," I breathe.

He licks the shell of my ear and then sucks on the lobe.

Fuck.

That's one way to clean me.

I approve.

I also won't complain, if Pan uses his tongue everywhere like the slinky cat that he seems.

Then a second naked man steps into the shower, this time in front of me.

I find myself sandwiched between two identically beautiful guys.

"Shadow," I gasp.

Shadow searches out my gaze more boldly than he has before. He's holding a soapy cloth and starts to wash me.

All his focus is on me.

Being able to perform this service to me appears to mean something special to him. He's not hard, but I've learned by now, that it's not about that for him.

Right now, he wants to care for me.

Shadow's touch is electric, as is the way that he cleans me with such reverence.

He starts at my shoulder and he doesn't flinch away from my burns.

Instead, he looks at me like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world.

I told the twins about what happened, when I was burned by Kyden, last week after my date with Peter. Being able to talk to Peter about it gave me that courage.

I trust these Never brothers more than I've ever trusted anyone.

When I glance over my shoulder at Pan, he smiles.

It's a dangerous, wicked thing.

"This is definitely breaking *Never's 100 Rules and Guide to Demerits*," I say.

"Shall I stop touching you then?" Pan teases.

He pulls his hand away from between my thighs.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” I snatch him by the wrist and tug him back where I want him.

Pan chuckles, skillfully working me with his fingers again.

“We’ll make sure that we only use one towel each,” Shadow offers. “Plus, we’re sharing water, which is efficient. It saves time and water, which is good for the environment.”

When Shadow moves the cloth over my breasts in slow circles, my head falls back onto Pan’s shoulder.

“Fuck, I’m all about helping the environment,” I gasp.

Caught between these two powerful men, I’ve never been made to feel this beautiful, cherished, or loved before.

My heart swells.

Shadow hums his agreement.

“So, apart from trying to save the world,” I say, “why have you two appeared in my shower tonight?”

Pan’s lips curl into a smile against my shoulder, and he begins to nibble down my neck. “You were taking too long in here. I knew that would happen, as soon as a woman shared our bathroom with us. I need to get ready for our date the same as you, right? I may just be impatient.”

I grind my ass back against his hard dick, and he hisses. “Huh, I couldn’t tell.”

Shadow laughs.

“And what’s your excuse?” I lean forward and offer my lips for a kiss.

When Shadow’s mouth meets mine, it’s deliciously wet and welcoming.

“I’m washing you.” Shadow draws the cloth down my stomach. “I like to think of ways to serve you. Does this feel good?”

“So fucking good.”

He glows.

I love making him look like that.

Pan crooks his fingers, pushing two into me, and I gasp at the spike of pleasure. “We could save time by sharing showers every night.”

“I only took a shower because my muscles are aching. Usually, I like baths.”

“Isn’t that lucky? Me too. Then we’ll share baths.”

“All three of us?” I struggle to get the words out, as Pan works his fingers faster in and out. “We won’t fit.”

“Then we’ll take it in turns to bathe with you. Shadow and I have always been good at sharing our toys.”

My pupils dilate at that image.

I want that.

“Anyway, Shadow will be good and do what we tell him,” Pan says.

Surprised, I glance at Shadow, who blushes.

I glance over my shoulder at Pan. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been speaking, and my brother says that you know what he doesn’t want. But I don’t think that he truly understands what he *needs* yet. You can show him. I trust you with him and I’ve never trusted anyone with my twin.”

My brow furrows. “I’d never hurt Shadow.”

“I know.” Pan’s eyes are large and dark. “That’s why you should train him. Would you like to put a pretty collar around his pretty neck?”

I twist back around to look at Shadow.

Shadow’s frozen, wringing the cloth between his hands.

Yet his expression is one of hope and desperate longing.

He’s expecting me to reject him.

He’s believed for his entire life that nobody would want him.

“Yes,” I say and know that there’s just as much desperate longing in my own voice.

Shadow’s eyes widen, before he smiles.

I dive to kiss him again, resting my hands on his shoulders.

The kiss is deep and passionate.

It’s a claiming and a promise.

We both are placing trust in the other with our bodies and our hearts.

It’s the most precious thing in my life. I never believed that someone would give me this.

I think that we may both be crying. I can’t tell through the shower’s water, which is streaming over us.

“Kneel, brother,” Pan commands.

It feels like a ritual.

Sacred.

Immediately, Shadow kneels.

The water plasters Shadow’s curls to his head, and I brush them back from his face. He leans into my hand, searching after the soft touch.

This is going to work.

Pan’s right: this is what Shadow needs.

Shadow leans forward, pressing a kiss to my thigh, wrapping his arms around my legs. He feels relaxed and contented in his position on his knees.

I wrap his wet curls in my fist and tug lightly in the way that he loved before.

And he fucking melts.

The sight makes butterflies flutter in my stomach.

He clings onto me more tightly, even as the tension bleeds out of his shoulders.

I tug on Shadow's hair again. "When we're free and ruling Never, I'm going to make you a gorgeous leather collar with golden stitching, which is the same color as your eyes, and buckle it around your throat so that everybody knows who you belong to."

Shadow looks up at me. "I'll wear it proudly."

"Right, we've used up all the hot water. Time to get out. Some of us have a date to go on." Pan slips his fingers out of me and leans over to turn off the cooling water.

What the hell...?

My happy glow fades away frustratingly, as Pan steps out of the bath, dripping water.

I stare at his stiff shoulders.

What's wrong with him?

I'm shaking on the edge of coming.

"Hey," I growl, "didn't you want to finish something here?"

"I don't think so. I don't want you coming too early, after all."

I gape at him. "Peter made me come three times."

"Good for him. Is this a competition?"

I scowl. "Jerk."

I hold my hand out to Shadow and help him to his feet, then we both step out of the bath. Pan throws a towel at us both.

Shadow starts to dry me, however, before I can. I try hard not to wince at how scratchy the towel feels.

Pan is still facing away from me.

Although I'm enjoying the view of his gorgeous pale back and ass (but not the bruises from where James last beat him), I'm not loving knowing that I've pissed him off somehow.

To be fair, it's easy to do with Pan.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Pan’s shoulders hunch. “Am I yours as well, darling?”

What?

I blink. “Of course.”

“I don’t mean just me.” He turns back, and his gaze darts to his brother’s.

I don’t miss the small reassuring nod that Shadow shoots him.

My heart’s hammering in my chest.

Being naked in this small space, I feel even more exposed.

What the hell is going on?

Pan holds the towel up like he’s strangling it. “I was a bastard to you, when you first arrived. I thought that you were going to be like your brother.”

“I figured. Don’t worry about it. I’d have hated me too, if I’d met Kyden first and thought that his sister was turning up to torment me.”

“But do you know why I hate Croc?”

I arch my brow. “How long do we have? I can guess that it’s a hell of a list and I thought that you were impatient to finally get to our date. I know that I am.”

Pan’s expression is troubled. “All right, I fucking hate him for a lot of reasons. But I should’ve said, why *Hook* hates him.”

My mouth dries. I shake my head.

Pan leans against the sink, crossing his arms.

He’s trying to look casual but he appears more tense than I’ve ever seen him.

“Hook, my alter, has his own personality, including what he loves, hates, and needs. He first appeared after Peto died and Mum left. Dad became worse then. It’s when the beatings...and the rest...started. Hook came to protect us. But when Dad forced me to start one-to-one therapy with my new

stepbrother, Croc violated me by forcing me to bring out Hook. Then he tried to merge our identities.”

Dread churns in my guts. “Merge...?”

“*Kill*,” Shadow explains, quietly. “He tried to get rid of the alter.”

Horrified, I let out a shaky breath.

“Hook calls Croc his *nemesis*. He fucking hates him for trying to force me to kill him.” Pan clenches his jaw. “But I won’t. I’m just as protective of him, as he is of us.”

He hurls his towel to the side and marches to me.

He snatches me by the arms, pulling me away from Shadow and dragging me close to him. His anguished gaze searches out mine. He appears to be trying to read my expression. I don’t know what he’s looking for.

“Hook is part of me,” Pan says, urgently. “It matters to me what he wants. I value his opinion. There’s no such thing as fucking normal, anyway. There’s only what works for each person. I don’t want to lose him. Please, tell me that you understand.”

My heart aches for him.

Is this what’s been worrying him? That he thinks I don’t want part of him? That I won’t claim Hook as mine as well?

I kiss Pan, hard and fast.

“I want Hook.” I graze his lips on each word. “I accept him. He’s mine.”

“I knew that she would, bro,” Shadow says.

Pan lets out a shuddering breath.

Then he appears to pull himself together, smirking. “Then he very much wants to be let out to play tonight. Remember that fantasy you described about the knife I carry in my boot...?”

I pull back, staring at him in shock.

Hot and cold wash through me.

Because I remember in detail what I told him, while we cuddled in bed one night last week, freed by the intimacy of the early hours of the morning to talk about our darkest desires.

I told him how turned on I am every time that Pan reaches for the antique blade, which once belonged to a hunter on this island.

Apparently, James has tried to confiscate it numerous times.

Pan has always managed to get it back.

Now, James accepts that Pan needs the knife...or Hook does.

And so, it seems, do I.

I dream about feeling it on my skin. I don't want to feel it cut me but I want to know that it *could*.

I wet my dry lips. "Uh-huh."

"Do you still desire that?"

I love that he's checking in with me.

"Fuck, yeah, and I desire *all* of you."

Pan's eyes become glassy. "Hook will be triggered and take over at some point. Just always be waiting for me, after. Promise?"

I'm vibrating with excitement. My damp skin goosebumps.

I nod. "I swear, Pan. I'm not leaving."

He looks away, clenching his hands.

When he looks back, his expression has darkened. "Your mum and my dad were invited tonight to dine with Croc over in Never Clinic. We're safe to play in Stag Tower. So, I'll give you a one hundred count head start."

I stumble back a step. "We're playing hide and seek?"

Pan's expression becomes dangerous, as he stalks after me.

Shadow's pupils are dilated, as he watches us both.

I continue to back away, and the delicious thrill of danger shoots through me.

I'm naked and now backing out into the corridor. Pan lounges in the doorway, and Shadow leans next to him, wrapping his arm around his brother's waist. He rests his head on Pan's shoulder.

They look like sin and trouble.

They're looking at me like I'm prey.

Pan's lips curl up. "Of course not, darling. Remember your roleplay? This is a *hunt*. I'm being kind, letting you have a head start, aren't I? You should thank me."

He's not being kind.

And I'm not thanking him.

He's giving himself time to go and grab his knife, then making it more exciting for himself by allowing me to believe that I have a chance to escape.

I don't.

This roleplay is just as thrilling for him. He admitted that he's into primal kink in that early morning confession as well.

Only, I don't want to escape.

I want to be caught.

We both know it.

Pan's eyes glitter with amusement.

I hesitate for a moment longer.

Then Pan hisses, "*Run!*"

Chapter Eighteen



It was then that Hook bit him.

Stag Tower, Never Hall

I turn and fucking run.

My breaths come in fast pants, and my pulse roars in my ears.

Yet it's with the excitement of the chase.

A predator is after me. Neither Pan nor Hook are safe.

I don't want them to be.

Tonight, I want to be their willing prey.

My bare feet are cold on the oak floor. Dust flies up around me in the narrow corridor.

I've never been naked like this in Never Hall. It feels taboo — *wrong*.

I love it.

I'm so edged already that sparks of pleasure shoot through me, every time that my thighs come together, as I run.

Damn Pan.

He did it on purpose. That gives him an unfair advantage. Although, he'll have to hunt me with a hard-on.

The hall is silent.

The only light is the soft silver moonlight, which filters through the arched windows at the far end of the corridor.

I pelt down the corridor.

Where can I hide?

The wall-mounted stags heads look sinister in this light.

My harsh breathing is loud in the silence.

Then I hear a primal whoop behind me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Pan.

The hunt's started.

He sounds close.

I push myself on faster. I'm not going to make this easy for him.

I'm buzzing with the thrill.

At the end of the corridor, there's a spiral staircase, which leads upwards, rather than down to the main hall. I've never explored it. I don't know where it leads.

Yet Pan has almost caught me already.

I don't have a choice.

I take the risk and dive up the stone staircase. I grasp onto the walls to balance as I climb upwards.

I can hear the fast footfalls behind me.

He's close.

My breathing speeds up.

Above me, I can see an oak door.

I'm going to make it.

I reach forward, slamming my entire bodyweight into the door, and it crashes open.

I tumble forward, falling onto the stone floor in the center of a room.

It's empty.

It's a tower room at the top of the Gothic manor. It has windows on all sides, looking down onto the nighttime gardens and out further over the wall that splits the estate and the clinic.

I scrunch up my nose against the dusty, moldy scent. Then I try to scramble to get to my hands and knees.

I'm trapped.

My adrenaline spikes.

Shit, shit, shit.

There are footfalls behind me. The door bangs open again. Then there's a howl of victory.

I scream as I'm slammed flat onto the floor.

Pan presses me down with his hand firmly on the back of my neck.

His hard dick slides between my ass cheeks. He's already wearing a condom.

Cocky.

My heart hammers in my chest.

“Angela, my heavenly creature.” Pan sucks on my shoulder, before biting like he needs to mark his prey. I hiss in pleasure at the sensation. “Who's going to save you, sweet angel, now that you're in the claws of this devil? What if I drag you to hell and corrupt you? You're already Falling.”

He pulls back just enough to grab me by the shoulders and flip me over onto my back. He never stops pinning me down. His weight traps me, but it's a weight that I welcome; it excites and reassures me all at once.

Then my gaze drops to the dagger in his hand, and my breath catches.

The handle is made out of antler, and he holds it like it's an extension of his body.

“Your touch isn't corrupting.” I seek out Pan's gaze, willing him to believe me. “Anyway, devils and angels make the perfect lovers. Your darkness and my light can end this world and create a new one.”

Pan's eyes blaze. “Let's reshape the fucking world.”

He leans down to capture my lips passionately.

When he draws back, his eyes are glassy. His hold on me weakens for a moment, and his platinum curls sweep across my cheeks.

Then he raises his head, and his expression has entirely altered. His eyes are dark, and his smirk is wicked.

He's a different man.

This isn't Pan.

I freeze. “Hook?”

“The one and only, my dear.”

I can't stop myself from smiling.

Hook looks put out at my reaction.

Should I have pretended to be scared?

Hook tightens his hold on my shoulders. “I appear to have caught myself a rare Darling.” Hook wraps his hand in my hair and tugs my head up hard enough for me to wince.

Then he lowers the steel blade to my throat.

The moonlight glints on Hook's bared teeth and the blade.

My eyes widen.

I take a deep breath. I'm so fucking wet. I know that Hook can feel it.

“I'm yours,” I whisper.

Hook's expression softens, before he swallows.

Then he growls, pressing harder with the knife.

“You’re brave, my dear. Or an idiot. You’ve forgotten that I’m a rogue,” he says with an elegant menace. “Well, let’s see if you can truly handle me.”

I’m beginning to feel floaty.

Is this what it feels like for Shadow, when he kneels for me?

I want this so much that I can taste it.

Hook’s eyes darken, when I pant.

“Please,” I murmur. “I’ve wanted to know you, since I met you. We’re in this together, remember? I promised. I won’t break that. I’ve told Pan and I’ll tell you: I accept you.”

He freezes. “Perhaps, you’re not as supreme a waste of time, as I first thought.”

“You’re still rude then.”

“I’m a rude man. I told you.”

“And I trust you.”

“I retract my previous statement. You’re remarkably idiotic, even if you are pretty, my dear.”

“Wow, condescending and rude.”

Hook inclines his head. “And holding a knife to your throat.”

I lick my dry lips; I’ve never been this turned on. “Wow, are you?”

“You’re as ill-mannered as I am. We’re a good match. I told you that you were spirited and would make a good pirate. It’s the red hair.” He gives me an assessing look. “You said that you accept me. I want to play. Know that I’m not as nice as Pan. Are you still inclined to know a sinister man like me?”

I tilt up my chin. “What if I don’t want *nice* right now?”

My breathing is ragged, but I hold my nerve.

I crave this, desperately.

Hook leans close to me, before pressing his lips to mine. His kiss is dominant, then he bites my lower lip, and I gasp.

He sucks on my lip, licking over the bite mark to sooth it.

When he draws back, he replies, “Then that’s lucky, my dear, because I won’t be nice.” He holds the knife in front of my face. “Do you want this?”

My breath stutters.

But hell, I want it.

So fucking much.

I nod.

Hook’s lips bare in a snarl. “Then call me Captain.”

I can’t look away from his mesmerizing gaze. “Captain.”

His dick twitches against me, becoming impossibly harder.

He’s fucking huge.

Then he sits up, straddling me with the knife.

I stare at the blade, which he’s twirling in his hand.

I’m hyper-aware of my body. My breathing is coming in fast pants. My heart’s beating like a drum.

Does he know how much I need this?

I can tell by his dark smile that he does.

I don’t want to be cut, and he knows that. This isn’t about that.

Giving Hook something that he’s always desired as much as I do, is fucking doing it for me in ways that I never knew it would.

“Raise your hands above your head, my dear,” Hook says silkily. “Then link your hands together.”

I feel like a sacrifice but I stretch myself out on the floor of the high tower.

Hook lays the dull edge of the blade against my right wrist.

My wrist is above my head, and I can't see what he's doing. It heightens the sensation.

My mind spins.

All my thoughts are narrowed down to the feel of the blade on my wrist.

I have to see that steel, where I'm most vulnerable.

"Keep your beautiful eyes on me," Hook commands.

