



A MAD WORLD NOVEL

INTO THE WOODS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HANNAH MCBRIDE

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*For everyone who supported me in my darkest hours.
You know who you are;
This wouldn't be possible without your support.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hey, friend! If you're reading this, THANK YOU SO MUCH! But also, check this out:

Into the Woods is a completely fictional story that deals with some very real world (and heavy) issues including alcohol abuse, adult language, lots of spice, and human trafficking. If you feel any of these topics might be intriguing, welcome to the madness. If it ain't for you, then best wishes for a happy and healthy future.

Oh, and, as always, if we're related and/or it'll make shit weird between us, stop reading now. Please spare us both the therapy bills.

CHAPTER 1



COURT

A screech ripped me out of one of my favorite dreams. The beach-at-sunset scene faded into the stark, undecorated white walls of my bedroom. Instead of being buried in silky, dark hair with teal streaks, my hand was wrapped around my cock. I flinched, feeling the lack of lubricant as I still pumped my shaft, not willing to let go of the dream.

I cracked an eye open to another scream, followed by a flailing hand slapping my chest.

“The fuck?” I muttered, barely able to form a coherent thought because... fuck me. How much had I drunk last night?

“What the hell is *that*?” a nasally female voice trilled from beside me, its tone high enough to crack glass.

“I’m Cori,” a soft, confused voice murmured. “I—”

“Get *out*!” the woman beside me shouted, sounding damn close to hysterical.

Awareness flashed through my subconscious. I went from sleepy to wide-motherfucking-awake in less than a second. I sat up, grateful that my still-hard dick was covered by the pool of sheets in my lap. I gaped at the girl hovering by the door, her blue eyes wide. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a braid, and she clutched a stuffed dog to her chest.

“Cori,” I breathed, horrified, “what are you doing in here?”

“We’re supposed to go fishing,” she whispered, gaze dropping and lip trembling. Her hair was done in two braids that had been secured with red elastic hair ties complete with glittery hearts that matched her shirt. Valentine’s Day was still six days away, but Cori embraced every holiday with the enthusiasm of, well, a little girl.

“Oh, my God! Get her the hell out of here.” My bedmate was still acting like this tiny human was a freaking ghost or some shit.

And I was over it.

Whirling, I glared, leveling all the hate and fury at her that I could. Judging by the way she paled and scrambled to put space between us on the king-size bed, the expression worked.

“Shut *the fuck* up,” I rumbled, keeping my voice low so Cori wouldn’t hear.

The woman, a bleached blonde with flat brown eyes and full lips, gaped at me. “Court.” Her voice softened, placating, as she reached out and laid a hand flat against my bare chest.

Only Corinne’s presence kept me from shoving her ass off the bed. What the fuck had I been thinking?

More like I *hadn’t* been thinking.

I’d been wasted—again.

Hooked up with a random woman—again.

And Corinne had walked in on it because... Ah, hell. I vaguely remembered my best friend’s little sister asking if, the next time she came to visit, my oldest brother, Royal, and I would take her fishing.

I twisted away from the woman and looked at Cori, forcing myself to take a breath. “Cor, I...”

“Forgot,” she practically whimpered, and I felt like such an asshole.

“No,” I lied, trying to think of *any* acceptable excuse. “I just... I didn’t set my alarm. Why don’t you meet me downstairs—”

A shadow appeared behind Cori a second before a familiar face came into view. I bit back a curse as Maddie stopped behind Corinne.

A myriad of expressions played out across her face—shock, concern, and then rage. Her hands shook a little as she settled them on Cori’s shoulders. “Hey, sweet girl. Royal and Rook just showed up.”

The little girl beamed. “Rook came to see me, too?”

Cori hadn’t seen my other brother since he’d been discharged from the SEALs a few weeks earlier.

Grinning down at her, Maddie gently tucked a lock of loose hair behind her ear. “He sure did. Why don’t you go see them? Court will be down in a few minutes.”

Cori instantly brightened. “Okay!” She whirled and raced around Maddie, her footsteps thundering down the stairs seconds later.

Maddie folded her arms and glared at me. “Are you *fucking* kidding me, Court Woods?”

Shit. First- *and* last-named.

And then, because why not make it a goddamn party, Linc popped up over her shoulder. His brown hair was mussed, and he’d clearly just woken up, but his eyes snapped open wide at the scene he’d stumbled into.

“Who the hell is this bitch?” the woman on my other side practically growled.

My eyes slid closed, but not before I saw Maddie’s eyes flash and Linc mime the Catholic cross over his heart.

This wasn’t gonna end well.

“You’re in *my* house, *bitch*,” Maddie snarled, coming into the room like she damn well owned it, because she did.

Well, she and her husband/fiancé, Ryan Cain. It was a complicated relationship. First he’d thought she was her evil twin and hated her, then they fell in love and got married. After that Maddie had been kidnapped and institutionalized by her psycho dad, who also had their marriage annulled by a shady-ass judge. But it had all worked out when Ryan shot Maddie’s father and killed the bastard.

They planned on getting married again at some point, but they both seemed content to use the *wife* and *husband* labels no matter their legal relationship status.

I was happy for them, except for right now—because Ryan, although one of my best friends, was also Corinne’s very overprotective big brother. The only thing he loved as much as Maddie was Cori, and the girl I’d brought into their house had just insulted them *both*.

Yeah, I was twenty kinds of fucked, and none of them in the fun way.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Look, Gloria—”

Her face pinched. “*Gretchen*.”

“Totally what I said,” I went on, not giving a shit. “It’s been fun, but this?” I gestured to the space between us. “We’re done. Time to go.”

Her jaw dropped open, and I had the tiniest memory spark of her on her knees, opening her jaw just as wide as my cock sank into it.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I shivered as something a lot like shame prickled up my spine.

Maddie looked at me, and beneath the anger, I saw the disappointment. It was one thing for me to act like a fuckup on my own, but Cori had been

dragged into this. Cori, who had already been dealt a shitty hand after her dad tried to kill her and then her house burned down. And that was after losing her grandfather, the one stable adult role model she'd had in her life.

She went to a special school that excelled in helping kids and young adults with autism. The past few months had been hell, but she'd slowly been turning it around. She'd been so damn excited when Ryan and Maddie planned to bring her here, to their new home, for a long weekend.

And I'd ruined it.

"You heard him, honey," Maddie practically spat. "Get out of my house."

With a huff, Gretchen got up, totally naked. Linc let out a little cough and looked away, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

Bending over to pick up her dress, Gretchen flashed me her ass and cunt, even giving a little exaggerated wiggle as she shimmied into the strappy green fabric. I cleared my throat and looked away, what was left of my morning wood going completely soft.

I shot Maddie another look, hoping it conveyed my apologies for all of this.

Her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched.

Gretchen slipped on her heels and looked back at me. "Court, I—"

"I will literally drag you out by your hair," Maddie threatened. "Then I'll kick your ass for making me mess up my manicure."

Gretchen spun. "I'd like to see you try."

"Whoa," Linc snapped, all teasing evaporating as he crowded Maddie's back, his eyes shooting fire at Gretchen. "Time to get the fuck out, skankalicious. Go peddle your STIs somewhere else."

"Hold up." Maddie lifted a finger that she then pointed at Linc. "We don't slut-shame in this house, remember? We talked about this."

Linc nodded, looking properly chagrined. "You're right. I apologize to Court's consenting fuck buddy. That being said, our consent to her being in *this* house is fucking over, so time to go. Whether or not you have any sort of disease is between you and your doctor. And possibly Court, if he didn't wrap it up." He shot me a smirk. "You *did* use protection, right, man?"

I flipped him off, because of fucking course I had. The empty condom wrapper was lying in plain sight next to my bed. I *always* wrapped it up.

Gretchen gasped, a hand flying to her ample—and fake—tits. She looked at me like I was going to save her. "Court, *do* something."

"Okay." I got up, not giving a shit that I was naked, and grabbed her arm,

propelling her to the doorway.

Linc pulled Maddie back to give me space to push her through the open frame. “Get out.” I let her go and stalked back into the room, then grabbed my boxer-briefs and yanked them on.