"Yes, Captain," I reply.

I struggle to keep looking up at him.

His expression is calm. We stare at each other, as his blade lies on my wrist. Then he begins to slide the knife, snaking it down the inside of my right arm.

It feels like nothing I've ever experienced before.

Incredible.

Cold and firm.

"Please, Captain," I beg, "may I watch?"

Hook wets his lips, loving the power. Then his free hand slides into my hair.

"You may watch, as I fuck you. Don't move now. I wouldn't want the blade to slip." Then he pushes into me in a single hard thrust.

I cry out in both shock and pleasure.

The sensations — both the blade and his dick — are overwhelming together.

Trembling, I struggle not to move.

The strong hold on my hair keeps me still.

Without it, I'd be writhing.

I gasp, desperately trying to process the twin pleasures being forced on my body, overloaded on sensation.

It's mind-blowing.

I don't look away, as the dull edge follows the curve of my arm to my shoulder.

Then finally, dipping to my throat, collarbone, and between my breasts.

Hook pistons into me with long, deep thrusts.

I'm already teetering on the edge of orgasm. The fear of the knife play is driving me there quickly.

I feel dizzy.

What is Hook going to do?

I've been hunted and caught. He's pinning me by my hair and his dick. And the moonlight is glinting on the razor-sharp edge of the other side of the blade.

I've seen Hook slice people with this knife.

He could make me bleed for him.

But he doesn't.

Instead, the blade changes direction and pauses, over my heart.

My adrenaline jumps.

I'm drunk on it.

I can barely think.

Hook speeds up, slamming into me harder, and the ecstasy is winding through me faster and faster.

It's going to break.

Fuck, is Hook going to stab me?

Kill me?

Hook's gaze meets mine. His back bows. He teeters on the edge himself.

He lifts the knife, until its point is sharp against my skin.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"You're mine," he howls. "If the others are claiming you, then so am I."

“Fucking do it.” My eyelashes flutter. “I’m close, *fuck*, I’m coming...”

“When I tell you and not before.” Hook speeds up. Then his hips are stuttering, and he hurls the blade to the side as he comes. “*Now*, show me how beautiful you are, when you come for me.”

Ecstasy washes through me, as I come at his command.

I scream, and he works me through it with lazy thrusts.

Finally, I collapse.

My mind feels whited out.

My limbs are weak, and my head is fuzzy.

To my surprise, Hook slips off me, settling himself next to me, before gently gathering me in his arms and resting my head on his chest. He brushes his fingers through my hair, and it soothes me.

I sigh, relaxing against him.

I never thought that I’d be able to relax with Hook. But then, I never thought that I’d trust him enough to do knife play or that it’d be anything like what I’ve just experienced.

I expected him to be rough and violent, but he wasn’t. Yet the sensations were intense.

Amazing.

“Was it what you needed?” He asks. “I was right about you. You are remarkably brave.”

I snuggle closer to Hook, which catches him off-guard.

He pulls a face like he doesn’t know how to react.

“It was perfect,” I murmur.

“Pan’s adamant about being the one to give you aftercare now,” Hook says. “The soft fool is going on about blankets to wrap you in and chocolate that he has set up in your room for you. Unless, you’d prefer that I tried to work out how to perform such *niceness*.”

He says it like an insult.

I can tell that he's covering because it's a side to himself that he's never explored before or at least, never had anyone to perform it with.

"Huh, *niceness*. Doesn't sound like you. On the other hand, you're already doing a good job right now," I reply.

In surprise, he stops massaging my shoulders and stroking my hair. "The dreaded Hook is only good at being bad."

I chuckle.

Then I nudge him, and he starts his massaging and stroking again. "If you're a villain, then you're *my* villain."

"Exactly," he answers, proudly.

I peer up at Hook. "You know, I feel like taffy, so this isn't a good time to mention it, but since I have you here...I keep thinking that someone is watching me."

Hook's gaze sharpens. "Who?"

"Maybe Pan. Actually, more like Shadow, when I think about it. They appear to be wearing the same Kohl under their eyes. They're outside my window at night. It could be some kind of prank or you know, the twins' usual over-protectiveness. Possibly, they're obsessively taking turns to guard me at night without telling me. But it could be all in my mind. My brother is also messing with my head in his therapy sessions. I know that he's doing the same with his hypnosis against Pan."

"That bastard is my nemesis," Hook snarls. "He's trying to murder me. He thinks that it'll weaken Pan and hurt him to lose me. He'll get even greater control over him without me there to fight for him. Croc could be planting any blasted suggestions or false memories in your mind. He's the one we have to watch out for."

I twist to look up at Hook, and dread coils through me. "What if someone really is watching me? Someone dangerous?"

Hook's gaze darkens. "I'll protect you, whenever I can, my dear. But here's the truth of Never. Everyone is always

watching you. They're all dangerous, and some are killers.
Even me."

Chapter Nineteen



You can have anything in life, if you will sacrifice everything else for it.

Never Dance Studio, Never Clinic

“**A**re you ready for murder on the dance floor?” Pan slings his arm around my shoulders. “Peter’s dance lessons are always fucking competitive. Everybody wants to be teacher’s pet.”

Surprised, I glance around the dance studio.

It’s Monday morning, and bright sunlight streams through the glass wall of the modern studio, which must have been a late addition to the clinic. It looks out over the courtyard and the large clock tower.

A gleaming dance bar stands along one wall, which is backed by a mirror. There’s a door on the back wall, which is covered with black and white photographs of dancers in modern poses.

They look like contorted butterflies.

I can’t tell if they’re flying to freedom or dying.

My eyes widen, as I study the photographs closer: They’re of the Lost Boys. Shadow and Pan are the star dancers in the center.

“Aren’t you the teacher’s pet?” I tease.

Pan tightens his arm around me.

Since Hook’s and his date with me on Saturday night, Pan’s barely been able to be parted from me. He’s been even more possessive than normal.

Like me, he’s dressed in the neon green uniform with bare feet. His curls fall over his eyes, and he brushes them away with the back of his hand.

“Normally, it’s Shadow,” Pan replies. “Now you’re here, however, I bet that it’ll be you.” Then he whispers, sinfully, “You are our *good pet*, after all.”

I huff. “I thought that was Shadow.”

“He’s *our* pet, not Peter’s.”

My insides melt with desire at that.

I glance at the other Lost Boys, who are excitedly gathered at the front of the class. They look relaxed. The women are spinning each other around even without music or chatting happily.

Despite the fact that Peter hasn’t arrived yet and there are no orderlies here, no fights have broken out.

They’re smiling and acting like this is a normal dance club.

How has Peter managed this? Tink and the other professors haven’t.

“So,” I tilt my head, “everybody wants to impress our professor, huh?”

I can’t help the stab of jealousy.

“It’s not what you think,” Pan replies. “I tried to tell you before. Peter’s taken beatings protecting every student here. You can’t buy that type of loyalty. He’s loved. If a student needs a fidget toy, mental health break, or to have the lesson taken outside to cope one day, then he does it, no questions asked. Even though Dad doesn’t understand it, Peter’s the real leader of Never.”

“I’m sorry that I’m late.” Shadow runs into the studio, panting.

Pan glares at him. “Where were you?”

Shadow holds up a mug of coffee. “Begging this from the kitchens for our Darling. I thought that she’d need an extra drink, before her first ever dance lesson.”

My eyes light up. “Have I told you that you’re my favorite supplier of coffee?”

Shadow beams, handing over the mug.

His curls are pinned back, and his eyes are deeply smudged with Kohl.

I take a long swig of the hot coffee.

Shit, that’s good.

I’m excited to finally have my first dance lesson. I’m definite that James has been trying to keep me apart from Peter.

I think that today is meant to be a reward for my good behavior.

It’s lucky that James doesn’t know the truth of what happens at night.

I don’t trust his rewards though.

Still, I can’t help the excitement, which is welling through me. Yet I hope that I can get through the class without embarrassing myself. I’ve had months now without dancing, while the Never brothers look in frighteningly good shape.

What if I fall on my ass?

I lick the coffee off my top lip. “Help me caffeine, you’re my only hope.” When I catch Shadow’s blank expression, I sigh. “I keep forgetting that you’ve never seen a movie. You poor, poor man. How have you survived?”

Shadow quirks his brow. “Probably how humans have for most of history.”

“You’re right though.” Pan looks troubled. “We don’t understand things like you do. We have no real idea of the world that you’ve left behind. We’ll never even see it or these shit *movies*. Are you certain that you still want to do this? Go against our families? Your brother?”

My heart speeds up. “I am.”

Pan slips his finger under my chin and tilts it up. “Are you? Because when we burn our world to ash, I don’t know what will rise from it.”

“And we may burn ourselves,” Shadow adds. “I once thought that hurting myself — controlling the pain — would make living here bearable. But it won’t. Yet how much are you prepared to sacrifice?”

Before I can answer, Peter sweeps into the dance studio, and my breath is stolen.

Peter’s dressed in nothing but a male dancer’s black leotard and tights.

They show off...*everything*.

He looks hot as hell.

Can you be grateful to an outfit? Because I am.

I can see his gorgeous dragon tattoo like this.

Pan’s hand brushes against mine. “Yeah, that’s why everyone wants to be teacher’s pet.”

“I wish that I’d brought him an apple now,” I breathe.

The rest of the Lost Boys eagerly gather around Peter at the front of the studio, vying for his attention. He laughs, answering their questions and kindly listening to them.

And he’s secretly mine.

The thought makes my gaze soften.

Peter glances over, before his expression becomes stern. He clicks his fingers and points at a spot in front of him.

“Come on, you three.” He taps the wooden floor.

Pan rolls his eyes. “Yes, Sir.”

I bet Pan works on making the ways that he says *Sir* as insolent as possible.

I kind of love it.

I bet Peter does as well, even if he glares at Pan.

Reluctantly, I place the coffee mug down on the floor.

Shadow snatches me by the hand and leads me through the Lost Boys to the front, while Pan trails after us.

Peter smiles at me, and I find myself flushing under his attention. “It’s good to finally see my new student here. Just follow everybody else today. You’ll do great.”

“Thanks, Sir.”

Peter turns to the music system, and suddenly, the opening piano chords of Ruth B.’s haunting *Lost Boy* booms around the studio.

The Lost Boys grin like they’ve both been expecting this and looking forward to it. They nudge each other, and I feel like I’m the outsider on a ritual that unites them.

The type of positive ritual that’s unique on Never.

I find myself grinning along with everybody else, infected by their joy.

They start to jump up and down, slinging their arms around each other’s shoulders. They point at Peter, singing along to the chorus and chanting *Peter Pan*.

Pan and Shadow are now grinning as widely as everybody else.

Hell, Peter has his own theme song.

I’m not surprised.

Peter gives an easy, charismatic smile.

He pirouettes fluidly, and it steals my breath. He falls into a series of stretches (God bless those tights), which the rest of the class copy.

I do my best to follow them and warm up.

Peter slows down his moves, repeating the stretches several times to give me a chance to see what to do.

He's a good teacher.

Why didn't I realize that he would be?

Pan kept telling me that Peter wasn't like Tink, Kyden, or any of the other professors here. Yet it's only now, when I can feel the relaxed vibe of his class that I can truly believe it.

I could be back in one of my college music classes.

But then, Peter went to dance school in order to escape from his mob family's business. Yet he's leading this group of troubled, dangerous, and volatile Lost Boys with such ease.

I can't decide if this means that he'd have made an incredible gang leader or a lead dancer in a ballet troupe.

Both...?

My heart breaks that his future has been stolen from him.

His talent, opportunities, *life*.

Yet he's made the best of what he has here, carving out a new role for himself, and creating a safe and positive space for these Lost Boys, who he's claimed as his own.

At least during his dance classes, he can give them one place for expressing freedom.

I admire him so fucking much for that.

As the song fades, Peter claps his hands together. "Okay, who's up for a dance-off?"

The Lost Boys cheer and stamp their feet.

I shrink back.

Don't choose me...

Peter taps his chin. "Hmm, who to pick..."

At least half the group's hands shoot up, excitedly.

Peter's lips quirk, when he notices that the twins' and my hands remain resolutely down.

Peter's amused gaze scans over us. "Shadow and Pan. Let's make this a brotherly contest."

Those who weren't picked don't seem disappointed but more eager to see the twins dance.

Pan's eyes narrow. "What's our reward if we win?"

"Sir," Peter prompts.

"What do we win, *Sir*?"

"A dance with Angela," Shadow says, looking hopeful.

Oh, no...

Peter's gaze flashes to my face, and his expression is wicked. "Deal. A good prize."

They're all playing with fire.

But then, they live for the thrill.

Pan knocks his shoulder into Shadow's, before prowling to the front of the studio. "You're on, bro. I'm winning."

Shadow only shrugs. His gaze slides to mine, however, and he offers me a secret smile.

I clench my hands at my sides.

Shadow's going to win this for me. I can feel it.

Peter steps to the side, leaning casually against the wall with his arms crossed next to the music system. "Let me explain for our new student. This is a dance-off that allows both competitors to dance at the same time. They can use any style, mixing hip hop, ballet, and modern dance. I can pick any song. Normally, I judge, but today..." His smile becomes devilish. "I'm going to allow the prize to become the judge."

I freeze.

Two gorgeous men's gazes focus on mine with stunning intensity.

How will I be able to choose?

Who do I want to win?

Then Peter clicks on the music system, and Hozier's bewitching "Eat Your Young" starts to play.

Shadow's expression stills and then he faces his brother. They stare each other down.

Pan looks determined, before he straightens his shoulders.

When he starts to dance, it's slinky and dangerous.

My breath stutters.

His moves are chilling but at the same time, so seductive that I shiver.

The rest of the Lost Boys are as mesmerized as I am by these dark twins.

In contrast, Shadow's leaps and deep splits make my cheeks heat because they're like watching pure lust come alive.

I'm shocked.

Shadow's interpreting the song with such a unique talent, it's like every move is a poem.

He's a natural.

Where he struggles with touch and to express himself with words, he comes alive with dance.

I know what that's like with singing.

I mouth along to the words.

I can't take my eyes off Shadow.

It's magical. He's pulling me into the dance with him.

My chest is rising and falling rapidly. I feel caught in this moment.

Suddenly, Pan flips over Shadow's back, breaking his concentration and making him cry out in shock.

"Damn," Curly mutters.

Pan smirks, battling his corner again.

Pan tilts up his chin, dancing with an aggressive attitude that's winning the audience.

The Lost Boys cheer and whoop.

I can see why Peter holds these dance-offs now. It brings these Lost Boys together in a way that they're not allowed anywhere else.

Yet it's Shadow's fluid dancing that's capturing *my* heart because these aren't merely moves to him.

It's his soul shining through every improvised move.

And I want his soul because it's beautiful, and what hurts me is that he doesn't realize that.

He's been made to feel that he's broken.

That he's only one Darling Butterfly away from sending that soul flying to heaven.

I bite my lip, as my eyes burn.

Peter catches my gaze, and his expression clouds with concern.

Instantly, he steps forward.

He waves his hand. "Dance-off over."

Shadow and Pan stop dancing. They're panting, as they bend over to catch their breath but they both look to me. Their gazes are gleaming with eagerness to see who I'm going to choose.

I hope that Pan understands.

"Go ahead," Peter prompts.

"You were both incredible," I say. "But Shadow wins."

Pan's expression darkens for a moment, before he shrugs. "He always does, when it comes to dancing. My bro's amazing."

I love Pan a little more for the way that he squeezes his brother's shoulder, before he steps to the side with a gallant bow.

Shadow's looking at me like I'm his whole world, as I step in front of the class.

I can't allow anyone to know about our relationship, but it's fucking hard, as his arms close around me.

Then he twirls me, and this dance...?

It's the best of my fucking life.

I rest my head on Shadow's shoulder, breathing in his delicious scent of vanilla. I loop my arms around his neck, gasping as he dips me.

I never want this dance to end.

I've never felt so alive.

"So, you dance and play," Kyden's voice bellows above the music, "while Nurse Tinknell lies murdered. How typical."

What...? *Murdered...?*

My blood chills.

Instantly, Peter shuts off the music, and I cling to Shadow.

Pan rounds in front of us, protectively.

The Lost Boys shuffle their feet anxiously, and all the joy bleeds from the class.

Peter pales. "What do you mean?"

Kyden ignores him, prowling into the room. "Get to your dorms and stay there. There will be an investigation, and all of you will be questioned. If any of you are found out of your dorms, you'll be dealt with by me personally. I can assure you that you don't want that."

The Lost Boys duck their heads and scatter out of the room in silence.

Pan heads for the door, but when I begin to follow him with my hand in Shadow's, Kyden catches me by the shoulder. "Not you."

I stiffen, and my adrenaline spikes.

Shadow doesn't let go of my hand.

“Don’t touch her.” Peter’s eyes flash.

“The Director has put me in overall charge of the clinic, since the nurse was found killed an hour ago,” Kyden says. “We’re under emergency rules, and they’re strict. Don’t think that you can order me around anymore, professor. I have the power now.”

“Fine.” Peter balls his hands into fists. “Then let go of her, *please*. What in the hell is going on?”

Kyden lets go of my shoulder, and I stumble away from him. My skin burns, where he’s touched me. My scars feel tight.

I’m trembling.

Shadow wraps his arms around me.

Pan growls and stalks back toward Kyden.

Kyden only holds up his hand. “You should put a leash on this one, unless he’s volunteering to be interviewed first.”

“If you touch her again...” Pan snarls.

“Pan, don’t,” Peter warns.

“What?” Kyden arches his brow. “Come on, *what* will you do?”

It’s a trap.

“Don’t answer,” I say, hurriedly.

Kyden glares at me. “Shut up. Nurse Tinknell was a good staff member. She worked tirelessly, and some asshole slit her throat. I wonder who here has a knife fixation?”

Pan blanches. “I didn’t do this.”

“I don’t tend to take the word of lying psychopaths.” Kyden narrows his eyes. “Now, take your idiot of a brother and get back to Never Hall, before I recommend a dose of hydrotherapy to calm both of your agitation.”

My heart’s thumping in my chest. I pull Shadow closer to me.

“And if we don’t?” Pan challenges.

“I’m only giving you this one chance,” Kyden replies. “If you don’t obey me and act willingly now, then how innocent do you think you’ll look? Wait, I know that expression. Hook’s just itching to get out, right? Go for it. Then I’ll know that *he* did this.”

Pan takes another frustrated step forward, before his gaze darts to mine. “I didn’t. Darling, please believe me, *Hook didn’t.*”

“I know,” I reply.

And I do.

When I swore that I trusted Hook, I meant it.

Pan’s shoulders relax, and he nods. “Thank you.”

Except, who did murder Tink?

And why?

I know that there are many deadly people on Never. I’ve been warned enough.

If the killer is still out there, who will they target next?

I shudder.

Kyden misinterprets my fear.

“You should be scared.” He points at Pan. “I’ve been advocating that this one be given to me and properly medicated for years. He should be kept restrained and locked up here in the clinic. The Director is coming around to my way of thinking. So, don’t leave and return to Never Hall. Fight me over this. Just give me the final ammunition to have you moved to the clinic under my care permanently.”

“No,” Shadow gasps. “Pan, *no.*”

“Go.” I drop Shadow’s hand and shove him toward the doorway. “Take Pan and return to Never Hall.”

I won’t let them risk that happening. The twins can’t be separated. It’d kill Shadow, if he was isolated from his twin, and I wouldn’t allow a dog to be put under my brother’s care.

Kyden would break both Pan and Hook.

“Please,” I beg Pan.

Grimly, Pan nods. “You’re upsetting Shadow’s routine by forcing him to return to Never Hall abruptly like this, Doctor. You could have let him stay here.”

“I’ve said it before: He needs to be normalized,” Kyden sneers. “I’m helping him.”

Shadow rocks on his heels, and his fingers tap out a rhythm on his thigh.

Pan jerks his head at him toward the door.

I watch, as the twins reluctantly leave.

“If you ever do what you just threatened,” Peter warns, his cheeks flushed with anger, “then I won’t stop, until *you’re* the corpse.”

Kyden freezes like he’s shocked by such a bold statement.

Peter strides to stand next to me. He slides his arm around my waist, pulling me into his side.

Kyden looks between us, assessing. “I’ll need everyone’s movements to find out if they have alibis.”

“You can have them.” Peter cocks his head. “But why are we being interviewed first and separately?”

Kyden crosses his arms. “Because this murder has given me the authority to make that happen for the first time. It’s also made me think. We could all die at any moment. There’s no one to mourn us. Only, that’s not true for our *happy family*, is it? I don’t understand. You’re nothing to him, Peter, nothing but a fucking name. But he lets you live with him at Never Hall, at least for some of the time. I’m his actual stepson but I have to live in the clinic because I don’t have a room in his house.”

“Well,” Peter drawls, “the crucial difference is that I didn’t try to burn my own sister alive, I suppose.”

Kyden’s eyes darken, before he snarls and dives on Peter. He snatches him around the throat, dragging him away from me and smashing him against the glass wall with a crack.

Peter lets out a pained *oomph*.

“Don’t fight back.” Kyden licks over his lips, pressing his thigh between Peter’s. “Or I’ll take this out on my sis instead. I run this clinic now. I can call the orderlies and put you both into isolation. Things are going to change from now on.”

Peter lets himself go limp.

He’s a trained fighter, as much as a dancer. I’ve already seen him kick my brother’s ass. He could break free in a moment but he isn’t in order to protect me.

I start forward to try to drag my brother off Peter, but Peter gives a quick shake of his head.

He doesn’t want me to drop my golden child act. It’s too important, if we’re going to stop Kyden, especially if he’s gained further authority.

My stomach is churning.

I force myself to stand still, ducking my head. At least my hair will hide my expression.

My nails bite into my palms. The bright flares of pain keep me grounded.

“It seems to me,” Peter’s voice is icy, “that you’re the one, Doctor, who’s profited the most from this death. Perhaps, the Director should be looking at who has the greatest motive. Wouldn’t that be *you*?”

My breath quickens.

Fuck, is my brother the murderer?

When Kyden grabs Peter by the balls and twists, Peter hollers.

“Never scream. Don’t you remember the rules?” Kyden tuts. “Payback’s a bitch.”

“It was worth it to knee you in the balls first,” Peter gasps out.

“You’re the one who’s a criminal. You’re mafia. Why does my stepdad treat you with such respect? I can’t work it out.

You have nothing but pathetic dance training, while I'm an esteemed psychiatrist. Yet I've had to treat you like an equal professor. That ends today."

Then he glances over his shoulder at me.

Now, I feel like prey, pinned by his dark gaze.

It's not how I felt, when I played at being prey with Pan and Hook.

I truly feel like my brother's a predator who's going to make me bleed.

"You're on the island, feeling the sun on your face," Kyden murmurs.

His voice is mesmerizing.

I take a step back. "No."

But already, my breathing is slowing, and my eyes are feeling heavy.

"You're becoming tired," Kyden persists. "You're desperate to *sleep*. Your throat is dry and you're swallowing." All of a sudden, I'm parched. I'm exhausted. "You can't keep your eyes open, You can't stop yourself yawning. So, you lie and curl up under the trees. Don't you feel sleepy?"

I'm lost. I can't move.

I shake my head.

I try to talk but I can't.

Panicking, I'm screaming on the inside.

Please, please, please...

"Now," Kyden says, darkly, "*Sleep.*"

Chapter Twenty



All of this happened before, and it will happen again.

Dr. Croc's Therapy Room, Never Clinic

I awake to a slap across the face.

I gasp at the *crack*. My cheek smarts.

I lick over my throbbing lip.

What's happening? Where am I?

Confused, my eyes flutter open. My mind is fuzzy and feels stuffed full of cotton wool.

My nose scrunches at the cloying, intoxicating scent of incense.

My limbs feel heavy. My muscles ache.

I'm kneeling on the floor, and my arms hang heavily at my sides.

As I blink, and my vision comes into focus, chills run up and down my spine.

Horror worms into my bones. It freezes me.

I'm too scared to scream.

I'm encircled by dozens of flickering candles. Their flames are all I can see. The ghost pain, as they burn my skin, overwhelms me

Someone's trapped me in fire.

“Awake again, sis?” Kyden’s cool voice mocks. “I thought that I’d have to hit you again. I never could wake you up for school, when you were a kid. Do you remember how you’d always beg for *just another five minutes*? I had to tip water over you to get you out of bed. You always were lazy.”

My heart rate skyrockets.

I stare up at Kaden, who’s standing in front of me with his arms crossed.

I’m in his therapy room.

The blinds are pulled over the windows, and the only light comes from the ring of candles around me. The candles cast dancing shadows across the bookcases, crystals, and the optical illusions on the walls.

My head’s spinning. I can’t breathe.

Kyden’s nose wrinkles. “Don’t have a panic attack. How can we talk then? You’re so much more obedient, when you’re hypnotized. You walked to my room like such a good doll.”

“I’m here, beautiful. You’re not alone.” It’s Peter, but his voice sounds wrong: tight and slurred.

Is he hurt?

Panicked, I strain to look past Kyden.

Where’s Peter? What the fuck has my brother done to him, while I was under hypnosis?

Kyden steps to the side, and finally, I can see Peter.

I close my eyes for a moment in distress, before I open them again, forcing myself to smile at Peter.

I wish that I was as good as the Never brothers at masking my emotions.

Because Peter is a fucking mess.

His hands and feet are tied with the wide leather restraints that Kyden used on Pan before. He’s sprawled on the leather couch.

Kyden has stripped Peter of his tights, so that now, he's only dressed in his black leotard. I don't want to think about that too hard. He looks vulnerable and exposed.

His face is black and blue. His cheek is swollen, and his right eye is purpling already. Blood drips from his broken lip down his chin and onto his chest.

Yet his arms and legs are deeply bruised as well, as if at some point, he was on the floor and stomped on.

Fuck, what if something's broken?

When I think of how Peter led the dance lesson with such joy, it's heartbreaking.

I clench my hands on my lap. Then I try to lurch forward, but that brings the flickering flames closer to me, and I can't do it.

I whimper, as flashbacks assault me.

Except, they're magnified and far worse than they have been in the past.

They steal my breath.

I'm shaking.

Kyden did this to me. He's been training this fear into me through his hypnosis to control me.

I stare up at my brother through welling tears. "You asshole. You weren't making me better, you were making my fear worse. You haven't been treating my phobia and PTSD, you've been training it into me."

"You were always frightened of everything. It's not my fault, if you're easy to scare. Now, kneel there like a good girl, while I teach the professor another lesson. I have a couple of hours at least, during all this confusion, for some payback." He swings to Peter, marching toward him. "You're the asshole, professor. Did you think that I'd forgotten about the way you humiliated me? You should know that I never forget bad behavior, and I always discipline."

Shit, has he been tormenting the eldest brother as well?

My stomach clenches.

Has Peter been protecting all of us and hiding it?

Peter glares at Kyden, defiantly. “What I know, is that you have no idea about consent or the difference between abuse and discipline, Doctor.”

Kyden’s expression darkens. He grabs Peter by the hair and wrenches back his neck.

“Stop it, K,” I yell.

“I’m fine,” Peter rasps. “Stay out of it.”

“Fuck that,” I say. “Why do you insist on being the one to take the punishment for the Lost Boys? I don’t care what you think about your past, you don’t deserve it. Give yourself a fucking break and let someone else protect you for once.”

Kyden gives a nasty laugh. “My sister playing the psychiatrist.”

He shakes Peter, who bites off a pained groan.

“This one loves to pretend that he’s a hero, when really he’s as much a brutal criminal as the rest of his family. My professional opinion is that he had inconsistent parenting, which was both too strict and too indulgent. He was treated as the baby of the family by being allowed to go off to dance school. But look where that ended.” Kyden pushes Peter away with a shove, before slowly unbuckling his belt and slipping it out of its loops. “Now, please don’t move or I’ll hit something vital and do more damage than I’m intending to.”

He sounds so calm like this is normal.

Perhaps, it is.

My gaze becomes steely. *It won’t be anymore.*

“If you do this, Kyden,” I say, “then I’ll tell Mom *everything*. You’ve left marks on both of us. You won’t be able to lie your way out of this.”

Kyden laughs. “Do you think Mom doesn’t know? She only cares about her new rich husband, her position, and her

status. Are you going to selfishly wreck her second marriage as well? Fine, go ahead. But she won't listen to you."

Kyden wraps the buckle end of the belt around his fist.

"Enough, Doctor," Peter commands.

Kyden studies Peter. "The problem we have is that you still like to think of yourself as in charge. Since my sister arrived, your megalomania has become even worse. Is that what your stunt at the farm was about? I'm the senior professor now, however, and I need to make it clear to you that I'm your boss."

Kyden slashes the belt down.

I wince, as the belt strikes Peter across his bare thigh like a striking snake.

Peter fights hard to stay still, even though a red line now marks his leg.

"Are you humiliated yet?" Kyden demands. "Now that my sis can see you're not always the dominant Alpha who you pretend to be?"

"He's not pretending," I exclaim. "Nothing that you do could humiliate him in my eyes. You can't top a dom."

Peter's breath hitches, before his pained expression gentles. His eyes sparkle with amusement.

Kyden vibrates with fury, swinging the belt harder.

Crack — crack — crack.

My eyes burn with tears. The flames on the candles flare higher.

I feel too hot like I'm the one who's burning up.

I edge closer to the couch.

If I could just jump over the flames, then I could do something to stop Kyden beating the man who I love.

Yet I feel dizzy even at the thought.

Frustrated, I fall back down.

“Stay there,” Peter’s voice is soft. Even through his pain, he’s focused on me. “Think of those candles as a circle of protection.”

I almost laugh because only Peter could turn Kyden’s attempt to psychologically torture me on its head.

Kyden’s eyes flash, before he grabs Peter’s hands, yanking them up and out of the way. He brings down the belt on Peter’s other bare thigh, then rhythmically again and again and...

Peter grits his teeth but he can’t stop himself huffing out small gasps of pain.

Kyden leans forward, cradling Peter’s face; he strokes along his sharp cheekbone. “Admit that I’m your boss and I’ll stop. See, I only need one small step. Therapy is all about these small gains.”

Peter shakes his head.

Kyden grips Peter’s chin, turning him to look at me. “Call *me* Sir.”

“No.”

“Asshole.” Kyden lets go of Peter’s face and backhands him.

Tears tremble on my eyelashes.

Kyden hurls down the belt and prowls toward me.

“*You*,” he snarls, suddenly not looking as in control as he did before. “Why did Mom have to bring you here? You ruined my first family, destroying my home, and now you’re ruining my second one.”

I stare at him in shock.

I never understood my brother fully.

I knew that he was a narcissist.

Plus, a true psychopath, unlike the way that the word’s thrown at Pan.

Yet I didn’t understand what I’d done to make him hate me so much.

I think his greatest trick has been to make me think that I've done anything wrong at all. Because I haven't, right? Nor has Peter or the twins.

We've simply existed in *his* world.

I was simply born.

For my brother that was enough to destroy me.

After all this time, it's a shock to realize that something so simple can be so destructive within a family.

"*You're jealous,*" I say in wonder, delighting in the way that Kyden recoils like he's been slapped. "You hurt me and you're hurting your new brothers because you're jealous of us. You can't stand that we're talented, successful, or love each other. You can't stand that anyone gets attention but you. You think that you're a god but really, you're just a scared little boy, begging for his mommy and daddy's love. When a new baby was brought into the nest, you pushed it out — *me out*. Now, you're the cuckoo in the Never nest. You're a bully, K, and all because you wanted to be an only child."

Perhaps, I should be a psychiatrist.

Peter grins, straightening his shoulders.

Then his gaze meets mine. "I'm so proud of you right now."

"I should have been an only child." Kyden's pale and trembling. "You fucked up everything. Mom and Dad divorced because of you."

"They didn't." I swallow. "And even if they did, then that's their problem. All kids have issues, and parents are meant to love them unconditionally and help them through them. But instead, you poisoned them against me. Yet they didn't fight for me, support or try to understand me. I can see that now. They abandoned me, when I was in hospital and needed them most. Then Mom tricked me to Never and trapped me here."

"She tricked me here too." Kyden's jaw clenches. "I'm locked up as well."

Peter snorts. “Yeah, well. The difference is that you deserve to be.”

“The difference is that I worked out a way to make myself useful to the Director.” Kyden stalks to the desk and leans on it.

He traces over a jagged crystal. He spins it, until the light catches on it. I squint, as it’s reflected back into my eyes.

“Enough of all this noise. Just relax. Take a deep breath. Aren’t your eyes feeling heavy? You can see the island rising up. There are groves of trees and emerald butterflies, which are flitting between them. Concentrate hard. What details can you see?”

My eyes feel heavy, and I yawn.

I’m lost.

Overwhelmed.

“Death, beauty, and hope,” I whisper.

“Stop this,” Peter’s voice cuts across the haze. He sounds urgent and angry. “Don’t you fucking dare. Why did you use that as a device to make them suggestible? Sending them to Wild Island where Peto died is sick.”

I’m startled out of the haze.

My eyes fly open.

My adrenaline spikes, and I’m back in the therapy room.

Back surrounded by the anxiety provoking ring of candles that invoke my worst fear.

Back staring at my brother’s smug face.

“I’ve been doing much more than making them suggestible with my Island Therapy.” Kyden slams the crystal back flat on the desk.

It’s terrifying how fast I fell under his suggestions. But then, he’s had weeks of training me. Yet he’s had years of conditioning sessions with the twins.

How much control does he have over them?

What could he make them do?

What if he made Pan kill Tink? What if he triggered Hook without Pan even knowing it?

“You’re the reason that Pan’s night terrors have become worse,” I say, slowly. “You’ve been making both twins more suggestible.”

Kyden nods. “It’s why the Director gave me this role and status. I can’t take all the credit, although my talent is what makes it possible. The Director is the one who had the idea of how to control his sons. He came up with the idea of the island because of its emotional connection for them, as well as using the belief that he’d instilled in them that Peter Pan was real. The night terrors then became both easy and fun to weave into Pan’s subconscious. Breaking Shadow was harder, and it triggered some side-effects like his self-harm, and for them both, memory loss. But it’s a small price to pay. After all, they can live at home without the need for daily medications or restraints. Aren’t they lucky?”

“I want you to know,” Peter says, straining hard against the straps that hold him, “that the moment I’m free, you’re dead.”

“Alpha posturing, of course. Don’t you ever get bored of it, professor?” Kyden stoops and picks up the belt from the floor. “By the time this lesson is over, you will.”

“Why did you kill the nurse?” I demand. “Was it to frame Pan?”

Kyden turns to look at me, and if the surprise is an act, then it’s a good one. “Why would I kill Nurse Tinknell? I liked her. She was the chief member of staff who understood both the need for efficiency and strict control. Now, if I’d been planning a murder to frame Pan, I’d have picked one of the Lost Boys who he keeps glaring at, probably Curly.”