She sucked in a breath, likely ready to start screeching like a pterodactyl again. I snatched her purse off the dresser and pulled out her wallet.

“Hey!”

I checked the license. “Gretchen Slutter.”

Linc cracked up. “Jesus, that’s really your name?” He turned to Maddie with his hands up. “This is me *not* commenting on how appropriately named Miss Slutter is. I’m sure it’s a strong name, originating from the land of... Sluts? Is that a city? Country? I just need to know where all the Slutters hail from.”

Maddie scoffed and looked up at the ceiling, probably praying for patience.

I ignored the fact that my best friend was an idiot. “558 Morgate Lane.” I dropped the card and wallet back into her purse, then crossed the room and handed it to her. “Get the fuck out of our house, Gretchen Slutter, or I’ll ruin your fucking life.”

She flinched back, holding her purse to her chest like a shield.

Linc cleared his throat. “I’ll show you out.”

Gretchen shot me a wounded look but followed him without any further complaint, leaving me alone with Maddie.

“Don’t say it,” I muttered, turning away from her.

“I haven’t said it, Court,” she retorted. “I didn’t say it when you brought the first girl here. Or the fifth. Or the twenty-seventh. You’re an adult, and if you want to act like a boy who just figured out how to use his dick by fucking your way through the city, I’m not gonna stop you.”

I clenched my teeth, my jaw aching as I faced her and let her lay into me.

She lifted a finger. “You want to throw your life away because you’re too chickenshit to deal with actual emotions? Fine. But when your fuckups touch Cori? That’s not okay, Court, and I’m not going to act like it is.”

“I messed up,” I murmured, scrubbing my hands over my face.

“You think?” she deadpanned.

I sighed. “I’ll make it up to Cori.”

“Goddamn right you will,” she grumbled. “That little girl has been through *hell*. Ryan and I want this house to be her safe haven. Her *home*.

When she comes here, she needs to know everything is okay and she's loved."

"I know," I said, feeling like utter shit. "I'll try... I'll do better."

"You'd fucking better," a deep voice snapped. Ryan glared at me, his large frame filling the doorway and practically vibrating with rage. He jabbed a finger at me. "You can start by explaining why my little sister is downstairs, upset that some woman yelled at her and used 'swear-jar language.'"

I winced. "Ryan—"

"I'll go check on her." Maddie moved to squeeze past him.

Ryan settled a hand on her hip, his gaze meeting hers and doing that weird-ass thing where it was like they were talking without actually speaking.

Maddie lifted a hand to his jaw, and his expression softened. "She'll be fine," she assured him, and rolled to her tiptoes, kissing him quickly.

Ryan clamped his hands on her waist and pulled her against him, devouring her mouth until she swayed a little on her feet. Only then did he let her go, watching her walk away with a private smile that vanished the second he looked at me. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't. I was drunk and... Shit, Ry, I'm sorry."

His lips twisted into a feral snarl. "The pussy parade ends here, man. You want to bury your feelings with your dick, be my guest, but get out of my damn house. I won't have this shit touching Cori or Maddie again. My girls have been through enough."

I wasn't going to point out that Maddie had hardly needed protecting this morning. If anything, Gretchen was lucky Maddie had let her leave without needing to see a plastic surgeon.

Maddie had changed a lot in the months we'd known her. She'd gone from unsure and drowning in our bullshit to thriving and confident. But nothing brought out her protective-mama-bear side quite like Corinne.

"I got it," I agreed, my voice rough and weary. Damn, I was tired of feeling like this. I was just shy of twenty-two, and I felt like an old man.

Ryan stared at me. "Court, you saw what I went through with Mads. You had a front-row seat to all my fuckups and what it took to get her back."

Yeah, I had. But that wasn't the same—there was no evil twin in my past to blame shit on.

My spine stiffened. "Your point?"

"If I can fix what I broke with Maddie, you can fix shit with—"

“Don’t.” I cut him off and spun away, not wanting to hear it.

Silence lingered for another moment, so long that I thought he’d left.

“She’s staying in Paris,” Ryan finally admitted.

It was like being donkey-kicked in the balls as a vise squeezed my chest. All the air whooshed out of my lungs.

“After her mom’s heart attack and filing for divorce from Malcolm, her grandparents convinced her to defer her final semester, since she already has the credits to graduate. Maddie hates that she won’t have her best friend here for the next five months, but Bex is still planning on coming back to Pacific Cross for college.”

My eyes drifted shut. It didn’t matter. This was my last semester at PCU before I started law school. I’d already been accepted to Stanford. Odds were I wouldn’t see her when she came back.

Which was for the best.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do,” Ryan started, “but you need to accept that she’s part of our lives now, and that isn’t changing. This isn’t like when we were kids, and you wrote her off because of what your dad did.”

I snorted at the way he’d dumbed down one of the most pivotal, life-changing moments of my existence.

“She’s Maddie’s best friend, and Maddie’s one of us now. You can’t avoid her forever.”

I swallowed and stared blankly ahead. “Are we done?”

He let out a snort. “Yeah. We’re done. Get yourself together, because I don’t care how hungover your ass is—you promised Cori you’d take her fishing. Either honor that promise, or tonight, you’ll sleep with them. Got it?”

Nodding, I went into the bathroom and slammed the door closed behind me before stripping out of my boxers. I stumbled into the shower and twisted a few knobs. The water rushed out, slapping me across the face, chest, and ass from several angles. Usually I loved taking my time in the shower, but I had a feeling Ryan would drag my ass out of here if I took too long.

Bracing a hand on the shower wall, I squeezed my eyes shut as the water rushed over my head. With a groan, I popped my eyes open and looked down. A red smear snagged my attention.

What. The. Fuck?

Christ, was that *blood* on my dick?

I grabbed my cock with my free hand, sweeping a thumb across the red and wondering if I’d somehow broken the only part of me that still seemed

capable of functioning. It took a second, but the red wiped off.

So, not blood. Lipstick.

I counted that as a win. Probably the only one I'd have today.

CHAPTER 2



COURT

I took the fastest shower possible before brushing my teeth. With a towel wrapped around my hips, I stepped into my bedroom. I was so preoccupied with wallowing in my bad decisions that I missed the asshole sitting on my bed.

And I was too slow to dodge the bone-crunching punch that landed on my ribs. Something shifted and popped as I wheezed out a breath. A second fist landed in my gut, doubling me over.

“Your ass is so goddamn lucky that I don’t want to explain to Cori why I rearranged your face,” Royal spat.

I braced a hand on the wall, trying to regain the ability to inhale. “Hey, big brother.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” he snarled, more surly than usual, but that wasn’t surprising. The man was a stone-cold killer who could terrify a death-row inmate into pissing his pants, but he turned into a marshmallow for Corinne Cain.

“Ryan and Maddie already read me the riot act,” I snapped, irritation licking through my veins.

“You think I give a fuck?” Royal’s voice rumbled low, practically a growl. His gaze swept down my body, his lip curling in disgust. “Jesus, what the hell is wrong with you? That bent out of shape over a girl who—correct me if I’m wrong—you pushed away. Again.”

My hands knotted into fists, my knuckles popping. “Oh, that’s rich coming from the poster boy for emotional dissociation.”

He smirked, his head tilting. “Better than acting like a lovesick little bitch who’s too scared to face reality.”

Fury pounded in my skull, and I threw a wild right hook before I even finished letting the words settle in. Royal blocked the punch with practiced ease before landing another blow to my ribs. It hurt, but I knew he'd pulled back. My oldest brother was built like a goddamn tank and had fists the size of ham hocks. I'd seen him dent a dude's skull in a single blow.

If Royal Woods wanted me comatose or dead, there wasn't much I'd be able to do to stop him. Yeah, I knew how to fight, but I was breaking the cardinal rule: Never fight with emotion.

But it seemed like all I could do was mess up.

Royal studied me, the anger etched into his face morphing into something that looked a lot like concern. "Come on, kid. Talk to me."