He says that so calmly, it’s chilling.

Yet I believe him.

Peter exchanges a troubled glance with me.

Who the hell murdered Tink then?

There's a killer on this island, and Peter and I are both trapped with my psycho brother.

"Don't worry, I intend to look out for my siblings from now on," Kyden says. "This situation has shown that you need close supervision to make sure that you're safe. I know that I can convince the Director to put the twins under my loving care here in the clinic. Professor, you have your cottage on the clinic grounds. But I can be kind. I'll let you visit."

"Never going to fucking happen," Peter growls.

"You're acting like I'm a monster. If I was, then I'd suggest the use of those therapies, which psychiatrists have tried in the past, from purging to pulling out teeth. Do you know that metrazol shock therapy caused thrashing convulsions that could break your back?" He strokes his beard, thoughtfully. "Of course, a lobotomy would literally cut out ___"

"Stop," Peter's voice is low and dangerous. "You can't carve out who a person is simply because you don't like certain behaviors. A doctor doesn't have a right to steal someone's memory or personality. No one deserves to lose themselves or their freedom because their brain is wired differently or has certain brain chemistry. They have as much worth and rights as anyone fucking else."

"I didn't know that dance instructors also had doctorates. Now, where were we?" Kyden furrows his brow, before snapping the belt across Peter's chest. "Call me *Sir*."

This time, Peter can't hide how much it hurts.

He doubles over with a cry, even as he shakes his head.

And that's it.

Kyden thinks that I'm weak.

He believes that he's trapped me in my body, head, and by my fear of fire.

I won't be trapped any longer.

It was Peter who freed me. Now, I'm going to free him.

I remember how it felt being on Wild Island with him and I battle to imagine that I'm there now with him.

I'm safe in his arms, sitting on his lap. There's the crackle of the bonfire, but the embers can't harm me.

I'm free.

With a howl, I burst up and launch myself out of the circle of fire.

The flames catch at my bare feet, but I kick the candles over. I hardly notice the pain.

Instead, I rush Kyden.

Taken off-guard, he raises his hands defensively in front of his face. I wrench the belt away from him, hurling it clattering over his desk. Then I scratch and claw at his face, and he stumbles back, tumbling onto his ass.

I wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze. "I'm not scared of you."

Kyden chokes, scrabbling at my hands.

I don't let go.

Peter struggles off the couch, trying to get to me.

Kyden snarls, reaching blindly for something to the side and grabbing it.

Then he swings a burning candle toward my face. "You don't have to be scared in order to be burned, sis."

Chapter Twenty-One



We are all failures — at least the best of us are.

Dr. Croc's Therapy Room, Never Clinic

“**G**et away from Wendy,” a voice that’s as cold as a blade says from the doorway. “She’s mine.”

Wendy?

Trembling, as the flame’s heat sears my cheek, I can see the outline of a man in the therapy room’s doorway.

My eyes water.

I can’t see much through the blur of tears, but it’s enough to make my heart stutter with concern.

It’s Shadow, I think.

Is he in a trance? Does he think that the Neverland of his childhood is real again?

He has a knife in his hands, and its tip is pointed at Kyden.

Yet if he takes on Kyden, he’s going to be fucking slaughtered.

Kyden’s smile is dark. “What are you doing playing with your brother’s knife? Did you get bored without me? This is for the best. I have a whole host of methods that I’ve been eager to try out to help you, starting with ECT, but the Director has been dragging his feet over concerns about side

effects. Now, I can tell him that both of his twin sons are murderous fiends, and he'll greenlight it."

"No." I start to struggle again, elbowing Kyden hard enough to make him loosen his grip on the candle, which rolls away from us. "Run, Shadow."

"That's not Shadow," Peter's voice is tight.

Then it's Pan...?

Confused, I stare up at the man in the doorway again, who I can finally see more clearly without the candle's light blinding me.

He's sinfully beautiful with Kohl darkly smudged around his eyes like Shadow has.

But he's not Shadow.

When I look closer, I can see small differences.

His hair is cut shorter and it's sleeker. He's wearing a scarlet silk shirt and black trousers.

There's a skull tattoo on his hand, which I can glimpse, where he's holding the knife in front of him.

His hand is so still that he could be a wax figure.

It's a different knife to Pan's as well. Its hilt isn't made of antler but is bronze and engraved with skulls.

Transfixed, I study this deadly vision.

But is he here to save or kill me?

Confused, Kyden sits back on his haunches, as I squirm out from underneath him. "What the fuck is going on?"

"My name's Peto." The man — Peto's — voice is like ice on a summer's day. There's a Scottish edge to his accent, now that I'm listening closely. "I grew up. But now, I've come back to Never and I'm going to burn it all down."

I blanch.

Peto — *the third triplet.*

The one who died at the lake.

Only, he didn't.

Where's he been all these years? Why the hell is he back now?

"Who?" Kyden stands up, snatching the belt and wrapping it around his fist to leave the buckle swinging as a weapon. "Are you another of Pan's alters? As if Hook isn't bad enough. You're only hurting Pan, you know. He doesn't need you."

Kyden's making a mistake to assume that this man is an alter, I'm sure of it.

Peto's expression darkens. "You don't even know who I am. Did nobody mourn me? Miss me? Am I that unimportant and invisible? I was simply...forgotten."

"Look, I don't want to know who you are, alter. In fact, I don't need to." Kyden takes a menacing step toward Peto. The candles' light glints on the silver of the buckle. "Let me convince you that it's better to hide behind Pan and never come out again."

"Watch out," I yell, as Kyden raises his arm.

I crawl closer, grasping onto Kyden's leg to hold him back. He kicks me, catching my chin and rattling my teeth. I bite through my lip, tasting tangy blood.

Peto's eyes are as cold as a demon's. He doesn't flinch back but only raises his arm to block the strike.

The belt lands with a horrifying *snap*.

Kyden smirks.

Unexpectedly, so fast that it's a blur, Peto allows the belt to wrap around his arm, before he uses the force of the blow to yank Kyden forward toward him. Then with a powerful push kick, he knocks Kyden flying backward.

Shit, Peto knows martial arts.

Just like Shadow's mesmerizing at dance, Peto's equally magnetizing at fighting.

Kyden tumbles backward over the desk.

Peter's eyes widen at the same time as mine do, and I know that it takes a lot of impress him.

Peto prowls after Kyden like a slinky wild cat, leaping over the desk and scattering papers and crystals flying.

He looks glorious.

And terrifying.

He side eyes me as he passes.

The three triplets are so different.

There's none of Pan's primal nature, Hook's savagery, or Shadow's shyness about the third triplet.

There's only a cold focus.

It makes me feel like the center of Peto's world — but a world that we both come from outside Never.

I know in that single look that Peto truly has grown up on the mainland and that he'd recognized the life that I come from of damage and scars.

Peto's gaze zeros in on Kyden's again, and it's that of a trained killer's. His knuckles tighten around the hilt of his knife.

Kyden struggles to his feet, and for the first time, he looks panicked.

It's fucking awesome.

Kyden holds his hand in front of himself in a conciliatory gesture. "Now, calm down. You're having an episode. I don't know who you are or what this is, but you need my help. Put down the knife, and I'll get you some nice drugs that'll make you feel better."

"Do you know what will make me feel better?" Peto leaps onto the top of the desk, standing up like he owns the whole of fucking Never. My heart hammers in my chest. "Slitting the throat of the man who hurt my Wendy and brothers."

"Orderlies..." Kyden screams.

Look at that, he's breaking Never's rule about screaming.

Peto leaps off the desk, landing in front of Kyden and slamming him back against the wall. He holds him there with his forearm across his chest. Then he grabs Kyden by the hair and wrenches back his head like a sacrifice.

“Don’t look,” Peter warns.

Only, I do.

I want to.

In one quick motion, as if he’s done it many times before, Peto stabs the dagger into my brother’s throat and then slices it deeper and all the way across.

Kyden chokes, as blood bubbles out. He struggles.

I cover my mouth with my hand but I don’t look away.

Blood sprays across Peto’s face and hands, but he’s expressionless as he continues to hold onto Kyden, until he stops moving.

Then he drops his body.

I’m numb.

It’s over.

I’m safe, finally.

For the first time in my life, I’m safe.

I drop to my knees, trembling.

“Undo me,” Peter orders. “Right now, Peto. She needs me.”

I glance at Peter in shock.

Is he seriously using his Dom voice on the man who we’ve just watched murder another professor?

“He means *please*,” I hurriedly add.

Peto cleans his knife on his trousers meticulously, before tucking it back into his boot like it’s a familiar ritual. Then he leaps back over the desk and slinks toward me.

I hold myself still.

He crouches down in front of me, before reaching out and rubbing my shoulder, as if he's no idea what he's doing. "Did I scare you?"

I almost laugh.

His fingers that he's using to rub soothing circles on my shoulder are stained with my brother's blood, and he's asking me that...?

The weird thing is that he didn't scare me more.

In fact, the truth is that he saved me.

"It was you, wasn't it?" I lick my dry lips. "Outside my window at night, watching me?"

Peto nods. "Father sent me away from Never. He forced me to grow up. But finally, I managed to get back and I had to know who you were. You were in my room. I didn't know that a Wendy had come to keep my brothers safe. Everyone here has been hurting them. I came back to protect them and I wanted to be sure that I didn't need to add you to the list. You're so pretty that I hoped I wouldn't have to."

"List?"

"Hit list."

My stomach drops.

"Am I on it?" Peter's jaw is clenched.

Suddenly, I know what Peter's doing. He's drawing the triplet's attention back onto himself to protect me.

He did that with Kyden.

I force myself not to look at Kyden's feet, which are sticking out from behind the desk.

Peto's eyes narrow, as he straightens and stalks to Peter. "That horrible nurse was." So, that's another one from his hit list: *Tink*. "She hurt all of you. I saw. I know what it's like to be mistreated by nurses and doctors who call you things like *mad* and *crazy*. They use it to justify locking you up, restraining you so tight that you feel like you'll never be able to breathe again, and taking away your freedom to make even

the smallest choice. *Wear this, eat that, think only this or you'll never get out of here.* So, you know what I did?"

Peter swallows. "You played along, right? Smart."

"I am, aren't I? But are you really any different to those men who play games with minds, *professor?*" Peto leans over Peter; their gazes lock. "Are you the same as everybody else? Do you want to keep me apart from my brothers?"

"That depends. Would you hurt them? Because then, we have a problem."

"I'd never hurt them," Peto snarls, but I don't miss the anguish in his eyes. "Why does everyone keep saying that? I love my brothers. As a child, all I wanted was to keep them safe. Then I was sent away from Never and my only worth became as a weapon for a father who I barely remembered, while a mother wept for sons she'd lost and couldn't forget."

So, the twins' mom left to be with Peto but never forgot them.

Peter holds up his bound hands. "If you're not going to murder me, then untie me."

"Who said that I wasn't?" Peto snatches Peter by the hair and yanks. I push myself to my feet in alarm at Peter's hiss of pain. "You're the false Peter. Father threw me out of Never but adopted you. *My fake brother.* Shadow and Pan treat you like...like...*you're me.*"

Peto's shaking.

He's fucking broken.

He's simply better at hiding it.

"If you kill this Peter, it'd be like killing the twins," I warn.

Peto pales. "I only want them to love me. *To be loved.*"

Peter's expression gentles, before he appears to come to a decision, and it hardens again. "Let go of my hair. I. Said. Let. Go."

Shocked, the triplet lets go and looks down at Peter with his cold, golden eyes, as if awaiting his next order.

If he truly has been trained to be used as James' assassin in the real world, then perhaps, it's what he responds to.

Peter will recognize that, since he comes from a mafia family. I knew that he'd make a good gang leader.

"Are you going to stand there, dripping blood, while our Wendy needs us?" Peter arches his brow. "Wipe your face."

Peto uses his sleeve to wipe over his face, and the blood is hidden by the scarlet of his shirt.

Is that why he wears red?

"Now..." Peter commandingly raises his hands, and this time, the triplet rushes to wrench the straps off him.

My adrenaline spikes, as I half expect Peter to rush him.

Instead, Peter takes a moment to massage his bruised wrists. Then he stands, towering over Peto. I'd be nervous if this was one of the twins that he looked so pissed at, but somehow, I know that this brother can more than hold his own.

Still, Peter grabs him by the neck and shakes him.

My eyes widen.

Only Peter could grab a trained killer by the neck like he's a kitten. He drags Peto back to face me.

Peto has a type of pale beauty that should scare me more than it does.

"Are you okay?" Peter assesses me. "We need to get ice on your lip."

I have so much adrenaline coursing through me that I can barely feel my injuries.

The twins' brother has come back from the dead. We've been involved with the murder of the clinic's leader.

When James finds out, we're screwed.

That is, unless we can screw him over first.

“I’m okay,” I reply. “Well, I’m in shock. I think. But I’m alive.”

“What do you have to say?” Peter squeezes Peto’s neck.

“I’m sorry for shocking you, Wendy.” Peto’s gaze darts to my face and then away. “I meant to protect you. You can forget about me again, if you want. If it makes you feel better. You don’t need to let me into Never Hall. I’m used to camping outside on Wild Island. I can live there alone.”

How long has he been living on the island?

Yet he says it like it’s the best that he can hope for.

Peter looks as troubled as I am.

“Why wouldn’t we let you into the manor?” I ask.

Peto cocks his head, and his blood-stained hair falls over his face. “I don’t live in the house. Are you saying that it’s different here? Even if I fuck up? You won’t chain me up?”

His gaze slides to Peter’s like he’s waiting for his confirmation. He’s definitely accepted that the professor’s in charge.

I don’t know how I feel.

What’s truly happened to Peto? Why did James lie about him drowning? Why was he sent away from Never?

And where has he been since?

Apparently, some kind of hellhole, where he’s forced to live outside in the garden, when he screws up.

“We need to talk about a lot of things,” Peter says, grimly, obviously thinking the same as me, “but what happens to you, depends on whether you decide to become a Lost Boy of Never now.”

Peto’s brow furrows. “How can I? My brothers won’t want me. Not when I left them.”

“Did you want to?”

He shakes his head, violently.

“Then I promise that they will.”

Hell, I can't even imagine Shadow's expression. When he told me about losing Peto, he'd been wrecked.

Excitement wells inside me about the chance to give the twins their brother back.

Okay, so their brother is murderous and delusional. But that won't matter to the twins. I don't think that it matters to me anymore.

On Never, we've redefined the meaning of normal anyway.

"You flew back to Never, didn't you? You took back your choice?" Peter challenges.

"I didn't fly," Peto corrects. "I risked coming by boat. The smugglers who once lived here had many hidden coves. Fyfe and his husband knew about some of them."

"Fyfe, the pilot?" I demand.

He blinks. "Pilot, sadist, assassin. He's part of the framework who run this operation on the outside. Dad gave me to him to be trained, but he's dead now. I mean, I killed him. So, he's more Fyfe, the RIP."

I find myself grinning with a fierce delight that the bastard who pretended all Scots charm to me, while at the same time treating Peto like an animal and chaining him up outside, is now dead.

Peter chuckles. "I like you, black humor boy. Look, you're here with us now and that means you're one of the Lost Boys. You're not alone, do you understand? So, no more camping outside or lone missions. You'll never be chained again, understand? We're going to take on the Director together and we're going to fucking win together. There's four of us..."

"Five," I say, pointedly.

"*Five*, and the Director is wrong if he thinks that all of us are too conditioned to fight back."

I jolt. "Wait, is your dad on this hit list?"

Peto's expression shutters. "I looked in Shadow's window at night too. I've seen what Father does to him...and to Pan."

Father is top of my list.”

“Hey, I get it.” Peter drops his hand from the triplet’s neck finally and rests it around his shoulder. “If you follow through, however, then everyone on this island dies. So, we need him alive. We can’t all row away on a boat to the mainland like you can. But I think that we can still mete out some poetic justice.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “We can force him to keep acting as the puppet Director, which would serve him right, after the way that he’s made the rest of us act like his toys.”

“We can’t force him. He’s a hard man. He has those rules about never screaming, crying, or escaping because he believes them, even for himself.” Peter’s smile is slow and dangerous. “But I have a plan that I’ve been working on for a while.”

My eyes light up. “I knew that you had.”

“We’ve all had to act our parts, which has torn me apart. I needed access to him, however, during private staff meetings because he believed that I was his loyal professor. The Doctor and Director both thought that I was pretty but dumb and easily handled because of that. *But I’m not*. I’ve been learning Kyden’s mind tricks, ever since I first realized what he was doing to the twins, during Island Therapy. Then I started to subtly condition the Director myself.”

“You’ve been hypnotizing the Director,” I whisper.

It *is* fucking poetic.

“I had to be careful. Kyden would recognize anything too blatant. But it laid the groundwork for whenever I’d get the opportunity to follow through. I made him more suggestible. If he worked out that anything was going on, then he could raise the alarm, which would have meant we’d all have burned. Now’s my chance to try properly and with no Kyden to stop me.”

I reach forward, taking both of the Peters’ hands in mine: the original and the new.

We stand, looking at each other, as hope soars through me.

I stroke over the skull tattoo on the back of Peto's hand: death, beauty, and hope.

At last, finally, *fucking hope*.

I grin, and my eyes blaze. "Let's go back to Never Hall and treat James to a taste of his own foul medicine. I hope that he chokes on it. Today, we free Never."

Chapter Twenty-Two



There is a saying in the Neverland that, every time you breathe, a grown up dies.