I bristled at his tone. I was seven years younger than him, but sometimes he felt more like my father than Jasper Woods had ever been. My father—*our* father—was a sadistic asshole who had fallen off the grid when we took down Maddie's and Ryan's dads a few weeks earlier. I wasn't stupid enough to think Jasper was gone for good. No, he was holed up somewhere, likely plotting his next steps.

I might've hated the man, but there was no denying he was smart as hell. He'd been appointed one of the youngest generals in the history of the United States Army. He'd fought and manipulated his way to the top, even going so far as to sire his own army of sons.

Looking at Royal, I could see the similarities between us, traits dear old Dad had passed on. The straight Roman nose, the strong jaw. But I had dark eyes like my mother, while Royal's were a blueish gray that looked like *his* mother's.

Jasper couldn't even use the excuse that he'd had an affair because my mom's pregnancy with me had complications that left her infertile after giving birth. Royal, Rook and Bishop were older than me, while our other brothers, Knight and Castle, were younger. I was right in the middle. Oddly enough, Jasper had only one mistress, Holly. He'd been with her since they were teens, but she wasn't high class enough to be considered wife material, so he'd relegated her to being a decorative side piece who'd birthed him an army.

Over the course of a decade, Holly had given Jasper six sons and a stillborn daughter. Only five of my brothers were still alive. The loss of her daughter and son had broken Holly, and I knew it pissed my brothers off to no end that she remained Jasper's doormat. Holly never fought Jasper.

Even though he was responsible for killing their son.

I'd never known King, who'd been closest in age to me. He'd been born six months before me, and his death had been the catalyst that ultimately led to a naked woman shouting at my best friend's autistic sister less than thirty minutes earlier.

God, my life was fucked. I was blaming my dead brother for my world going to shit.

"Drop it," I snapped, turning away and stripping off the towel to get dressed. If Royal had an issue with having my ass in his face, he could leave.

I finished pulling on jeans and a Henley before turning back to my brother, who was watching me with his arms folded over his massive chest. After a beat, his gaze wandered around the room. "Love what you've done with the place."

I ignored the tone, because I knew he was right. Since moving in, I hadn't done a damn thing with the space. The only furniture in the room was my bed, a black dresser, a matching desk with a chair, and a black bookcase that was empty except for a single framed photograph, taken at Ryan and Maddie's wedding, of them with me, Linc, Ash, my brothers, and... her.

The photo was there only because Maddie had put it there when we first moved in. I'd tried more times than I could count to throw it in the trash, but every time I did, I put it back.

I told myself I left it there to make Maddie happy, but my subconscious was all too happy to remind me that I needed to see it when I woke up after a weekend bender and wound up cuddling the goddamn picture like it was my blankie.

All because of her.

My heart clenched, and I damn near gasped. I'd written the organ off as dead long ago, but, of course, *she* was the one who could make it beat again.

It was always her.

Following my gaze, Royal ambled to the bookcase and lifted the frame. "Talk to her."

Grimacing, I sat on my bed to pull on my socks and boots. "Are we leaving?"

Royal glanced back at me, his expression a blank mask. "Are you done being a bitch?"

I shoved to my feet. "Can we not, man? I'm tired and—"

"You think I'm not?" Royal challenged, arching his brow. "Between you

and Rook, I'm ready to buy stock in Midol or Tampax."

I cocked my head. "Look at you, knowing your way around feminine hygiene products."

"With my brothers turning into pussies, someone has to," he drawled.

"What's wrong with Rook?" I asked.

Royal rolled his eyes. "Something about his dead teammate's baby mama drama or something. Pretty sure he fucked her, and now he's got his panties in a twist that he overstepped."

My eyes widened. Rook, until recently, had been a Navy SEAL. His team had been attacked and dismantled when one of their own had betrayed them, killing one of Rook's teammates and injuring others. The guy who'd died had left behind a pregnant wife, and when her life had been threatened, Rook had moved in to protect her and her newborn.

I'd never pegged Rook, basically a slightly shorter and leaner version of Royal, as one to turn into Mr. Mom, but I had copious amounts of baby pics he'd sent through our family text thread to prove otherwise. We'd all known he had a thing for the baby's mom, Emerson, but falling for the widow of a guy you'd considered a brother tended to complicate shit.

After the threat had been neutralized, Rook had moved out of Emerson's life.

Or so I'd thought.

"He told you he hooked up with her?" I stared at him.

Royal sighed, like this whole conversation was annoying even though he'd started it. "We went down to San Diego to talk to that informant and meet with Ford. I formally offered him a job with Phoenix."

"He take it?"

"He's considering it," Royal answered. "While we were there, Rook was with Emerson and the kid. A lot. Next thing I know, he's telling me we need to come back to Los Angeles."

"And from that you deduced he slept with her?" I tried to smother an amused smile.

He shot me a bland look. "Only a few reasons a man runs away from a pretty woman he's obsessed with like his dick is on fire—he fucked up, or he fucked her and *then* fucked up."

"You're a regular Dr. Phil, huh?" I glared at him.

"You saying I'm wrong?"

I scoffed. "I'm saying hearing that from a guy who's had more one-night

stands than Dodger Stadium has seats is pretty fucking funny.”

He moved until he was right in front of me, his boots hitting mine. “That so?”

I just smirked.

“Call Bex.”

My hands came up to shove him back, a snarl pulling at my lips. He caught my wrists in his hands and hooked a leg behind my knees. My ass was on the ground before I could tell him to fuck off.

“See?” Looming over me, he arched a pointed eyebrow. “You’re a fucking mess.”

He held out a hand to help me up, but I slapped it away and stood on my own. “Fuck you.”

“Pretty sure you’ve been doing enough fucking for all the Woods brothers,” he muttered. “Are you trying to see if you can rot your dick off before you hit twenty-three?”

I winced, thinking of the lipstick-blood scare in the shower, and realized he wasn’t too far from the mark.

“It’s complicated,” I finally said, my shoulders sinking.

“Then un-complicate it,” he retorted, eyeing me. “Or at least figure out a way to function as a human being that’s a part of this team. It’d be nice if we could depend on you to be there when shit’s going down.”

My spine straightened, alarm ringing through me as it dawned on me that I hadn’t just checked out with my friends; I’d checked out on our damn business. “Meaning?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels, his jaw tight. “The informant I talked to finally got back to me last night. He thinks he tracked Jasper down to a town in Kosovo.”

I grimaced. “No extradition.”

“Exactly, but he’s still in Europe, since that’s where Kent’s operation is based. Word has it he’ll be traveling to Brussels in a week or two for a meeting with a few of the higher ups in the European and Asian markets, but the guest list has been vague. All my contact knows is that Jasper’s men are providing security on the ground.”

I hissed out a breath. Rising in the ranks of the military had never been our father’s endgame. No, he’d used all the contacts he’d amassed over decades in the armed forces to create the most elite group of mercenaries money could buy. Men who obeyed the person writing their check without

blinking about things like laws and morals. Black Box Ops was his baby now, and he hired the best and most twisted of the armed forces to do his bidding as foot soldiers.

“Does Linc know?” I asked.

“That his father is a sick motherfucker who sells women and children to the highest bidder? Pretty sure he’s aware,” Royal remarked, his tone cool.

“Fucker,” I snapped. Of course Linc was aware that his dad, Kent Westford, was as despicable a human being as they came. Sure he hid it well behind a billion-dollar hotel empire, but it was all a front for his human-trafficking enterprise.

It was what had bonded Ryan, Ash, Linc, and I together. Why we’d started Phoenix International, a company we all—along with Maddie, now—had an equal share in. We’d formed the company with the sole purpose of destroying our fathers, vowing that we’d never inherit our father’s sins.

Months earlier, we’d had a huge win by taking out Maddie’s and Ryan’s dads. Gary Cabot and Beckett Cain had been handling all their dirty money, laundering it and investing it so they could funnel it right back in. Kent was the brains of the entire operation, and Jasper provided all the muscle needed to transport and deliver purchases.

Taking my father out of the equation would leave Kent vulnerable. We’d already shaken their empire by bankrupting several of their ventures, but that meant Kent had simply funneled more of his own personal finances into the hotels and seedy clubs he ran under shell corporations. If we could eliminate Jasper, then Kent would be on his own.