Never Hall, Never

Once, Peter warned me not to listen at the doors in Never Hall.

Yet there have been too many dark secrets and mysteries hidden here for too long.

Finally, everything has been dragged into the light.

Standing in the shadowy, musty corridor outside the kitchen in Never Hall, I press my ear to the door.

My heart thumps with anxious excitement.

I can hear Peter's muffled voice, along with Mom's sobs.

Peter's been in there with James and Mom for at least an hour now.

Is Peter's hypnosis working?

Peter told me to wait out here, however, until he calls for me.

I glance at the triplets who are on the opposite side of the narrow corridor.

When I first arrived at Never Hall with Peto, Pan went bone white and Shadow's knees buckled at seeing their dead brother brought to life.

Now, Shadow is curled up on the floor with Peto. He's allowing Peto to touch him in the same way the he does Pan. In fact, he hasn't allowed him to move away even for a moment, clinging to him like he thinks that he'll vanish again, if he does.

Peto appears uneasy and confused by the attention. When Shadow first tried to untangle his triplet's crimson matted hair, he dodged.

"I'm dirty," Peto protested. "You shouldn't touch me, when I'm not clean. Do you want me to go and use the hose outside to wash off?"

Shadow's expression gentled. "You can shower later, inside with hot water, but you're not dirty. You're perfect. You've no idea how much I've missed you, bro. Now, you're home again."

Pan paces up and down the corridor. His arms are firmly crossed.

He glances at Peto warily.

He keeps clenching his hands, as if he's desperate to drag Shadow away and into his arms and is only just restraining himself.

I notice that he's keeping himself angled between Peto and me, creating a shield.

I don't blame him.

This is a shock.

And Peto is a killer.

But then, Hook would be too. I'm sure that Pan realizes it.

Peto's cold gaze snaps to mine. "Is the false Peter okay in there, Wendy?"

I nod. "I can't say the same for our parents but hey, karma's a bitch."

“There’s nothing *false* about Peter, so show him some fucking respect.” Pan looks like he’s struggling with himself. “And her name isn’t Wendy. It’s Angela — or our Darling.”

“Pan,” Shadow protests, “he’s been away...”

“Yeah, he has, hasn’t he?”

I hate to hear Pan’s anguish.

I understand it. He feels that Peto abandoned him, possibly lied to him.

Peto cocks his head, assessing me. “She’s *my* Wendy.”

Warmth unfurls through me at the way that he says *my Wendy*.

Pan takes a step in front of me. “Hook wants you to know that he doesn’t like that. He doesn’t like that you also wear a bloodied knife in your boot and are so close to Shadow, pretending that you’re a lamb and not a wolf. And we both particularly don’t fucking like that you’ve murdered...how many people?”

Peto untangles himself from Shadow’s hold, slinking to his feet.

Instantly, he looks threatening.

I was never frightened of Hook, whose savagery is always protective. He makes me want to become his willing prey.

Peto’s vibes, however, are of a beaten wild cat who has turned on its trainer. And he has sharp claws.

Pan appears to realize it at the same moment, taking a step back.

“I didn’t keep track of my kills.” Peto prowls closer, circling Pan.

Pan shivers. “What happened to you, bro?”

“I grew up.”

“Hook should like him,” I insist, as my pulse races. These are powerful but damaged men, and we need to be united to take over Never. “He killed my brother to protect me. He

murdered Tink for Shadow and you. He came back for you as well. Everything that he's done has been out of love for family."

Pan growls, snatching Peto by the collar and slamming him into the wall. "Was leaving us out of love? Abandoning us alone with Dad on Never? Have you had a fucking amazing time out in the big world, while we were trapped?"

"Stop it." Shadow rocks, holding his hands over his ears.

I rush across the corridor to drop by Shadow's side, throwing my arms around him.

He melts against me, watching his brothers with large eyes.

"I didn't leave." Peto sprawls against the wall casually, and I realize that he's allowing Pan to pin him there. He could break out of the hold at any moment, if he wanted to. "I was drugged and sent away. Never was paradise for me because I was with my brothers. The mainland was hell. I was alone. It felt like I'd died. But I understand, if you want me to leave."

Pan's expression crumples.

He drags Peto closer to him, until their foreheads are touching. "Don't you fucking dare go anywhere ever again."

"Okay."

Pan takes a long breath to steady himself "Why were you sent away in the first place? Dad told us that you'd drowned. It broke Shadow and me too."

"Dad didn't let us cry, after the first day," Shadow whispers. "Then Mum left us too."

Peto stiffens. "She cried for you as well all the time. There was always this weeping and missing you and blaming *me* that she'd had to leave Never."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Pan is ashen.

Shadow's shaking.

This is tearing the triplets apart, only they need to know this. It's two parts of a story, which James has kept hidden

from all three of them.

“They told me that I was too *obsessed* with you.” Peto’s gaze flicks to Shadow and then away, as if even to look at his brother is forbidden. “That we were speaking to each other in a code, which no one could understand, and that as the strongest triplet, Dad had decided it was my fault. So, he planned to break it...*us*...by sending me away from Never. Mum found out what he’d done and how he’d lied about my death. She was horrified. So, she left him. She discovered where I was being kept by Fyfe and moved in. When I became older, I was told that Dad wanted a son to help run Never on the outside and also act as an assassin for the elites. I’m not the same as you anymore. I couldn’t be in order to survive. Yet I’ve been dreaming of when I could slip my leash and get back here. I’ve been terrified of what was happening, while I couldn’t protect you. I’m sorry that I fucked up looking out for you.”

Shit, there isn’t a part of what he just told us, which isn’t screwed-up.

My chest is tight.

Shadow slips out of my hold and stumbles to his feet. “Don’t you dare say sorry.”

He dives across the corridor, throwing his arms around Pan and Peto, knocking them both into the wall.

“Hey,” Pan protests.

There’s laughter in his voice, but I can hear the tears that he’s trying to mask.

“Do you always hug this much?” Peto asks, sounding bewildered.

“Only when our long lost triplet brother comes back from the dead,” Pan says, dryly.

“Can I join in?” I ask, standing and dusting myself off.

Pan winks. “Always, darling.”

My heart soars. I need this so fucking much right now.

After everything that's already happened this morning, I need to feel that I'm part of this deadly, beautiful found family.

When Pan turns and grasps my arms with equal desperate need, dragging me into the center of these three identical men, who are unique in their own ways, they encircle me.

I feel safe, surrounded by their darkness.

At the same time, I know that I'm the one who's saved them.

Once, I feared my own darkness and scars.

Now, I've found a home for them.

"You're all mine," I murmur, and Peto's eyes widen with hope. "Angela, Darling, or Wendy. I'm yours too."

Pan cups my face, before his mouth collides with mine, and Shadow wraps his arm around my middle.

"Is this allowed?" Peto asks, brushing his lips against my ear.

I nod, lost in a haze of passion and joy.

This is my home. These are my men.

Peto presses a single kiss to the sensitive skin behind my ear, and I shiver.

Suddenly, the kitchen door wrenches open with a creak, and Peter stands leaning in the doorway like the devil who'd tempt you to give up heaven.

He's thrown off his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves to reveal his strong, tanned forearms. He's flushed and triumphant.

He smirks. "I should have known that if I left you out here with three pretty boys, you'd be kissing them, beautiful."

Pan breaks off kissing me to chuckle.

"*They're kissing me,*" I splutter.

"Of course they are; they're only human. Now," Peter's expression becomes stern and professional, "I've prepared the Director. He's deep in a trance. The question is whether you

want to talk to him, before I lay the final groundwork for our revolution.”

Pan’s expression becomes hard. “Why would we?”

“Closure,” I suggest. “To find out the truth.”

“It’s Peto’s call.” Peter studies Peto closely. “I warn you, the asshole will probably only spit poison. Don’t expect weeping, apologies, and hugs.”

Peto snorts. “I won’t. I don’t need them but I want to look him in the eye and make sure that he knows I’m back in Never. He’s going to understand that he didn’t get rid of me and he won’t be able to throw me out, when he feels like it. He’s never going to hurt my brothers again or my Wendy.”

Shadow reaches and takes hold of his hand, firmly. “No one’s going to hurt *you* either. This looking out for each other goes both ways, you know.”

Peto arches his brow. “How many different types of weapon can you fire? Do you know any martial arts?”

I smother my grin.

Shadow tilts up his chin, defiantly. “You can help people other ways than fighting. My coffees have saved lives alone. You’ll see, when I make one for you tomorrow morning.”

That’s fair.

Peter’s expression turns serious. “Come on, it’s time to create our new Never.” Then my stomach swoops, when his gaze darts to mine. “Your mom has been screaming for you, and it’s given me a hell of a headache, so you’d best deal with her first.”

I swallow, nodding.

Peter turns on his heel and disappears back into the kitchen.

The triplets prowl in front of me, holding hands.

They’re sinfully beautiful. Dangerous. Wild.

And they’re mine.

I follow them into the kitchen. Then I stop short at the scene in front of me in shock.

The grand kitchen has high vaulted and beamed ceilings. The morning sunlight is streaming through the mullion windows over the oak table in the center of the room and James, who's been tied to the table by the same leather straps that I've so often witnessed being used against the Never Brothers.

James' eyes are glazed, and he appears to be in a trance.

His mouth is hanging open, and he's drooling.

I take a stumbling step forward, expecting him to turn his head and yell at me.

When he doesn't, it's liberating.

It's like the world has cracked open and now, anything is possible.

I laugh.

How the fucking mighty are fallen.

It's incredible to be in a room with James and not feel that his glowering presence is dominating it.

Not to feel my heart race, waiting for what he's going to do next.

Not to tremble, waiting for his next backhand.

In the silence, the only sound is the steady *tick-tock* of the grandfather clock.

Peto stares transfixed at James. "He looks smaller than I remember."

Emotion wells through me.

Then a whimper from the back of the room snatches my attention. It's coming from beside the Belfast sink.

The triplets surround James on the table, while I warily approach the whimpering.

I crouch down and peer in shock at Mom, who's doing her best to hide beneath the sink. Her silk dress is ripped, and her

hands are bound by straps. Her hair is hanging messily around her face, falling out of her bun, and her mascara has run down her cheeks.

It pulls at something deep inside me, and I hate it. I catch her hands between mine in comfort.

I steel myself.

I need to be strong.

“Gela!” Victoria pushes herself up onto her knees. “Why did it take you so long to get here? Look at this — the crazy freak has tied us both up and probably is doing some kind of occult ceremony or something. What if you’re next, love? Please, help me.”

“Help?” My expression hardens, and I drop her hands. “Will that be *help* like the time I begged you for help, after I’d been hit and locked in my room? Or *help* like the times the twins came to you, but you accused them of lying about the abuse? Or *help* like the times I begged you to protect me from my brother, but you chose to believe him over me?”

She blushes, looking away. “You know that I’m sorry about your brother.”

“But not the rest of it.”

“I’ve been trying to do what’s best for us. This was meant to be a new family and life for our whole family. It’s easy for you to judge, but how do you think it was for me, having kids like Kyden and you?”

I hiss in a shocked breath, and behind me, Peter is holding Peto back from launching himself at Victoria.

I’m pretty sure that she just made his hit list.

But it’s okay. I feel clearheaded now.

I’ve got my closure.

I stand up, feeling lighter than I ever have.

Freer.

When I stand up, Mom's eyes widen with panic. "Don't you dare leave, Gela."

"I'm not." I turn away from her and move to Pan's side.

The relief, when his fingers brush mine, is electric.

Then I glance at the kitchen table behind him and I remember all the times that we've sat there, while our parents have berated us, being forced to hide our relationship.

Even now, we're hiding it.

I played the good girl to his bad boy.

I remember the Sunday lunch, when Pan's hand suddenly touched my inner thigh under the table, during one of his dad's lectures.

When I flushed and gasped, Peter smirked. "Do you need some water, Angela? I wouldn't want you to choke on... anything."

I hit him with my napkin.

Then on the other side of me, Shadow's hand rested on my right thigh, while he continued to listen to James like nothing was happening.

"You're flushed," Peter commented. "You could be going down with the flu."

Jerk.

He was enjoying this so much, I thought that he must have planned it.

I was caught between the twins on both sides, as they inched up my skirt. Then as Shadow held it there, while Pan fingered me to an earth shattering orgasm that I covered by knocking over my water.

Now, however, I don't want to hide my love.

I want everyone to know that these men are mine.

When I glance up, and Pan grips onto my hand more tightly, I know that he has the same idea.

I nod.

Then his lips press to mine.

I lose myself in the kiss.

He smells invitingly masculine: I love the scent of leather.

Then I feel Shadow's hand enclose mine, Peto's light touch on the hollow of my back, and Peter's firm grasp in my hair, as he directs me to deepen the kiss.

I sigh with satisfaction at Mom's gasp behind me.

Peter loosens his hold on me, and reluctantly, I pull out of the kiss but not my guys' arms.

I turn to look at Victoria. "We're together and we're in love. So, you wanted me to find a new family here. I have."

Victoria stares at me. "I knew that the doctors said you had issues but this...? Your own stepbrothers...? And who's this third one? What's going on?"

My eyes prick with tears, but I don't let them fall.

I'm fighting for this.

I won't let her ruin it.

"They're not my biological brothers. We weren't raised together. We only met as adults, when I arrived in Never this summer. And yeah, I have issues, but it's not because I love the men who support me. I was traumatized, and you abandoned me. I only realize now what love means because of the Never brothers. They accept me — all of me. I didn't think anyone would. You won't make me feel bad about that, even for one fucking moment. They're the reason that this island has any joy, and you let them suffer. After today, I don't want a thing to do with you."

I'm breathing too fast, but the firm touch of my lovers grounds me.

I'm surrounded by their love. I can feel it.

"Then let me go." Victoria's voice wavers. "Call Fyfe. He can fly me off Never."

Peto's lips quirk. "That won't be possible."

“You can stay on Never, along with your husband.” Peter’s eyes flash. “Isn’t that what you wanted? To be with him? You don’t get to leave because we don’t. You’ll stay within Never Hall and the gardens, however, and never go beyond them. You’re not going to call for help or give away our secrets because we can end your comfortable life here just as easily. You do understand what I’m saying? And only Angela decides if she wants any contact with you. She’s in control, do you understand?”

Victoria sobs but nods.

Peter strides to the table, glaring down at James.

“Time to wake the Director.” He glances at Peto. “Are you sure that you’re okay with this?”

Peto stalks to the table, hopping onto the bench and then leaping onto the table in a fluid move that takes away my breath.

Shadow whistles. “Can you teach me that? It’d look amazing in a dance routine.”

Peto looks surprised and then pleased. “Yes. I can also teach you how to assassinate a high profile target in a way that will also frame your enemy.”

Hurriedly, Pan shakes his head. “Let’s just stick to the nonlethal stuff, right?”

Peto shrugs. Then he cocks his head, studying his dad.

“Definitely smaller,” he mutters.

Peter claps in front of James’ face.

James jerks, before his eyes focus. Then he stares at Peter, before he starts to struggle.

After a moment he forces himself to be calm and still. His breathing is ragged, and his teeth are clenched.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” James demands. His voice sounds raspy. “You know that you’ll have to let me out of here. When you do, I’ll have you disciplined for the rest of your bloody life. You’ll lose your privileges as a

professor and become a student again. When that happens, how you act now will decide whether it's one on permanent punishment chores. This is clearly a psychotic break. The pressure of your professor role is too much for you. Perhaps, Dr. Croc will have some good ideas about how to cure you."

"I doubt it," Peter replies, resting his hands on his hips, "since he's dead."

Victoria lets out a low keen.

I listen to her sobbing.

Would she have cried for me like that, if I'd died five years ago?

I don't know.

Shadow squeezes my hand. His smile is understanding.

James narrows his eyes. "Explain yourself."

"How about *I* do, since I'm the one who killed him." Peto stands over his dad with his hands stuck casually in his pockets.

James startles, as he twists his neck to look up at Peto. "What in the hell are you doing here, boy? Does Fyfe know that you've flown away? He's going to crucify you. You'll be chained up in that bloody kennel, which he keeps you in when you're bad, for a year. Do you want that?"

I wish that Fyfe was still alive so that I could kick his ass myself.

Peto shakes his head.

James' expression sharpens. "See, you've all let this get out of hand. Pan...Shadow...I don't know what your brother has incited in you, but you're fools if you listen to a lying word from his delusional mouth. Peto has always been dangerous. It's why I had to keep you safe by—"

"Lying to us that he'd drowned in the lake?" Pan says, low and dark.

Does James hear the danger in Pan's voice now?

He should.

He appears to because he hesitates.

When James speaks again, he suddenly doesn't sound so confident. "I only acted to protect you. You were becoming codependent. It was unhealthy. It's why I put him in his own room at night, but still, he used to wail and bang on the wall. Shadow would rock and spin, if you weren't together all the time. It's why it was recommended to me by the therapists that Shadow have time in isolation to get used to being alone."

"We were triplets," Pan bursts out, marching to the table. "You kept us alone in this hall with no other kids and only a single tutor who beat us. We didn't know any different but since we've grown older and been able to speak to Peter, other Lost Boys, and our Darling, I've come to see how fucked-up that was. So, of course we were close and clung to each other for support and affection. You shouldn't have made us feel wrong or bad for that."

Peto kicks James in the ribs, and James grunts with pain. "And you shouldn't have separated us."

Shadow tugs me by the hand to stand next to the table. "Can we do this now? Free ourselves."

Peter's brow arches. "That's one order that I will obey."

"What do you mean *free*?" James sneers.