Layer by layer, we were making progress.

“I think you and Rook should go to Brussels. See who Dad is meeting with. If we can cut their supply lines, it’ll be easier to break them,” Royal said.

“You want Rook and me to go?” I stared at him, incredulous.

He inclined his head. “Okay, Bishop, too. I think you and Rook need some perspective beyond your dicks. You’ve forgotten what we’re fighting for.”

“The fuck I have,” I spat. I’d seen firsthand the shit our fathers were capable of. It was the stuff that gave the boogeyman nightmares.

His hands came down heavy on my shoulders, squeezing to just the point of painful as he looked me in the eye. “You *have*. You’ve been spiraling since Christmas, little brother. We all thought you’d pull yourself out of it—

fuck knows you always have—but this time, it’s different.”

I glared at him. “Your pep talks suck.”

“You want pep talks, find a therapist. You want absolution for your sins, find a priest. You want to man the fuck up, then you get your ass on a plane in a week and start acting like you give a shit about people other than yourself. I’m not your keeper, Court, but I *am* the guy who will tell you it’s time to grow a pair and act like a goddamn adult.”

I jerked back like he’d hit me again, but the ironclad grip he had on my shoulders didn’t let me go far.

“Phoenix is at a tipping point—which you know—and you’re choosing *now* to live out your douchey playboy fantasies instead of acting like a grown goddamn man? I’m fucking embarrassed for you, bro. You’re acting like—” He cut himself off, leaving the unspoken words looming between us.

Ice settled in my bones. “Say it,” I ground out.

“It doesn’t matter.” Royal sighed, dropping his arms.

“Too much of a pussy to say it?” I challenged, daring him to finish the sentence.

His gray eyes cut to me, unflinching as steel. “You’re acting like Jasper.”

I flinched. A sucker punch to the jaw would’ve hurt less. Hell, a rusty icepick through my eye would’ve been easier to handle than being compared to that sadistic prick.

Still not done, he jabbed a finger into my chest. “*You* were the one who brought me into Phoenix. *You* convinced me and our brothers that this wasn’t about some rich little boy lashing out at Daddy for not being hugged enough. You said you wanted to make a difference. Has that changed?”

I shook my head, mute and a little numb.

His head tilted. “Then get off your ass and be the man I know you can be.”

“That simple, huh?” I asked roughly, my voice hoarse.

He raised his hands a little. “No, asshole, it’s *not* that simple. It’s a goddamn fight every motherfucking day, but it’s what we do. Unless you’re so far gone on the pity train that you forgot that.”

I drew my shoulders back. “I haven’t forgotten.”

“Then get your head back in the game, Court, because it’s not fair for us to carry your ass.” Royal reached up to slap the back of my head. I blocked the shot, grabbing his wrist and twisting his thumb until the muscle and tendons pulled tight.

He smiled, the unfamiliar expression catching me off guard for a beat. “Not bad, little brother.” Leaning into the pressure of my hold, he popped his thumb out of its joint.

“Jesus,” I swore, staring at his hand in shock. And then I was on my ass again, him having used my surprise as leverage.

Smirking down at me, he casually popped the thumb back into place without so much as a grimace. “But not good enough.”

“You’re a fucking psycho,” I muttered, shaking my head. This time I let him help me up.

A harsh laugh rumbled from his chest. “Don’t ever forget it.”

CHAPTER 3



BEX

“Rebecca!”

I was halfway down the stairs when I heard my grandmother call my name, her French accent giving it a posh spin that I’d always loved. “Yes, Mémé?” I trailed my hand down the ornate oak bannister and used the scrolling loop at the bottom to swing myself around and into the parlor like I was eight, not eighteen.

Mémé looked up at me from where she sat perched on the edge of a floral wingback chair near the fireplace, her legs crossed at the ankles and a deep frown set in her face. Behind her was a large picture window that looked out on a courtyard that bloomed a riot of brilliant colors in the spring, but right now, deep into winter at the beginning of February, showcased a few random snow flurries blowing around bare branches.

“Rebecca, this blasted contraption is yet again refusing to alert me to new calls. Your Aunt Celeste has been trying to get through, but it won’t make a lick of noise.” With a heavy sigh, she held the top-of-the-line iPhone out to me. “You know I’m utter rubbish when it comes to these new devices.”

Grinning, I took the phone and unlocked it with her passcode—her and Papa’s anniversary—before checking her settings. I turned the phone over, smothering a smirk when I saw the orange peeking up at me. She’d turned off her notifications. *Again.*

I quickly righted the issue and handed the phone back. “All better.”

She exhaled with a happy smile. “Thank you, chérie. Would you care to join me?” She motioned to the adjacent velvet couch, and I couldn’t refuse. The soft fabric was like a hug, so familiar and precious that everything seemed a little less awful.

I'd always loved my grandparents' home in Paris. Situated on a quaint street in the 16th arrondissement, with a lush, green park at one end and gas lamps illuminating the cobblestone street at night, it was like something out of another life.

The three-story château had been in our family for over three hundred years, with some of the stone and wood inside dating back even longer. With vaulted ceilings, gold accents, and ornate lines, it made me feel as though I lived in a fairytale. My cousins and I had spent summers playing hide and seek for hours in the home's three stories and numerous rooms.

Over the years it had been updated—carpets replaced, walls painted and papered, and plumbing updated—but it had kept the same feel as the original home. It was ornate and decadent, but not overwhelmingly so.

The main parlor was Mémé's favorite, with its large fireplace and furniture that looked like it had been plucked straight out of the Regency era. At one point, the producers of some streaming company making a TV show out of a famous historical romance series had tried paying my grandparents to use the location for filming. They'd declined, not wanting to have their lives disrupted by TV crews and actors.

I'd sat in this room for hours with Mémé. She was usually reading or working on her latest crochet project. I was usually reading, too, or watching a movie on my laptop with my earbuds in. We didn't need to fill the silence with chatter; we were happy just being near each other.

"Have you spoken to your maman?" Mémé asked, arching a delicate brow. At seventy-nine years old, she was still in shape and had an elegance that commanded respect and awe. Her skin was radiant, her eyes a sparkling blue that my grandfather claimed captivated him.

"She's working late," I replied with a tight smile.

Mémé sighed, looking mildly distressed. "She works too hard. That's why she had her episode."

Episode was one way of putting it. Most people would call it a heart attack, but Mémé preferred to give things a more positive spin. It was an endearingly naive trait that everyone in the family smiled about.

But this time, Mémé was right. Mom's heart attack had been scary, and it was brought on by a genetic flaw no one had noticed. Her heart had been a ticking bomb in her chest, and years of prolonged stress had finally led to it seizing up one night a few months earlier.

When Mom had filed for divorce from my father, sold off her private

practice, and decided to start over in Paris, I'd never expected to stay with her. I had a life in California. Granted, that life, up until the past six months, had kinda sucked, but still.

Okay, that was a lie.

The past six months hadn't exactly been a picnic. In addition to Mom's heart attack and my parents' divorce, I'd also learned that my father was into some seriously shady shit with some seriously messed up people. Plus I'd been drugged, almost raped, and kidnapped. Oh, and I'd almost died in a huge earthquake.

It had been an eventful few months.

I'd come to Paris with Mom for Christmas because she'd needed a break. But when we'd arrived, she'd sat me down and told me that she planned to live here permanently, and she wanted me to stay. If not for college, then at least for the immediate future.

It took a lot of soul-searching, but I'd finally realized that her reasons for needing a fresh start were why I needed one, too. At least a temporary one, and since I'd been a total nerd who devoted all her time to classes and studying—the byproducts of being a bullied adolescent at a private boarding school—I'd done enough work to be done with high school. Since I was already of age, I filled out the necessary paperwork and graduated six months early.

Staying in Paris for a few months meant I could sort some shit out before diving into college in the fall as a freshman. I'd already decided I wanted to be pre-med, following in my mom's footsteps. But where she'd focused on private practice and then built a career as a private concierge doctor to the elite, I wanted to focus on oncology. Specifically pediatric oncology.

As if sensing my thoughts, Mémé fixed me with a look. "I do wish you'd reconsider your decision, bébé."