"Tink and Kyden are dead," Peter replies. "The Lost Boys and most of the staff are loyal to me. You can't run the clinic without me. So, I'm giving you one chance to make me officially the leader of Never Clinic and let me run it the way that I want."

"Do you really think that you can tie me down and threaten me and then get promoted?" James demands. "That's not how discipline and rewards work. Without me, you'll starve and die. They'll be no deliveries of basics like medicine. Worse, powerful men (who Peto knows all about), will bomb this place and burn it to the ground."

Peter looks delighted. "So, that's a no. You can't say that I didn't give you the chance to do this willingly, which is more

than you ever gave your sons. But you have no idea, asshole, how happy it makes me to turn you into a puppet.”

James’ eyes widen in alarm. “What...?”

My heart’s hammering in my chest. This is finally happening.

I watch in fascination.

Is this going to work?

If it doesn’t, then we’re dead.

I bite my lip.

It better work.

Please...

Peter claps his hands together again. “Sleep.”

James’ eyes close, and he slumps against the table.

Pan’s face lights with excitement. Shadow shifts closer to me, and our hips touch.

Peto crouches, watching with a cold intensity.

My pulse roars in my ears, as Peter leans closer to James.

“You’re on the island.” Peter’s voice is soft, but his eyes are hard. “You can see the roses around the skulls in the cemetery and the emerald butterflies flitting between them. You’re feeling happy and relaxed. Wouldn’t this be the perfect place to retire to?”

James smiles, nodding.

Fuck, this is working.

My shoulders are stiff. I hold my breath.

“That’s good.” Peter glances up at me and gives me a secret smile, which makes me flush. “You’re too tired to work anymore. All you want is to relax. You never want to step into Never Clinic or beyond the gray wall again. You’re going to leave the running of the island to your four sons. It’s time that they took over the business for you and let you retire, right?”

For a moment, James looks confused, and my breath stutters.

Is this going to work?

Then he nods again.

“You’re not interested in how it’s run. You’re only going to check in with outsiders, when you have to. You’re not going to tell anyone about your sons running Never because that’s a secret. It’s their island now. They’re in charge. They’re going to live in Peter’s cottage, and you’re going to stay in Never Hall. And it’s all *your* idea because you’ve been planning on your retirement for years. It’ll make you so happy, just like this feeling that you have right now on the beautiful island. Relaxed and happy. You’re proud that your sons can take over your legacy.”

“I’m proud,” James mouths. “My sons are running Never.”

“Deep sleep now,” Peter orders.

Excitement wells through me, along with joy.

Shadow laughs, twirling me around.

“We did it!” I smile, wider than I ever have before. “We beat the fucking asshole. This is forever our Never.”

Peter smiles too. “And you’re forever our Darling.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



*Just think of happy things and your heart will fly on wings,
forever, in Never Never Land!*

Wendy's House, Never

O ne year later...

“WHEN WILL PETER MAKE ME A PROFESSOR LIKE YOU?” PETO pushes the black leather couch to the side of the lounge like it weighs nothing. “He should. I can impress him with how well I teach you. Plus, I haven’t threatened any of the Lost Boys with my knife in at least a month.”

The shoulders in Peto’s strong arms bulge, making the skull tattoos, which wind up them, appear to come alive. There are three skulls, one for each triplet, and they each wear a crown.

He’s stripped down to only his tight pants, ready for my first self-defense lesson.

I rock on my heels in excitement, rubbing my hands down my loose sweatpants. “Well, a week.”

Peto glances over his shoulder at me, before checking that he’s cleared a large enough space in the center of the lounge.

“Curly doesn’t count.”

“Fair.”

This is my home now.

Once, it was called Peter’s Cottage, but we haven’t thought of it like that for a long time.

Instead, we renamed it **WENDY’S HOUSE**.

Pan found a piece of weathered wood from Wild Island and burned the words onto it, which we hung in a ceremony together in front of our green door.

That was when our relationship felt truly real because I had my first home with my lovers.

Over the last year, despite how hard we work to run the clinic, I’ve never been so fulfilled.

Peter’s an even better clinic Director than I could have imagined. He’s kind, inspirational, and organized.

He’s strict, which isn’t a surprise, but all the cruel and outdated therapies and punishments are banned.

Some weeks, we barely see Peter because he’s so immersed in making sure that students and staff alike are cared for, but I admire that about him. When he is with us, however, he makes sure that our needs are met.

He’s our Sir, and I’m proud of it.

I’m Never’s new music professor.

Pan laughed, when Peter first suggested that I take up the post. “So, I was right about you, darling. You did fly out here to become a music professor.”

Weirdly, he’s right.

It feels like it was fated, if I believed in that bullshit.

I don’t, even though the Never triplets feel like my soulmates.

Moonlight streams through the windows over the lounge. The ceilings of the cottage are low with timber beams. The floors are oak like the large desk that stands against the wall,

which Peter works at in quiet evenings. There's a vase of roses on it because Pan has been cutting them for me every day.

Pan loves having our own garden and being in charge of it. Even after a year, he goes in for grand romantic gestures.

Yet it's the small things, like the run that I take around this island of ours every morning with Pan, which I adore most.

The lounge walls are painted a deep blue like the sea. My lips quirk at the memory of the long weeks it took us to redecorate the cottage because Peter wanted it be to a fresh start for us all.

Hell, we sucked at decorating.

It'd been carnage.

On the other hand, sex in spilled paint is fucking amazing.

When Peto gives the couch a final shove with his foot, and the couch knocks into my small music studio in the corner of the room, making the microphone wobble, I let out a squeak of panic.

Peto's eyes widen. "Sorry. Will you still sing your new song for me like you promised tomorrow?"

"I never break a promise, right? But if you break any of my equipment, then you're the one who has to go to the mainland and replace it."

"Anything you need, just ask."

"Dangerous."

He arches his brow. "I like danger. Anyway, Shadow needs some dance equipment for his lessons. I watched him taking his last class. He's incredible both as a dancer and a teacher. He could become a great fighter with those skills."

If Pan should've been called the seducer, then Peto, I've come to learn, should be called the tempter.

"No convincing Shadow that his true calling is as an assassin, even if his name sounds like one. See, you don't need to take on a professor's role as well, you've already got an essential role here."

Peto stalks toward me, and his obsessive focus settles on me. “Nothing is more essential than you and making sure that you’re safe, my Wendy.”

How does he do that?

Make me feel like the whole world has fallen away, apart from the two of us?

“I’ll show you how to defend yourself, then no one will be able to threaten or intimidate you again. You’ll be capable of defending yourself.” Peto gives a cold smile. “Eventually, I can teach you how to break their kneecaps or slit their throats.”

I choke on my tongue. “Let’s just focus on the basic self-defense to start with.”

He shrugs. “You’re in charge.”

He darts around me, snatching up the sheepskin rug that’s in front of the fireplace and dropping it behind me.

Something feels wrong.

What’s he doing?

His lips quirk. “First lesson: Trust your instincts.”

Then I shout, as he sweeps my legs out from underneath me, catching me in his arms, as we both tumble together onto the rug.

So, that’s why he moved the rug.

He laughs, but I scowl at him.

My heart is beating fast, and my chest is rising and falling rapidly.

Peto’s tangled his legs over mine to hold me down.

“Why’s Pan not here, getting his ass kicked as well?” I protest.

Peto’s expression shutters.

He’s hiding something.

What?

“He’s too lazy.” Peto’s curls are slicked back, and his eyes are smoky. I study his gorgeous face, but even after a year, I can’t read him. I do know that he’s lying about something. “He’s probably sleeping, curled up like a cat with Shadow upstairs. I saw him sleeping in his lesson on the farm yesterday. Are professors meant to do that?”

I narrow my eyes.

So, Pan and Shadow are planning something upstairs.

Pan and Hook will be behind it, which will mean that it’s worth the wait.

I’m not going to discourage that type of scheming.

I smile. “Hey, the farm’s never looked so good, and I overheard some of the Lost Boys saying that their lessons with Pan are their favorite. If you’d ever worked on the farm with Tink, then you’d understand why Pan gets a pass on sleeping in the sun.”

“My brothers have become amazing men.” Peto’s expression becomes vulnerable for a moment. “I spent so many years terrified of what was happening to them because I wasn’t here for them. But they survived. They stand tall by themselves. I’m proud.”

And this is possibly why I fell for Peto.

His loyalty and devotion for his brothers, shown in a hundred small gestures every day, from finding out Shadow’s routines and making sure that he doesn’t interrupt them, to supporting Pan through his night terrors, make him easy to love.

“Perhaps,” I say, softly, “tell them that someday, huh?”

Peto strokes the back of his fingers down my cheek, before tracing them over my lips.

Then he presses his mouth against mine, and like it always is, it’s like touching an imploding star.

It’s deadly and beautiful at the same time.

I lose myself in the intense sensation, and I never want him to draw away from me.

When finally he does, I'm flushed.

Yet in one fluid, panther-like movement, he pulls himself into a crouch and then leaps to his feet. He holds his hand out to me, and I take it.

He hauls me to my feet. "Second lesson, it's all about confidence. Predators prey on the weak. So, don't be weak."

He pushes my shoulders back and tilts up my head.

Instantly, I feel stronger. "Like this...?"

"You're Wendy," he says, simply. "Never is yours. *We're* yours. Move like it."

My breath catches.

To him that's so simple. Yet that these four men (five, including Hook), have made themselves mine, when I thought that no one would ever want me, is enough to make happy tears burn my eyes.

I clench my jaw, lifting my chin even higher.

I'm proud of what we've achieved in Never, this new world.

I intend to show it.

Peto's eyes flash. "Just like that. We all have a villain side in us. Find that part and use it. Lesson three, the element of—"

I knee him in the balls.

His eyes widen, before he drops to his knees, cradling his crotch.

"...surprise," he groans.

I bounce up and down, as adrenaline surges through me.

I did it! I beat a trained killer.

"Did I pass the class? I mean, was that right? Peter told me that it'd impress you."

Peto huffs a laugh. “Peter, right. I’m looking forward to our *friendly* MMA match at the weekend. They’re the highlight of my month to show Peter just how much I *appreciate* him showing you that move. But, Wendy, you made me proud. Perhaps, you’re the one who I should train as my apprentice.”

He jumps to his feet with a feral grin, prowling toward me.

My eyes widen. “Wait, I’m more into music than murder.”

Peto smirks. “My balls say different.”

“What if I promise to kiss them better?”

“Acceptable. But since we’re sweaty, why don’t we take a bath together first?”

When he takes my arm and leads me toward the stairs, I peer at him, suspicious.

“I knew it. Pan’s got something planned up there, hasn’t he?” I say. “This whole class has been a distraction to keep me busy. You three have been plotting against me.”

Peto doesn’t even try to deny it. “We’re triplets. Plotting together is what we do.”

His smile is dangerous.

I should be scared. I sort of am.

But I love it.

I love them.

Peto and I clatter up the narrow stairs into the upstairs corridor, which is painted in forest greens and filled with wooden statues, which Pan loves to carve.

At the bottom of the corridor, the doors to one of the two bathrooms lies open. I can see steam curling out of it in clouds.

The cottage has two bathrooms, which feels like heaven after Never Hall, even if it’s still a nightmare some days to share with so many guys (especially, when one of them is Shadow who takes as long as I do to get ready).

Peter insisted on the fluffiest towels as well.

He had a ceremonial burning of *Never's 100 Rules and Guide to Demerits* in the clinic's yard. Then the Lost boys had celebrated with a grand barbecue and dance under the stars.

It'd been fucking incredible.

Now, we can have as many towels as we want.

Sometimes, I even treat myself and use three.

I tug Peto to a halt. "What's going on?"

"We're going to have a bath." Peto's golden gaze is devilish. "My brothers and I are going to show you why you're the only woman we'll ever love."

Wait, did he just say *love*?

He tightens his arm around me, yanking me on. Peto isn't one for gentleness, but I don't need that from him.

He's never said *love* before.

It's hard for him. He was rejected as a kid and isolated.

His Mom mourned what she'd lost, rather than concentrated on what she had, and now, has run once again. I don't know where she is, and as much as it hurts the triplets, I'm supporting them in not looking for her.

They have the memory of her to cling to, finding her will only lead to a reality that breaks their hearts.

Alone, Peto was trained and treated like an animal who could be beaten and chained outside, when he didn't perform to an impossible standard. He was pushed to accept pain as inevitable.

He accepted that he didn't deserve to love or be loved.

Now, he admires strength, and I try to show him that. But also, that he has as much right to be loved as anyone else.

As possessive and protective as he is, he's never said *love* out loud before.

Perhaps, he thinks that this dream will vanish, if he does.

He's stiff; I can feel the tension in his arm.

"I'm looking forward to it," I say. "Because then I can show those men that they're the only ones who I'll ever love as well."

Peto glances sharply down at me.

When our gazes meet, it's electric.

He lets out a relieved breath. "I want to fuck you tonight."

I give a delicious shiver. "I'm so down with that."

Peto's smile widens, before he drags me on faster, until we're running and laughing.

We burst into the bathroom. Then we come to a stumbling stop.

I stare around myself in shock.

The bathroom has been transformed. It looks like a romantic, luxury bathroom in a honeymoon suite.

The large Victorian bath in the middle of the marble bathroom is filled with hot water and scented oils. My nose wrinkles at the aroma of intoxicating rose and vanilla.

The floor is a carpet of rose petals, and the room is dotted with crimson candles. Their flames are the only light, which illuminate the room in a golden, soft glow.

The flames no longer scare me.

Pan kneels by the bath in nothing but tight black jeans. He looks like sin incarnate. He's trailing his hand through the water and sprinkling a final handful of petals into the water.

He looks up through hooded eyes, as Peto and I enter.

"Would you like us to wash you, darling?" Pan draws.

He sits back on his haunches like he doesn't know that showering or bathing with one of my guys isn't my favorite part of any day.

"Since you've gone to so much effort to spoil me," I say, offering him a smile, "and to trick me..."

“Trick you?” Pan tries for mock offended but doesn’t pull off the innocent act. I know him too well by now. “I call it romantic planning.”

“Uh-huh, or is it kinky planning?”

“That too.”

I twist to Peto. “Can I undress you first? I made you a promise about kisses, and I don’t break my promises, remember?”

I glance down at his crotch.

Pink tints his cheeks, but he nods.

I drop to my knees amongst the petals. I look up at Peto to check in for a final time, before I touch his boots.

Peto’s knife, which is in his boots, is more intimate to him than his dick. That he’ll allow me to take off his boots means more than a BJ or any words that we could say.

He holds my gaze with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine, before he nods.

I place my hands reverentially on his right boot that holds his knife, before easing it off and setting it aside. His heart is beating fast. Then I remove his left boot.

Pan is watching us with a protective closeness, which I know now is for both of us.

I love Pan for that.

I shuffle nearer to Peto, reaching up to undo his trousers, easing them down to his knees. He reaches out, stroking his fingers through my hair. He’s always had a fascination with my hair but rarely indulges in touch.

He’s half-hard already.

I lean closer, slowly.

Deliberately, I build up the anticipation. I puff air across his balls, before licking across them.

Then I kiss them — worshipfully.

Above me, I hear Peto gasp.

Encouraged, I suck on his balls, and he groans.

His hand tightens in my hair, and I suck one ball into my mouth and then move to the other one. I tease him a little longer, before pulling back.

Peto's eyes are glassy, and his dick is fully hard now.

“Why don't you get in the bath first, bro? We need to make sure that our Darling is properly clean.” Pan's gaze is dark.

I glance around at him. “And that's going to take three of you?”

“Definitely.”

Peto kicks off his trousers and prowls to the bath. He steps into the water. He groans and settles in, resting his arms over the side.

“Thank you,” he mutters. “I love these hot baths.”

Pan stiffens.

Even after a year, it still breaks my heart to be reminded that hot water means so much to Peto.

“You don't need to thank me for hot water, remember?” Pan says, brushing his hand against Peto's.

Peto shrugs.

Then Pan's expression brightens. “There you are, pet.”

I twist to the doorway, and my mouth dries.

Shadow is standing in the doorway with his hands held behind him. He's standing proudly naked, which Pan and I have worked hard to train into him — to feel and believe, not only as a position.

It's hard for Shadow to be comfortable in his own skin and to know that he's enough, just as he is. No one is judging him on his scars, needs, or past.

Nothing is expected of him, nothing more than he's prepared to give.

The power is always in his hands, and it's taken a long time to help him to understand that through our actions.

But gradually, he's getting there.

He trusts us, and that's half the battle.

Shadow's eyes are painted in emerald eyeliner and eyeshadow that looks like butterfly wings. Around his neck is buckled the beautiful butterfly leather collar with golden stitching that's the same color as his eyes.

My collar.

The one that I placed around his neck myself in a ceremony six months ago, while he knelt in front of me.

It was a ceremony, which all my guys attended. It was as special as a marriage.

I'd do anything to protect and care for Shadow.

I smile, and Shadow shyly smiles back.

"Go and undress our Darling," Pan commands.

A year ago, I'd have been awkward with this. I'd have been self-conscious about revealing my scars.

But not anymore.

All of us have our scars here.

Eagerly, Shadow steps forward, meeting my gaze to request permission before his hands touch my purple t-shirt.

I nod. "You bring me so much pleasure by serving me like this."

"It brings me pleasure to serve you," Shadow replies with a smile.

He slips my top over my head. He folds my t-shirt neatly, before dropping it to the floor. Then he slips fluidly to his knees in a way that I wish I could copy and slips off my sweatpants, folding them as well, lovingly.

He leans forward and presses a kiss to each of my feet. When he looks up at me through his eyelashes, my breath hitches.

I drop my hand onto his head, running my fingers through his curls. He melts against me. His shoulders relax.

I stroke my hand down to his neck, scratching harder. “Good boy.”

He shudders, looking up at me with adoration. “Can I be the one to wash you today?”

The triplets are competitive over everything, even who washes me.

“Hey,” Pan protests, splashing the water, “I asked first. Bad boy.”

I laugh. “Don’t, Pan. I’m sure that you can think of something else fun to do with your hands.”

“You’re going to regret that,” Pan growls.

I doubt it.

I stroll to the bath, and Shadow crawls after me with a sinful slink of his hips.

Yeah, not regretting my choice.

Peto holds out his arms to me. “I’m the one who gets to fuck her. I don’t care who washes her.”

Pan smirks, tossing Peto a condom. “I’m always prepared.”

Peto efficiently rolls on the condom, and I slip into the heavenly water, moaning indecently. The water’s oily, and the rose scented steam wreathes around me.

I rest back against Peto, and he tangles his legs around me, holding me in place.

Shadow dips the cloth in the water, before rubbing it over the soap and beginning to soap over the scars on my shoulder, before down to my tits in slow circles.

I attempt to arch up into his touch, but Peto holds me in place.

Tease.

“Mean,” I groan.

“Do you want mean?” Pan drawls. He edges to the other side of the bath to Shadow. “I can do that.”

Pan ducks his head, and his hands clench on the side of the bath for a moment.

I feel Peto's dick nudging at my pussy. He pushes backwards and forwards a few times, until I'm gasping.

Shadow dips the cloth down my stomach and under the water. Then my head slams back onto Peto's shoulder, as Shadow flicks the cloth over my clit.

"Fuck." I entwine my hand with Peto's on the side of the bath. "Please, fucking, please..."

"You want this...?" Peto thrusts into me, and it's perfect.

It's cold, ruthless, and rough.

Then Peto grasps hard onto my hair, and it's overwhelming.

I'm floating.

Lost in the touch of these men who I love.

Who have created this scene in order to make me feel good.

"Harder," I demand. "Fuck me harder."

Pan's hand encircles my neck, and my pupil's dilate. "You should be careful what you wish for, my dear."

"Hook," I murmur, happily.

Pleasure is washing over me in waves. I'm high with it.

Hook kisses me savagely on the mouth, before biting down my wet collarbone. The bright points of pain against the bright points of pleasure are bringing me close to the edge.

"Please, please, please," I don't even know what I'm begging for.

But definitely not for this to stop.

Hook gives a wild smile, before he slips his hand below the water, brushing Shadow's cloth aside. I choke off a cry of ecstasy, as he circles my clit in time with Peto's thrusts into me.

“Pan warned you that he could do *mean*, even to a pretty thing like you,” Hook says. “And could do something fun with his hands.”

“Don’t stop.” I don’t know whether to arch toward Hook’s fingers, Peto’s dick, or Shadow’s cloth that’s now teasing my nipples in a tormenting way that’s making my breath come in desperate gasps. “Just don’t stop.”

Hook touches me even more firmly, and tears at the intensity of the sensations chase down my cheeks. “Remember, in our new Never, there’s no damn rules anymore. You can cry, you can scream our names, and please do try to escape from us, my dear, because we love to hunt and chase you.”

Oh fuck.

I’m going to come...

Then there’s movement by the door, and all of us look up.

Peter is standing in the open doorway.

How long has he been watching us?

He’s dressed in his smart work suit. He looks fucking hot.

I can tell how turned on he is by the way that he’s tenting his pants.

His expression is hungry and dominant. But there’s a softness too, which he usually tries to hide, at the way he’s studying the scene.

And that’s what does it.

What pushes me over the edge.

What makes me come.

I scream, as my back arches. Beneath me, I feel Peto being dragged over the edge as well.

“Wendy,” he gasps, clenching harder onto my hair.

I shiver, as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me.

It’s overwhelming and perfect and like life.

Instantly, all three of my men have their arms around me, stroking my hair and kissing me.

“I’d marry you if I could,” Peter’s passionate, earnest outburst hangs in the air.

The triplets and I look up at him.

He’s staring at us like he’s willing us to believe him.

“Don’t you think we know that?” I reply. “And I’d say yes, by the way.”

Peter breaks into a smile as he strides to join us.

He leans down, kissing me gently. “I guess that I should get a ring then, even if this is an unofficial marriage.”

“*Rings*,” Hook says, pointedly. “Pan is screaming that at me. He may want me to cut off your blasted dick and do something creative with it, if you don’t get them for everybody. I’d like one with a skull on it.”

“So would I,” Peto says, brightly.

“Rings,” Peter corrects himself. “Of course.”

“What’s an official marriage, anyway?” Shadow says, dropping the cloth on the floor and resting his hands in his lap. “They’re just words on a piece of paper that people can break like our parents did.”

“But we have this.” Peto wraps one of his arms around my middle, holding me more firmly against his chest. “We have Never.”

Joy surges through me, along with hope.

“Yeah, we have Never.” I can’t help the smile dancing across my lips.

Sometimes, I feel like I’ll never stop smiling, when once I thought that I’d never smile again.

Shadow reaches up and traces over the leather butterflies at his throat. “I already have my collar. That means more to me than a marriage could.”

“Come here,” I murmur.

Shadow reaches over and presses our foreheads together.
“We’ve promised each other our forevers.”

And we have.

I no longer want to escape.

I flew to Never, and I discovered the men who’ll burn the world down and build it back from the ashes for me.

I’m the Darling of Never now and I’ll never grow up.

But at last, I’m home.

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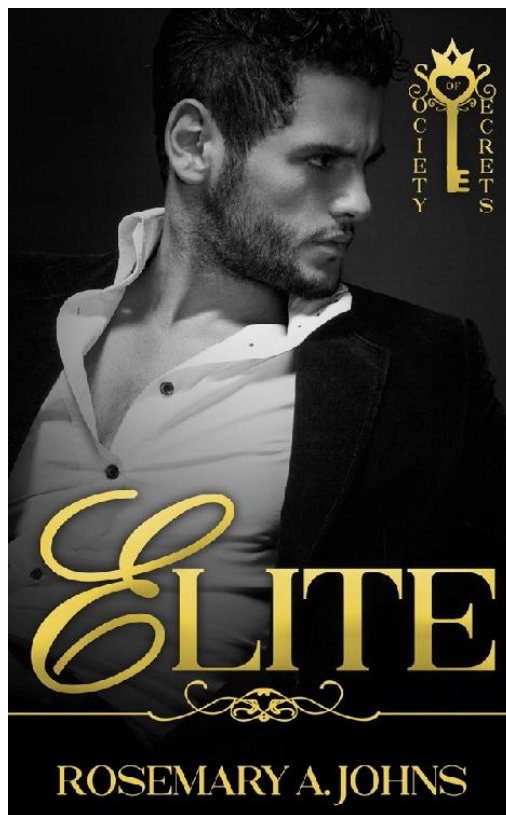
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Elite, Society of Secrets



**Your Next Contemporary Reverse Harem Standalone to
Read: Elite, Society of Secrets!**

A dark contemporary retelling of Alice in Wonderland!

Welcome to the dark and delicious world of the Society of Secrets: the elite's playground but also their grave.

Here, the rich act like gods, and the rest of us watch the glitz and glamor with longing stares. But behind the sinful smiles and wild parties lies a darkness, darker even than my own past.

My name is Riley, and my scholarship to Oxford University is my ticket to a better life. I won't let this chance be torn away by my enemies. But my rivals are the Kings of Oxford — *the Elites*.

Hatter, Rabbit, Knight, and Cat.

They're the powerful empire heirs of a club called Wonderland: An American billionaire, English Duke, and Irish playboy twins.

Arrogant, savage, dangerous.

They're everything a girl shouldn't want. But how can I resist being drawn into their wicked games? They rule this university, and one day, will rule the world.

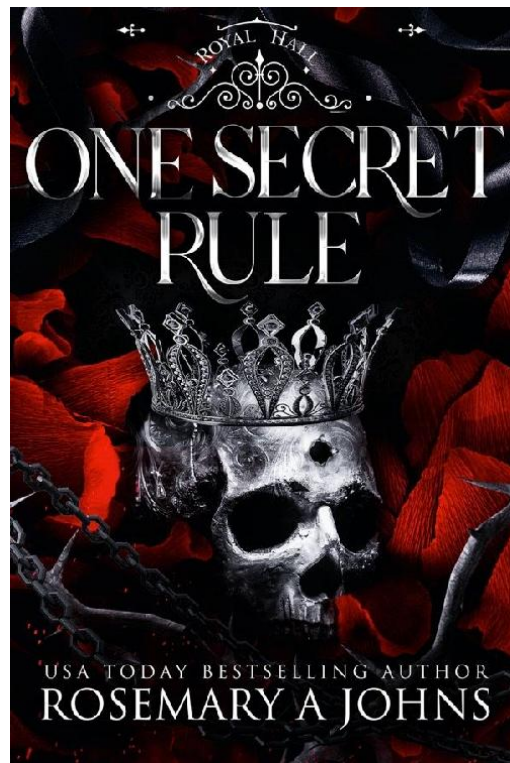
But nobody rules me.

If only something deadlier wasn't stalking me in the shadows. What if the Elites are actually protecting me?

As it turns out, they're keeping an ancient secret — *a secret that could wreck us all.*

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Read Book Two, *One Secret Rule*



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I stare around the luxurious Emerald Ballroom, wide-eyed.

So, this is what they mean about being a fish out of water.

I wish Dad could see me now: his Reject daughter rubbing shoulders with America's rich and famous, even if it's terrifying to play submissive and not drop my mask.

I've been anxious all week, reading every file that the resistance have on the Knight pack: interviews, social media, and YouTube clips.

It's not stalking, if you're on a mission, right?

It felt a little like stalking.

Now that I was looking out for him, I caught the occasional glimpse of Scott, standing behind Senator Falcon in paparazzi shots, always in typical bodyguard stance.

By the time that I was pulling on the dress that Scott chose for me, I'd stared at so many pictures and films of Falcon and Scott that I felt like I knew them.

And I desired them both.

I plaster on a demure smile, as an oil baron strolls past, arm in arm with a playboy socialite and their pretty Omega.

I smooth my hand down the satiny material of my dress, which cascades all the way to trail across the floor in

shimmering purple. Earlier, Angel piled my hair up on my head, fixing it with sparkling violet clips. A few strands have already escaped to flutter around my face.

Even my hair doesn't like to be trapped.

I feel strangely as if I'm floating and this is all a dream.

The night is humid like that moment before a storm breaks.

I'm hot, sweaty, and dizzy.

I sigh, rubbing my hand across my head. Maybe I'm going down with something.

I rest my back against the wall, hiding behind my glass of champagne, enjoying its fruity scent that at least partially masks the scents in the room: an overwhelming barrage of horny, posturing Alphas.

The vast, glittering ballroom is decked out in feathers, drips in diamonds, and is draped with sumptuous emerald velvet.

It's like something out of a fairy tale.

I study the dance floor: beautiful people in even more beautiful dresses and suits. But all are wearing fake smiles.

In the corner, a small orchestra dressed in black tie play Strauss' "Emperor Waltz", which is as upbeat and triumphant as these elites clearly feel.

And why the fuck not?

I scan across the waltzing billionaires, CEOs, and politicians. All are top of their field or socialites living on their pack's inherited wealth. These are the Alphas with the pick of bond mates, who control and rule our country.

A movie star Alpha cradles his tiny Omega possessively as he waltzes. Next to me, a handsome Beta hand feeds a canape to his Omega, while a female Alpha gives a nod of approval like she's a queen.

I half expect them both to be kneeling at her feet.

When Lucian explained to me in preparation for this ball to expect to see traditionalists and not to react, he really meant traditionalists with a capital T.

Would I be tempted to take advantage of my power, if roles were reversed?

Would *anyone* be tempted?

They're showy, arrogant...but gorgeous.

Just like Senator Knight.

I can't help the shiver, as I remember his jade green eyes looking out so fiercely from his beautiful, pale face like he's trying to figure out how to take over your Soul...or the world.

The weird thing is that he's the only Alpha I've fantasized surrendering my Soul to. He's dangerously compelling.

He's also so dominant that he hasn't yet made an appearance at his own ball, which means his bodyguard hasn't either.

So much for my first spy mission or checking that Scott is okay.

On the other hand, by ducking my head and smiling sweetly, I've been able to make a couple of leads for the Omega Society's funding with rich donors.

Perhaps, tonight has been worth it.

Light glitters from three giant crystal chandeliers that hang from the high glass ceiling. I get even dizzy when I peer at it; the dancers are reflected in the glass like there's a second, alternate world trapped above us.

Which one is real; which the illusion?

Another wave of heat hits me, and I whimper.

It's too much.

I shouldn't have come.

I grit my teeth, weaving through the dancers, towards the back exit. I drain my champagne, hoping that it'll cool my fever, before placing the glass onto the gold tray of a passing

Beta server. Like all the servers, he's dressed in tight green livery.

Does Scott have a uniform like that?

Hell, he'd look hot.

I force the wicked thought away to enjoy later.

"Thanks." I smile at the server.

He jolts like he's shocked to be acknowledged, before shooting me a shy smile.

When I try to make it to the exit, however, I'm caught in a gaggle of excited Omegas. Their strident, posh voices are raised in excitement.

"You're not his number one fan, I am!" One insists, tossing her curls.

"I'm the admin of the Knights Hopefuls," another simpers. "I bet that he'll choose *me* to be his new Omega. The gossip is that his pack has wanted a female Omega for years. I'll look after him, as he deserves."

"Dream on," a third protests, narrowing her eyes. "And *look after him*? You're the highest maintenance Omega there is. The Senator only picks the best, and my breeding is—"

"Ladies, no arguing. It's unbecoming for Omegas. Do you think that it'd impress Senator Knight?" An older Omega scolds, finally hurrying them past me. Maybe she's the pack guardian. "He'll choose one of you tonight. I'm going to make certain of that. Who knows. Perhaps, he'll pick all three of you."

They clap in excitement.

Yet I feel sick.

Why does it matter to me? They sound like Falcon and them deserve each other.

Still, I wouldn't wish those types of Omegas on anyone. But would I wish Falcon on anyone either?

My chest is tight.

Before I can turn, however, a calm voice stops me.

“Don’t leave already.” Scott’s marching toward me, and it’s like the heat, lights, and music fade away. His citrus scent winds around me, cooling my fever. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t be here earlier. That was far from optimal, but I had my duties.”

He’s dressed in a tailored black suit, which makes the steel of his eyes and the sharp cut of his cheekbones even more pronounced. His suit is more relaxed than any of the other party goers’ outfits, but then, I guess he’s only here to work, the same as the other Beta servers. Although, his suit isn’t as tight as their uniforms, possibly because he needs the room to fight if necessary.

Not that I know that because I checked out his ass in it...

I smile, leaning into him, as he reaches me. “So, you’re working tonight. That’s a shame.”

He nods. “I judged it unlikely that you’d show. I’m happy that you’ve proved me wrong.”

I furrow my brow. “Why?”

“I needed to see you again. You’re addictive. Plus, it’s not easy to get the Senator to ease up on...” Shit, he *did* get in trouble. “Well, to trust someone outside our circle enough to allow them into Knight Hall. This event was happening anyway, and it seemed the perfect opportunity. I thought you probably wouldn’t accept the invitation, however, since it was all so highhanded. An invite out of the blue from the Knight Estate to a ball isn’t the typical first date.”

WTF?

First date?

So, the invitation *was* from Scott, which means he thinks that I’ve accepted his date by coming here tonight.

What a mess.

I avoid his gaze, smoothing my hand down my dress.

Scott looks troubled, stroking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Too much?”

Just the right amount, if only this could be a real date.

He’s addictive too. I want him in the same way that I’ve always wanted Prince.

I flush. “More like I’m just glad that you’re not in trouble for helping me.”

He tilts my chin up to study me, then his lips tug into a smile. “You were worried about me.”

“I wasn’t. Okay, a little bit.” I hold my finger and thumb up to illustrate.

All of a sudden, his expression becomes serious. “I also invited you tonight because I had to find a way to check on you.” When he scans me head to foot, as if for injury, I pull back from him, shifting uncomfortably under his gaze. I know what he’s doing because I’ve done it often enough with Lucian. “Did *you* get into trouble with your brother for your late night mischief? Do I need to straighten anyone out for you?”

“*Mischief?*” I gasp. “And no straightening out.” I twirl, and my skirt flutters out like the wings of a butterfly. “Look, I’m fine. Wow, so you were worried about me.”

Warmth floods me. It’s a nice feeling.

Scott holds up his finger and thumb, mimicking my earlier gesture. “A little bit.”

I laugh. “Do you want to dance?”

I love the idea of a Reject dancing amongst the elite Alphas.

Scott sighs. “I can’t now. Duty calls. But can we meet up later, afterward?”

My face falls. “Of course. You’re guarding Fu—”

I catch myself just in time.

Shit, that was close.

I should kick Lucian's ass for inventing the whole *Fucking Falcon* thing.

Scott ducks his head, quizzically. "Senator Knight."

"*Ehm*, yep."

"Do you want me to introduce you later?"

I shiver, and my heart speeds up.

I can do this.

Yet my throat is too tight to answer.

Am I ready to meet him?

I promised Lucian and Angel that I'd take this opportunity. It's probably the best way that we'll ever get to gain information. Yet this whole night is terrifying.