My cheeks warmed, and I ducked my head. "I know, Mémé, but I want to help kids the way I was helped."

She made a sound in the back of her throat. "Not everyone will have the outcome you did, Rebecca. Can your heart handle that?"

She was right. I'd first been diagnosed with leukemia as an infant. But I was told I'd beaten that easily.

It was when the disease resurfaced when I was nine that it became hell. I'd gone through ten brutal months of treatments and chemo. For the longest time, I'd thought that was what had broken my parents' marriage; that my

sickness and the stress of keeping me alive had destroyed their relationship.

It wasn't until recently that I'd learned it wasn't my cancer that had destroyed it at all; it was my dad and the decisions he'd made back then, including almost getting me killed.

I wished I could remember, but that time in my life was shrouded in confusion. I'd done some research, and apparently there was a thing called dissociative amnesia where the brain essentially blocked out traumatic events.

Shoving those thoughts away before I spiraled, I focused on my grandmother while twisting a lock of dark hair streaked with faded teal around one finger. I needed to redo the color. Or change it. "I want to help people."

Her face fell a bit, but she reached over and patted my hand. "Of course you do. You are like your mother in that way." Her blue eyes hardened. "And unlike your father, damn his soul."

"Mémé." I sighed, shaking my head. I wasn't going to defend my dad. Especially not since he'd made a few half-hearted attempts to reach out to me but then seemed to give up. I hadn't heard from him since he'd sent a simple *Merry Christmas* text five weeks ago.

The past six months had been crazy, and I needed a break.

My phone rang, and I pulled it from the back pocket of my jeans and grinned when I saw it was a video chat request from my bestie. I looked at my grandmother, but she was already taking her crochet project from the small basket beside her chair.

I hurried from the room and detoured through the kitchen as I answered the call. "Hey, girl!"

Maddie grinned at me, her blonde hair a mess of loose waves around her face. "Bex! Have I mentioned how much I hate that you're on the other side of the planet?"

"Only every day," I drawled with a laugh, opening one of the industrial-size refrigerators and snagging a tangerine. After I closed the door, I started jogging up the back staircase toward my bedroom.

"You left me all alone with these four," she whined, the camera jostling as she hurled herself onto the couch.

I chuckled. "Well, you're the one who asked them to move in. You and Ryan could've had your own place..."

"With all the sex in all the rooms anytime I wanted," she agreed with a wistful sigh. "Instead, I have to stick to our bedroom, unless I know for a fact

the guys will be out for a while.”

“Hussy,” I teased, entering my bedroom. I kicked the door shut with my foot and beelined for the giant beanbag chair in the corner by my bookshelf. It easily could’ve fit three people, and the ultra-plush faux-mink fur was the softest thing I’d ever touched.

She ducked her head. “Guilty, but my husband is seriously talented with ___”

“Lalala!” I started singing loudly, not all that interested in hearing about her sexcapades with her super-hot husband.

“Fine,” she huffed, “but you know I couldn’t leave them behind. They’re like a matching set, and I wasn’t breaking up the band.”

“That was a lot of metaphors,” I commented, situating the phone so she could still see me before starting to peel the tangerine. The sweet citrus scent made my mouth water.

She waved a dismissive hand, the screen again almost tumbling over. “Whatever. How’s Paris? I already convinced Ryan we need to come visit you for spring break.”

“Paris is...” I glanced out the large window. Beyond it I could see part of the Eiffel Tower. “Paris is what I need.”

Maddie’s face fell a bit. “Not gonna lie, Bex. I was totally hoping you’d say it sucked and you were coming back to California.”

“Not for a few months,” I said, my tone soft. I hated disappointing her. She was my best friend. Hell, she was one of my *only* friends. I hadn’t been popular in school. Actually, it was the opposite. I’d been the pariah, always on the outside, until Maddie showed up and changed everything.

She sighed again. “I get it. I mean, needing the break. But I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.” My lips turned down in a sad sort of pout.

She sucked in a deep breath and forced a smile. “Okay, tell me all about your life.”

“We just talked two days ago!” I reminded her with a laugh.

She looked offended. “And in that time, you could’ve been swept off your feet by a sexy Parisian man with an eight-pack and a black beret who bakes you fresh croissants daily.”

“That’s oddly specific.” I grinned as someone spoke off camera.

Maddie’s gaze flicked above the screen, her mouth dropping open and her cheeks turning red. “Ryan, I was *kidding*. I don’t give a shit about sexy guys in Paris or anywhere else.” She paused and winked at me. “Don’t get married

until you're forty, Bex. Husbands are highly overrated."

I giggled as her eyes went wide. A second later, Ryan appeared in part of the screen. He shot me a wolfish smile before lowering his lips to her ear and whispering something that made her gasp, her jaw falling open.

Smirking, Ryan drew back and traced the outline of her parted lips with his finger. "I accept, baby. But finish with your friend first." To me he added, "See ya later, Bex."

Still flustered, Maddie looked back at me, but I could see the lust glazing her eyes. "I swear, that man..."

"Still don't wanna know," I reminded her.

"Whatever. My question still stands."

Now it was my turn to shift uncomfortably. "Not really, no. I've been hanging with my grandparents and reading a lot."

She gave me a look. "Bex, if you're blowing me off for the next six months to live out your French fantasies, then I demand you at least go on a date."

"I don't date," I hedged.

"No, you didn't date *here* because of... Well, because. But you're in a whole new city. You're an amazing person," she informed me.

"Isn't *amazing person* code for homely and meek?" I snorted.

She arched a brow. "Fine. You've got a great rack and an ass you could bounce a quarter off of."

My jaw dropped.

"Want me to call Linc over for his opinion, too?"

"No," I spluttered. "Linc likes anything that has boobs and a willing hole."

"Valid," she said with a sage nod. "Now why don't—" She was cut off by an excited yell, and then grinned as a tiny human landed on her. "Hey, sweets. You have fun with the boys?"

Corinne pulled back with a brilliant smile and a nod. "Yup! Royal helped me catch the biggest fish. Rook got a smaller one, and Court didn't get any."

There was no denying the kick to my heart at hearing his name. God, would it always be this way?

Seeing the phone, Cori turned to me. "Hi, Bex!"

"Hey, Cor," I greeted, waving a bit.

Corinne turned back to Maddie. "Is that lady gone? The mean one that was in Court's bed this morning?"

Maddie shot me a stricken look before turning back to her sister-in-law. “Uh, yeah. She’s gone, honey.”

“Good. And who sleeps *naked*?” Corinne went on, completely unaware that she was carving into my heart with a rusty razor. She looked disgusted by the naked shenanigans, and I was right there with her. “It was so gross.”

“Cori—” Maddie tried.

“I’m glad she’s gone,” Corinne decided. “I’m gonna go help with lunch. Bye, Bex!” She bounced away.

Maddie’s eyes turned to me. “Bex—”

I cleared my throat. “Hey, you know what? I’ve gotta go.”

“Shit,” she swore. “Bex, I’m sorry.”

“Why?” I forced a brittle laugh. “Court’s an adult, and he can do whatever he wants, right? We both can. You know what, Mads? I think you’re right. Maybe it’s time I go out on a date. Try some of that awesome sex you’ve been telling me about.”

“That’s not...” She trailed off, chewing her bottom lip.

“Talk later, yeah?” I smiled again, feeling like my face was going to crack.

“Bex—”

“Bye, Maddie.” I hung up and tossed the phone aside. It lit up a second later with a text from Maddie, probably apologizing *again* for something that wasn’t her fault.

No, it was *his* fault. And, yeah, maybe mine, too, because I wouldn’t let myself move on. I was still that little girl with a crush on the boy she could never have. The boy who’d pushed her away and then turned into the man who’d broken her heart.

“Time to grow up, Bex,” I told myself, swallowing back the wave of tears that pricked the backs of my eyes.

Court Woods might have been the first boy I’d ever loved, but he wouldn’t be the last. It was time to move on, the same way he had.

CHAPTER 4



BEX

If I was going to move on with my life, I needed a wingman.
Wingwoman.

Maddie, being on the other side of the globe, was a no-go, so I called in the next best thing: my cousin Camille.

My mom's older sister, Celeste, had two daughters. Jayme was the oldest, and she was currently traveling the world with my favorite band, By the Edge, as their tour director. She was awesome, edgy, and fun, but it was her younger sister, Cami, that I counted as one of my best friends.

Camille was two years older than me. After her parents' divorce when she was three, she'd split her time between Paris and England, leaving her fluent in two languages. With her pale golden hair and big hazel eyes, she had this ethereal sort of grace that I'd always envied. I lived for her stories of scandals and drama at the ballet academy where she'd trained for years.

After a falling out with my childhood best friend had left me feeling alone and sad, Cami was the one who'd started calling me Bex. She'd simply declared that I needed a change.

I had been two weeks into a summer-long moping session when Camille burst through the door and convinced me I was better off without Madelaine, the coolest girl in my school, who had been my best friend for almost three years.

I'd trusted Madelaine, and now I knew the real reasons that she'd dropped me like yesterday's trash, but at thirteen, losing her friendship had been the end of my world. And it was made worse when she went from being my best friend to being the school's worst bully, leading the charge against *me*.

Thirteen sucked enough without adding best-friend betrayals on top of it.

After that, Cami became my best friend. She'd spent the rest of the summer with me, even though she'd had a boyfriend who had ultimately broken up with her because she'd prioritized me over him. It still made my heart all sorts of fuzzy, knowing that my super-sophisticated cousin had picked me over a guy who was literally a model.

I'd gone back to California at the end of summer with a new hairstyle that Cami had found in a magazine, a new wardrobe, and a new name. That was the summer Bex was born and Rebecca was put away. Cami was the one who'd convinced my family to start calling me by the new name and had even gone so far as to send gifts and flowers to me at school under it. And because she'd wanted to make sure the world knew me as Bex, she'd had them delivered to me during classes from random names, going as far as to enlist her private school friends to help write the messages so the handwriting varied.

I finally made her stop after a teacher threatened to give me detention if my delivery schedule interrupted his class again.

Did it change the fact that I'd still been an object of ridicule and mockery? Or that Madelaine was a heinous bitch who'd devoted her life to torturing me? No. But it had allowed me to reclaim a piece of myself that had been stolen, and *that* had helped me survive the past five years.

I'd mostly kept to myself at school, but Maddie's arrival had changed that. With her, I had an actual best friend and ally. And, of course, with her came her fiancé... and his friends.

It was weird; I'd grown up with Ryan, Ash, Linc, and Court, but I hadn't really seen them since I was nine. We'd all changed. Some for the better, and some for the worse.

My mistake was in thinking we could move beyond our past. They had proven to me, yet again, that I was disposable.

I'd spent the first eighteen years of my life playing the part of the wallflower, and I was *done*. I wasn't entering college as a scared little mouse.

My bedroom door slammed open with the force of a category-five hurricane.

"Oh, darling," Cami sing-songed, striking a sultry pose in the doorway, "did you miss me?"

Unable to help myself, I giggled and jumped off my bed, where I'd been reading the newest Fiona Davenport romance. Sometimes a girl just needed a quick-and-dirty happily ever after.

Cami stalked into the room, her long legs perfectly suited for a runway in Milan. She threw my door shut with as much force as she'd opened it. "You look..."

I arched a brow and waited.

Cami lowered oversized black sunglasses down her perfectly upturned nose, her glossy pink lips bunching to one side as she looked at me. "Well, it's nothing a trip to Le Bon Marché and the salon won't fix." She tilted her head. "But I *do* like the teal streaks. Much more subtle than Jayme—she died her whole head *neon green*. She's like a walking limeade. It's insane."

I rolled my eyes but opened my arms as she surged forward to wrap me in a bear hug. She squealed, rocking us back and forth before twirling away and plopping down on the seat in front of my vanity. Without fail, she started checking out the scant amount of makeup I had on display.

"And a trip to Sephora," she added, dropping my mascara like it had Ebola.

"Are you done critiquing me yet?" I planted my hands on my hips and tried to glare at her, but a smile kept cracking my lips.

With a dramatic sigh, Cami leaned back against my vanity, crossing her skinny jean-clad legs. "Bex, honey, we both know I'm right."

I shook my head with a shrug. "Fine. You're right. Can you fix me?"

Now she frowned, sitting up straight. "You're not broken."

I dropped onto the edge of my bed. "Feels like I am."

Her head tipped to the side, a wave of cornsilk blonde hair falling over her shoulder. "Explain, please."

Suddenly on the spot, I squirmed. My gaze dropped to the floor.

"Oh, *hell* no." Cami stood up and dragged the seat closer until our knees were touching. Her eyes sparkled with ferocity. "Whose ass am I kicking?"

I scoffed. "Mine? I mean, I should know better, Cam."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'll be the judge of that. Tell me everything."

"It's complicated," I warned, not sure I had the mental bandwidth to go through the past few months of my life.

Cami shrugged a slim shoulder. "I have time. I cleared my entire night for you. I even canceled my date with Alex, so you better give me something worthy of missing out on multiple orgasms."

My eyes widened and I choked a little on my own saliva. "Camille!"

"Oh, shush." She swatted my knee. "Tell me, Rebecca Eleanor Whittier."

I cringed a little. My full name sounded so... geriatric. I shook it off and

looked her dead in the eye. “It really *is* complicated.”

She sobered. “Bex, I know I’ve been busy lately—”

I let out a little snort. “Are you kidding me? Cami, you were named the top toilet dancer.”

Her jaw dropped with a shriek of mock-outrage. She pushed my shoulder. “You’re *such* a twat.”

I giggled. “Fine. I meant to say *danseuse étoile*.” Truth be told, I knew what an honor it was for someone Cami’s age to be named a premier ballerina of the Paris Opera Ballet. Camille had dedicated her life to dancing. She’d started ballet as soon as she was able to walk, and I’d seen her bare feet enough to realize she was dedicated as hell. Those toes were the things of nightmares.

At the end of the company’s last season, she’d been promoted to her new position. She put in ten-hour days, six days a week. Today she’d already been up since four a.m., getting in a workout and then several choreography sessions for her upcoming season, which was slated to begin next month.

“You know I’m crazy proud of you, right?” I asked.

She grinned. “I am well aware that I’m the shining light of the Moreau granddaughters.”

“Okay, first, there are only three of us,” I pointed out, “and it’s not like my train wreck of a life is giving you much competition.”

“So? Tell me about the train wreck,” Cami said with a soft smile. “I know my schedule is insane, but I love you, B. I’m always here for you.”

I exhaled a long breath. “First, I need you to promise not to get judgy.”

She pressed a hand to her chest, looking aghast. “I would never.”

“Sure.” I laughed. “Okay, let’s start with the fact that I made a friend at school.”

Her eyes widened with happiness for me. “Rebecca El—”

“It’s Madelaine Cabot,” I finished, knowing I couldn’t use Maddie’s real name. Did I trust Cami? Absolutely, but Maddie’s real identity was a secret for a lot of reasons, and she’d trusted me with that info. I wouldn’t betray her by telling Camille, or anyone, that Maddie was actually Madelaine’s twin, *Madison*, who had assumed her life after Madelaine was murdered.

Camille went from elated to enraged. “Rebecca Eleanor Whittier.” It came out frosty, if not outright hostile.

“That sounds a lot like your judgy tone.”

Her mouth snapped shut, but she still glowered at me.

“I can’t give you all the details, but Maddie isn’t who you think she is.” I picked my words carefully.

Cami scoffed. “Madelaine—”

“*Maddie*,” I cut in firmly. “She goes by Maddie, and kinda like the way you helped me bring Bex into the world? Maddie did the same. She’s not the evil psycho either of us thought she was. There was a lot going on behind the scenes, and she treated me like she did to protect me.”

“Where in the abuser’s handbook is that bullshit logic coming from?”

“Camille.” I eyed her, not willing to budge. “I need you to trust me, okay? Maddie is... I wouldn’t have survived the last few months without her.”

She still didn’t look convinced. “Bex, this girl once took out an advertisement for five-dollar blow jobs on the internet and gave people *your number*.”