I'm alone here and surrounded by people who buy Omegas from the Institute and oppose the Reform Bill.

Facing Falcon, before the resistance has triumphed and forced him to grovel and make amends, makes my heart feel like it'll beat out of my chest.

I swallow convulsively.

Then I force myself to squeak, "Uh-huh."

"Great, then I'll find you later. I know you're unbonded, but you're entirely safe on this Estate. Each Beta server is also trained as a guard and is an official Omega chaperone. I wouldn't risk you." Scott leans closer, and I take a deep breath of his delicious scent. "Have fun."

I nuzzle at his neck, pushing his collar down.

I can feel his lips, curved in a smile on the top of my head.

My own lips press closer to his scent gland but then they graze something: the scars of a bite.

Two bites.

He's bonded.

I wrench away from Scott in panic, staring up at him wildly. "You're a bonded Beta."

He blinks. “I’m aware.”

“You asked me on a date. You allowed me to get all snuggly. My scent is all over you. *Again.*”

“*Again*, I’m not oblivious.”

“Are you playing with me?” I growl.

Why are all the good guys bonded?

I can feel the burn of tears but refuse to let them fall.

Scott’s expression gentles. “I thought you knew. I’m sorry that I didn’t make it clearer. But my pack aren’t controlling dicks. They won’t give me flak for liking a new Omega. We’re open to bringing in new pack members and bonding, if we all get on.” He bites his lip. “I didn’t want to tell you like this... We have romantic music and champagne, but this is still not the setting that I’d have chosen... But my pack would love a female Omega to join us.”

I huff, shaking my Rej bracelet; it’s the only ugly thing in a room of beauty. “Sure. They’ll love your choice of a Reject that you met like a stray on the street.”

His gaze hardens. “They’ll respect my choice. Period. Will you meet them?”

It’s so fucking temping.

Yet they’d only be meeting half of me. I can’t share my resistance identity.

It wouldn’t be fair. But I want it so much that it hurts.

“Maybe,” I hedge.

I can’t bear to crush Scott completely.

His eyes light up. “Stay in the ballroom, and I’ll find you later. Try the mini chocolate éclair things. I made sure that they were ordered just for you.”

My eyes widen.

Did Scott truly request a chocolate treat to be added to the catering, simply because he knew that I’d like it?

Why the hell does he have to be so thoughtful? Come on, think of one flaw that could make walking away from him not feel like my heart is being ripped from my chest.

I already have that with Prince.

I mean, there's the being bodyguard to my enemy thing. That's a biggie.

I force myself to smile. "Seduction by chocolate. Smart."

"I excel at strategy." Scott gives me a jaunty salute, before disappearing back into the crowd.

I sag, letting out a despairing whine. I can't keep my mask up any longer.

Determined, I weave through the crowds toward a quiet spot at the back of the ballroom, which is screened by velvet drapes. There are lines of chairs for people to rest in, when they've exhausted themselves with dancing. It hasn't yet reached that time in the evening for anyone else yet.

It appears that I'm the only one who no longer feels in the mood.

I sink down, holding my head in my hands. Sweat drips down my neck.

The sooner the storm breaks, the better.

My nose wrinkles. Suddenly, I can smell the scent of two Alphas like black coffee: it's overpowering.

The scent of Alphas about to battle.

I pant in distress, toppling off the chair onto the floor. Instinctively, I scramble to the shadowy corner, making myself as small as possible.

What if I've been found out? Are these Alphas here to take me to the Institute?

I clamp my hands over my mouth to keep myself as silent and still as possible.

Yet deep down, I know that they'll smell me in my distress.

One of the first things that my pack taught me was that no matter how instinctive it is to back away and hide from an Alpha, they're biologically built to hunt and track Omegas.

Yet I can just as easily hunt and track Alphas.

When the Alphas sweep behind the drapes, however, they appear so distracted that they don't even glance at me. In fact, the elder Alpha looks to have hunted and caught the younger Alpha and is dragging him here to...what?

And the younger Alpha is Senator Falcon Knight.

Transfixed, I stare at Falcon.

How is it possible that he's even more gorgeous in person than in his photos?

I can't look away from him.

Falcon's dressed in a dark, hunter green tuxedo with classic silver cufflinks. His green eyes gleam with an intensity that takes away my breath. His skin is even paler and more ethereal than it looks seen through a screen. He's tall and broad shouldered; more Alpha than any Alpha that I've seen so far tonight.

Apart from the older Alpha who is tugging him roughly to the back of the room.

This rough Alpha is broader than Falcon with salt-and-pepper hair, which is cut closely to his head. His face looks like it's set in a permanent snarl.

He has the same green eyes as Falcon.

I wish that I didn't recognize him but after all those YouTube *13 Awesome Secrets You Need to Know About Senator Knight* clips, sadly I do.

General Knight, Falcon's dad and Chief Alpha of his pack.

The General slams Falcon against the wall, and I'm impressed that Falcon doesn't flinch.

"I've been patient but I'm now done with your romantic nonsense," the General growls. "Pick an Omega from this ball, lord knows there are enough silly girls out there who are

desperate for your knot. By the end of the night, you'll announce your new Omega. Then you have until the end of the week to bond."

Wow, this Emerald Ball is kind of like *Cinderella* then?

Falcon's the Alpha Prince Charming, and all these Omegas are here, hopeful to be the one to leave the glass slipper and be given his knot.

Idiots.

I only just stop myself from snorting.

I'm shocked, however, that Falcon doesn't.

"Or what, Father?" His voice is cold and commanding.

The General's eyes narrow, before he slams his hand to the side of Falcon's head. I jump, but Falcon doesn't like he was expecting it or is used to it.

I should be glad about that but I'm not.

I'll never be happy about anyone being mistreated. Plus, no one should be forced into bonding, even the entitled, arrogant Senator.

"Or I'll choose an Omega out of the Institute for you, taking the decision out of your hands," the General replies. "You're Chief Alpha within the Knight Estate, but I'm Head Alpha still over the *entire pack*. Do you forget up in Washington that *I'm* the one with the real power and control? If I give you the order to bond an Omega, then it's absolute."

"You wouldn't," Falcon hisses.

"Try me."

I've seen Falcon in over fifteen hours of video clips and interviews. I've watched him be charming, commanding, serious, playful and occasionally, allowing the slightest vulnerability to show.

I'm pretty sure all of it was an act.

I've never seen his eyes glint with panic, and his hands ball into fists.

He's defenseless, in the way that Omegas so often are.

This is the exact type of weakness that Lucian wanted me to reveal.

So, why are my guts churning with misery, rather than excitement?

"I've told you," Falcon says, speaking slowly and carefully like it's a great effort to control his temper, "I'll never buy an Omega."

The General pats Falcon's cheek. "Then you'd better dance with a lot of Omegas tonight and make sure that you *choose* one, hadn't you?" His expression becomes severer. "Bare your neck."

I draw in a breath at the same time as Falcon does.

Baring your neck between Alphas is an ancient sign of submission. Only the most traditional of packs still use it, usually to humiliate young Alphas who have stepped out of line and challenged those above them.

Never...in my wildest dreams...have I imagined watching Falcon baring his neck to another Alpha.

I admit that it makes me tingly to see something that I've imagined him doing for *me*.

Falcon seems to be fighting an internal battle with himself for a moment, before he turns his head sharply to the side, presenting his neck to his dad.

I lick my lips, watching such extreme vulnerability, which is an invitation for another Alpha to decide if they want to rip out their throat.

Although, only in ritual. To attack a submitting Alpha is considered the worst brutality.

If Falcon wasn't such a knothed, I'd be craving to nuzzle against his pale skin, which looks delicious, sucking dark hickies into it and marking him in a good way.

After a long, excruciating moment, the General nods. "Enough."

Pink tints Falcon's cheeks, as he turns back to the General. "I have things to do. Can I return to my own ball now?"

"As long as you're returning to choose a proper Omega who won't shame our pack any longer. I don't know what possessed you to take on a defective Reject."

So, Falcon's mystery Omega is a Rej 1.

Lucian is going to be impressed with what I've found out tonight. But why would the great Falcon have taken on a Rej?

To my surprise, Falcon's eyes flash with fury, and he pushes past his dad, storming to the drapes. "Say what you like to criticize my character. I no longer care what you think about me. But don't *ever* criticize my Omega. I desire a female Omega, you know that, but it's not because of any failing in my current Omega or whether he can have kids or not. I cherish him, and he's loved. Precious. Hurt me but not him."

The General snarls, as he stalks after Falcon. "Sentimental fool. Haven't I raised you better than that? I'm trying to help you. Now, do your duty, or do you wish to make a scene? I assure you, it'll humiliate you, more than it will me."

The General pushes his son back toward the dance floor.

I sit in shock on the marble floor.

I knew that Falcon's Omega was spoiled, but to hear Falcon defend him like that to his strict dad is a revelation.

Plus, the General would win the Worst Dad of the Year Award, if mine hadn't already won it...for life.

Shaken, I push myself to my feet.

I need to get out there and watch to see what poor Omega is chosen by Falcon. If he ends up with the Omegas who claim to be his Number One Fans, however, then maybe it's *poor Falcon*.

I smirk, edging back around the velvet drapes and toward the dance floor.

Then I chuckle, as I see that Falcon has already been surrounded by his Knight Hopefuls. He looks lost, even

though he's plastered on a fake smile.

"Something funny?" A rich, musical voice asks.

I twirl and find myself looking up at a seductive Alpha with caramel skin and dark, bedroom eyes. He's dressed in a flamboyant burgundy tuxedo. I don't think he's the type who likes to go unnoticed. He's also one of the younger Alphas; he's only a couple of years older than me.

He follows the direction of my gaze and then he laughs too. "It's tragic. I'd go on a rescue mission but I'm no soldier. Plus, this sexy ass," to my shock, he wiggles it, "is too dangerous a weapon to ever let loose, even on those psycho Omegas."

I stifle my giggle. I've never heard an Alpha talk like this before.

He's strange but the good type of strange. He smells like delicious, warm brandy. It's intoxicating. I want to get drunk on him.

He smells like an Alpha but is he really one?

I can't help the glance down at his dick that's far from small in his tight pants.

With a giant dick like that, he's *definitely* an Alpha.

When he catches me looking, I blush.

"Ah, you want to know why I'm not deploying my knot to save the Senator?" He winks. "I keep that for when I want to ruin Omegas who've been very, *very* good."

A shiver runs down my spine, and my skin prickles.

Is he really dirty talking in the middle of this crowd of strangers?

I should scold him or walk away.

I should.

But I like this bratty Alpha, and sometimes, it's fun to spar.

"And I have something that I use to ruin Alphas who've been very, *very* bad," I whisper back.

His eyes widen, and then *he* blushes.

“I think that since we’re at the competitive dirty talking stage, we should introduce ourselves.” His silky, raven hair tumbles over his face, as he sketches me a bow. “I’m delighted to meet you. I’m...”

“So, we’re all formal now.” I nudge his shoulder with mine. I haven’t felt this relaxed with an Alpha who isn’t my brother...ever. “I’m Rebel.”

“Xavier.”

When I glance around me, I notice that we’ve drawn a small crowd of onlookers. Xavier is gorgeous and not one to be invisible. Perhaps, he has admirers.

Or maybe they’re wondering why an Alpha like Xavier is wasting his time on a Rej.

He could be a visiting prince for all I know.

I shrink in on myself. “So, what do you do?”

“I thought we weren’t going for formal?” Xavier asks. “Can’t we chat about something more interesting?”

“Your job’s not interesting?”

“I love it.” Xavier’s face glows like he’s imagining it, and instantly, I’m fascinated. I feel like that with my own Omega Society; it’s not work, it’s a calling. “I set up my own tech firm. But who wants to hear about that?”

“I do.”

He glances at me, surprised. “Then you’d be the first.”

“Would I have heard of it?”

He shifts from foot to foot. “Do you own a computer?”

I nod.

“Then yes. Can we leave it at that? Okay, what would your perfect morning look like?”

I blink. “Huh?”

He shrugs, and it's as sexy as the rest of him. "I read that in "Ten Questions to Ask an Omega". Don't tell me April Devere led me astray again."

He looks distraught for a moment, and I stroke his arm reassuringly.

Then his smile breaks through, and I almost smack his ass.

Shit, what would that look like? An Omega spanking an Alpha?

"Dick," I mutter.

"But I have such a gorgeous one." He nudges me. "Go on, your perfect morning."

I tilt my head in thought.

Can I tell him? It's only a fantasy, right?

"Honestly? Waking up with my pack in a nest, cuddled together. Loved and loving in turn. Then being made pancakes with blueberries and chocolate sauce for breakfast."

He gives me a long look. "A girl after my own heart. I choose pancakes every time as well. Plus, the cuddling." He leans forward and whispers, "I'm a cuddler."

I redden.

Then he draws back and offers his arm. "So, Miss Pancakes and Cuddles, want to dance?"

It's one thing flirting with this gorgeous Alpha and dreaming of a pack...fantasy...that I can't have. At least, not yet. But it's another to dance with him.

I know Scott said to have fun, but I still don't want to hurt him.

I shake my head. "Sorry."

Immediately, ripples of shocked whispers spread through the crowds.

Xavier glances around himself, squaring his shoulders as if he's not affected. But I can tell that he is.

Have I just screwed-up his reputation?

Is rejecting him such a major thing for traditionalists?

Xavier's smile freezes, but he leans closer again. "What if I said that I'm being pursued by a psycho Omega like the ones after the Senator and I need your help?"

I glance around us.

There's a new type of tension now.

The danger is directed at both Xavier and me.

We could truly be ruined.

I touch the back of Xavier's hand lightly. "What kind of knight would I be, if I didn't save an Alpha in need?"

Xavier gives a startled laugh, and there are titters in the crowd around us.

What did I say?

Xavier gives a wide grin that's like sunshine. "My hero."

For a moment, it's like no one exists but him. He's bright enough to burn me up.

Except, am I truly burning up?

Why is it so hot in here?

Unexpectedly, there's the loud *clink* of champagne glasses, calling for silence.

"My cue," Xavier whispers. "You'll have to rescue me later."

He squeezes my shoulder as he slips past to saunter casually through the parting crowds to the front entrance of the ballroom.

I bite my lip. I can't look away from Xavier's slinky hips and tight ass.

He's right: it is a powerful weapon.

Perhaps, I should've claimed him as a weapon for the resistance.

I push through the throng of circling Omegas after Xavier to see what the commotion is about. I take a step back,

however, when I realize that it's Falcon who's standing like lord of the manor, calling for silence.

Is he about to make a speech?

Falcon looks commanding and in control; his head is tilted back arrogantly, and his dominance is so strong that every single person in the room is standing still and watching him with bated breath.

He looks so different to when he bared his neck to his dad.

Yet I witnessed that moment. There's more beneath this arrogant mask than the Senator wants anyone to know.

Is he playacting now?

I swallow, wiping at my brow. I blink the sweat out of my eyes.

To my shock, Xavier strolls all the way up to Falcon and loops his arm around his waist. It's casual and familiar.

Loving.

I freeze.

Like they're bonded.

Shit, I almost danced with the metaphorical (and seriously gorgeous) devil: *The Knight pack's second Alpha*.

And I like Xavier.

Lucian is going to be bouncing up and down with excitement, when he finds out that I know who the second Alpha is in Falcon's pack. It'll blow his mind to discover how funny and different he is.

He's closer to the Lucian's ideal friend than the enemy that I've been imagining.

When Scott marches smartly to stand on the other side of Falcon, I smile at him.

Scott's eyes light up, but I understand that he can't exactly wave at me; he's working, after all.

I jump, however, when Falcon turns to Scott and kisses his cheek.

What. The. Hell?

My mind stutters to a shocked stop.

Unless workplace law has significantly changed in the last twelve hours, kissing is not how an employer greets their bodyguard.

It's how an Alpha greets their bonded Beta.

With a sickening rush everything falls into place: Scott buying treats for the Knight's Omega in heat, being able to get me the invitation tonight, and his bonding marks.

Scott's both the Knight's bodyguard and their bonded Beta.

Plus, he wants to introduce me to his pack, just when Falcon needs to choose an Omega by the end of the night.

I begin to shake. My hands are clammy. A fever is now ripping through my body.

How the fuck did this happen?

I'm as good as dead.

Another wave of heat hits me, stronger than before.

Something's wrong.

This is more than the fear and summer heat.

More than going down with the flu.

Please, *please*, don't let this be happening now. Not here, amongst traditional Alphas and my enemies.

I need to get home to Lucian.

Then my pussy gushes with wetness, and I know that it's too late.

My first heat is unexpectedly here.

Please, no...

I stagger forward, stumbling.

My eyes flutter closed, as my vision blurs to gray.

Someone's calling my name. Then cool arms are catching me, as I fall...

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About the Author



ROSEMARY A JOHNS is a USA Today bestselling and award-winning romance and fantasy author, music fanatic, and anti-hero addict. She writes sexy shifters and immortals, swoonworthy book boyfriends, and epic battles.

Winner of the Silver Award in the National Wishing Shelf Book Awards. Finalist in the IAN Book of the Year Awards. Winner in the Best Indie Book of the Year Awards. Runner-up in the Best Fantasy Book of the Year, Reality Bites Book Awards. Honorable Mention in the Readers' Favorite Book Awards. Shortlisted in the International Rubery Book Awards.

Rosemary is also a traditionally published short story writer. She studied history at Oxford University and ran her own theater company. She's always been a rebel...

Thanks for leaving a review. You're awesome!

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