I winced because, yeah, that had sucked. Pun *not* intended. “She also saved me from being date raped at a party last fall.”

Cami sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh, my God. Bex, why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

“I dunno,” I hedged. “I guess I was kinda embarrassed? I mean, the whole thing was stupid. I’m so not victim blaming, but I can admit I blew past the flashing warning signs. Anyway, Maddie got me out of there before something bad happened.”

“One good deed doesn’t undo years of torture,” Cami said, shaking her head. “Look, if you want to be besties with the enemy, then... okay. But I plan to remain skeptically displeased about this arrangement until... Well, just until.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Cami was fiercely loyal, and I’d called her in hysterical tears more than once after Madelaine had taken her bullying too far.

“Fair enough,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair. “The thing is, Maddie’s engaged. To Ryan Cain.”

Cami frowned. “Wait, I know that name.”

“Ryan Cain is best friends with... Court Woods.” I whispered the last two words, like uttering his name might invoke the man himself.

“Holy shit. *The Court Woods?*” Cami’s eyes were as big as a shocked cartoon character’s.

I nodded grimly. “Yeah.”

Cami looked around my room. “Tell me you have some kind of alcohol in here, because I need a damn drink for this conversation.”

“Cam, I’m serious.”

“So am I.” She stood up. “Be right back.” Before I could say anything, she was out the door. When she returned less than five minutes later with a bottle of champagne, I could only shake my head.

Without missing a beat, Cami popped the cork, lifted the bottle to her lips, and drank. Five gulps later, she set the bottle at her feet and waved a hand at me. “Okay. Continue.”

I eyed the bottle, spotting part of the label. “Jesus, Camille! That’s a thousand-dollar bottle of champagne!”

She gave me a *duh* look. “And? It’s the cheapest thing Mémé has in the wine cellar, B. You raided it enough with me over the years to know that.”

“Uh-uh.” I wagged a finger at her. “*You* raided. I was the idiot you conned into being your lookout.”

She swiped the bottle and took another pull. “You were a shitty lookout. What kind of accomplice says, ‘In the wine cellar!’ when their mom calls out for them?”

“The kind who was fourteen and not ready to be grounded for the rest of her natural life,” I grumbled. “If you wanted a Bonnie to your Clyde, you should have picked someone who wouldn’t break under the scrutiny of maternal inquisitions.”

Cami narrowed her eyes. “Don’t use your big fancy words on me, Bex. And I’m freaking Bonnie. You can be Clyde.”

“Fine,” I muttered, shooting her a grumpy pout.

“Now stop stalling and tell me all about tall, dark, and sexy,” Cami demanded.

I gave her a look.

“What? You’re gonna tell me he didn’t grow up gorgeous?” She snorted and took another drink. “I met him once, the summer I came to the States when I was eleven, and I’m pretty sure I was still imagining him the first time I masturbated at thirteen.”

“You remember the first time you…” I hated that word, so I stumbled over saying it.

Cami arched a perfect brow. “Flicked the bean? DJ’d my downstairs?”

I groaned. “Oh, God, *stop*.”

But Cami was on a roll. “Buttered my muffin? Jilled off? Pet the kitty?”

Diddled my—”

“Stop!” I shouted with a laugh, reaching back for a pillow and hurling it at her head. Heat radiated off my cheeks.

“—skittle,” she managed from behind a wall of foam. She grinned at me as she tossed the pillow aside.

“You’re such a dork,” I huffed.

“Spoken like a girl who doesn’t routinely do the three-knuckle shuffle,” she teased.

“Where the hell did you learn all that?” I asked, exasperated.

“I went to an all-girls ballet academy my entire academic career,” she deadpanned. “I can also curse in six languages. But we’re not talking about my formerly pathetic life, we’re talking about *yours*.”

Oh, yeah. Right.

“So,” she said, waving her hands, “you were telling me about how you finally got to screw the man of your dreams?”

My cheeks were now five-alarm-fire hot. “What? No. First of all, I didn’t. And second of all, ‘man of my dreams’ is a bit of a stretch.”

Cami reached over and took my hand. “B, I love you, but I also know that you’ve been obsessed with Court Woods since you were an infant. And I’m not giving you shit for it, because, trust me, *I get it*. Even at thirteen years old? He was so gorgeous. Tall, that chocolate brown hair, and those eyes that —”

I made a small, annoyed sound in the back of my throat.

Her eyes snapped open wide. “Did you just *growl* at me?”

I folded my arms, refusing to answer that question.

She held up her hands. “Message received. You’re still just as territorial over him as you were when you were a kid.”

“I was not,” I snapped.

She shot me a look. “B, I was teasing him about losing a race to... I don’t even remember his name, and you *accidentally* spilled an entire glass of lemonade on me.”

I sniffed. “I tripped.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Whatever you say.”

Sighing, I rested my elbows on my knees. “No, he didn’t grow up as gorgeous as you’re thinking.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“He’s even hotter,” I lamented, dropping my head into my hands as I

remembered an all-grown-up Court and exactly how he looked.

Those long, gangly limbs had filled out and were thick with muscle. Every time I saw him, it looked like he was one flex away from his biceps ripping through his t-shirt. He was seriously tall, and absolutely had the dark and broody thing going for him.

But it wasn't like I was the only one who'd noticed—even Cori had met his latest bedfellow.

I rubbed my chest, a physical ache hitting me right in the feels at the idea of him with someone else.

This was exactly why I needed Camille.

“So, what's the problem?” Cami was still giggling.

“The problem is he's a goddamn liar and a freaking manwhore, and I can't spend the rest of my life hoping for something that's never going to happen.” I wasn't sure if I was angry or sad. I wanted to throw the bottle of champagne against the wall and break down in tears.

Cami stopped laughing. “Oh, honey.”

“I need to forget he ever existed.” I took a deep breath. “And I need you to help me do it.”

CHAPTER 5



BEX

The grin that split Camille's face was terrifying. One of those smiles that basically said I was screwed. Like she'd been waiting for the day I handed her the reins to my life.

Without saying a word to me, she pulled her phone out of a hidden pocket in her leggings and pressed a button before lifting it to her ear. "Hey, baby. Remember how you were asking me if I had a friend for your brother since he's back in town?"

Panic struck like a lightning bolt, and I jumped up. "No!"

She held me off with a hand and a stern look as she kept talking. "It just so happens that my cousin has decided to spend a few months in Paris, and I think Eric would love her."

"Cami! Stop it," I hissed, trying to keep my voice down.

She pushed me away and slid off the seat, dancing away like she was, well, a dancer. "I'm hanging out with Bex now, honey. I'll call you later." She hung up as I jumped and tried to snag the phone.

"Seriously? A blind date?" I demanded.

She shot me an incredulous look. "Uh, you're welcome."

I resisted the urge to grab another pillow and whack her across her gorgeous face. Instead I threw my arms in the air with a disbelieving scoff. "Cam, the last thing I want is some pity date with your boyfriend's brother. I'm not *that* desperate." *Yet.*

"Okay, slow down, B," she told me, her eyes big as she sat back down and reached for the champagne. She passed it to me.

I didn't even think before lifting it to my lips and gulping.

"First, Eric just moved back to Paris after being away at boarding school

and then college, where he got his MBA or something,” she started.

“Code for he looks like a bridge troll,” I groused.

Cami lifted a brow and swiped through her phone until she found what she wanted, then she passed the device to me. “Does he look like a troll to you?”

I’d met Alex once, and only for a few minutes. Dark blond hair, cool gray eyes, and a build like a lacrosse player—muscular, but on the lean side. It wasn’t enough to get a full impression of him, but he was definitely good looking.

But the guy next to him in the photo with light brown hair, artfully mussed, and soulful gray eyes was most definitely *not* a troll. In fact, if anything, he made Alex look like a troll. He looked like he belonged on stage with a band, crooning about heartbreak and love under a spotlight as thousands of women—and men—sang along.

Cami grinned at me as she snagged her phone. “See? The Lambert-Durand brothers do *not* have any complaints in the looks department.” She pressed a dramatic hand to her chest. “The Lord truly blessed those men.”

“How can a guy like *that* need help getting a date?” Maybe it was their last name that turned women off? Lambert-Durand sounded like an eighties band.

“The way Alex tells it, Eric is super smart and went to a lot of elite European boarding schools, but they were all boys only. He was always super focused on school and never had a chance to date. He’s, like, a genius or something. Honestly, I think Alex is kinda jealous of his little brother, but that’s just between us.”

“Oh.” I licked my lips, a nervous habit I’d never been able to break and also the reason I always carried lip balm in my purse.

Looking entirely too smug, she swiped the champagne bottle from me. “I haven’t actually met Eric yet, but Alex said his dad is worried that Eric is too serious, so he asked Alex to help get him out of the house. You know how I told you that Alex works for his father’s investment firm?”

I nodded, vaguely recalling that detail.

“Eric runs a shipping business that their late mother’s family owned. Like, he’s a twenty-three-year-old CEO of a million-dollar corporation,” she gushed. “How insane is that?”

So, let’s recap:

Broody guy who made my lady bits sit up and take notice? Check.

Early twenties and running a multi-million-dollar company? Check.
I definitely had a type.

But there was one major difference between Eric and Court: Eric *wasn't* Court. Which meant I might have a shot at my heart not getting broken yet again.

Sighing, I slumped. "Fine."

Cami brightened. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I allowed myself a laugh, happy to see one of my favorite humans in the world beaming at me.

Setting the bottle aside, she clapped her hands. "Oh, yay! B, this is going to be epic. We're going to have so much fun. We need to shop."

I glanced across the room at my closet. "I have plenty of stuff here to wear."

Standing up with more grace and fluidity than a human should possess, Cami shot me a disbelieving look. "Okay, then, fine. I can shop and you can... watch."

"How generous of you," I drawled, even as I got to my feet.

With a squeal, she threw her arms around my neck. "Do you know how much I've missed you?"

"You realize I follow you on Instagram, right? I've spent the last year watching you live it up with your dance friends and freaking models," I pointed out even as I hugged her back.

"But none of them are *you*," she replied. "It's hard having a friendship with any of the other dancers when I'm pretty sure they'd smear oil on the stage just so I'd break a leg."

"Seriously?" I gaped at her.

She let out a humorless laugh. "Honestly, before I met Alex, I didn't have much of a social life."

She'd told me as much when we'd texted, but a text didn't capture the loneliness or longing on her face. A tight band wrapped around my chest, making it hard to breathe.

I'd spent the past few months in a whirlwind of chaos and, as a result, I'd kinda iced Cami out when it sounded like she could've really used a friend. I couldn't change the past but, moving forward, I could be the cousin and friend she'd always been to me.

"New plan," I suggested, going to my desk and picking up my purse. "How about if we go out for dinner and you tell me all about Alex?"

She gave me a suspicious look. “And shopping?”

I grinned. “And we’ll totally go shopping, too. I guess I could at least use a new mascara. Pretty sure the one you picked up is from the last time I visited and you took me to Sephora.” Besides, I did love shopping, too.

Cami gasped and whirled, grabbing the mascara and chucking it into the trash can. “Are you freaking kidding me, Rebecca Eleanor?”

I blanched. “I mean—”

“Have you ever seen what eye mites can do? They’re grubby little things that grow in your lashes.” Cami looked utterly horrified. “Six months, Bex. That’s how often you change your mascara.”

“I mean, I have dark lashes. I don’t use it that often—”

She held up a hand. “We’re not negotiating the shelf life of an opened tube of mascara. I love you too much to let little insects burrow into your eyeballs and lay eggs.”

I wasn’t sure that was how eye mites worked, but the idea of getting some funky eye infection from old mascara definitely gave me the creepy-crawlies.

Cami shot me a knowing look. “You’re imagining bugs digging—”

“Stop!” I shouted, lunging forward to slap my hand over her mouth, but she spun away with a laugh while at the same time opening my bedroom door.

“Let’s go, Rebecca,” she called, her lilting voice carrying as she hurried down the hallway.

With a reluctant sigh, I followed my cousin, my heart lighter than it had been in weeks.

This was exactly what I needed: a day out with one of my favorite humans to remind me that there was more to life than broody bad boys who ripped out your heart.

CHAPTER 6



COURT

“Damn.” A sharp catcalling whistle followed the awed word. I glanced over my shoulder to see Maddie descending the stairs in a short red dress, her hair swept up in some elaborate twist that somehow managed to look both elegant and effortless. Her heels clicked across the marble floor as she made it to the landing, but it was the way she turned bashful at his praise that made me grin.

“Thanks, Linc,” she muttered, her cheeks turning a few shades pinker than the dress she wore. Her hands fluttered around her torso, patting the dress like it was wrinkled. “Is it too much? I swear, California does *not* understand winter.”

Maddie had grown up in Michigan, in a town near Detroit. Usually by the first week of February, her town was buried under a foot of snow. But here in southern California, the temps hadn’t dipped below seventy-two.

“Nah.” Linc took a massive bite of the apple in his hand while he leaned against the railing of the staircase. “Seriously, Mads, you look hot. New dress?”

Her blush deepened as she gave a shy nod, and I was yet again reminded of all the ways she was different from her twin sister. Not that I’d ever really known Madelaine. Sure, I’d known her growing up and known that she was friends with Becca, but after I’d cut Becca out of my life, I hadn’t given Madelaine a second thought until Ryan had announced they were getting married.

Ryan’s father was a fucking bastard for a lot of things, but maybe the one good thing he’d done was arrange Ryan and Madelaine’s engagement, because that had brought Madison into Ryan’s life. Into all our lives.

Where Lainey had been callous and cruel, Maddie was sweet and friendly. She was loyal and kind, and she'd won a permanent spot in our group even before Ryan wifed her up for the first time. Besides, with her came Becca.

As much as the way we were now killed me, I would never regret the time I'd had with Becca before things went FUBAR.

Again.

Linc lifted an arm to rest on the bannister, his dark blue eyes glittering in a teasing way that was all too familiar. "Mads, if you ever change your mind, I know a great divorce attorney."

"And I know seven places to bury your body that the cops would never think to check," Ryan retorted as he came down the stairs, fastening a button at his wrist. He slapped the back of Linc's head before coming to a stop in front of Maddie. His eyes went practically feral with lust as his gaze devoured her. "Fuck, baby."

She shot him a coy smile, sliding her hands up his chest to loop around his neck. The chandelier overhead caught the several carats of colorless diamond on her finger, sending scattered rainbows across the white walls of the entrance. "Play your cards right, and you absolutely can later, Mr. Cain."

The return gaze he sent her—all heat and promises of debauchery—almost gave *me* a semi.

"Where are you two going?" Linc asked, taking another bite of apple.

"Cain Industries fundraiser," Ryan replied with a grimace. "Unfortunately the PR team said missing it would send a bad message to the board."

Maddie sighed and shook her head. "Babe, it's for the Los Angeles Food Bank."

He scowled. "I can just as easily write them a check here as I can at the event."

"But at the event you can meet more people who can write more checks," she pointed out, her tone soft. "And as someone who frequently had to rely on food banks, I know they can never have enough help."

Ryan's expression instantly changed from annoyed to pained. "Mads."

Maddie hadn't grown up like the rest of us. We'd all had our share of trauma and heartache, but we'd never had to wonder if there would be a next meal or if we'd be evicted from our mega mansions.

"I'm just saying," she continued, her chin lifted in challenge, "writing a check is good, but setting up a system to keep multiple checks coming in is

better. *You* can do that, Ry. You're the freaking CEO of Cain Industries. You keep saying you're going to be different than your father, and this is where you prove it. Show the world you're more than a kid who had Daddy's company handed to him."

Ryan bristled, his icy blue eyes sparking.

Maddie's hands framed his face. "Show them who you are. Show them why you're so much more than Beckett Cain's son. Be the man I know you are."

I'd known Ryan Cain since I was an infant. We'd grown up together, and I'd seen him in every phase of his life: reckless kid who thought he was indestructible, belligerent adolescent who hated his dad and the whole world, and cold, calculating man who was the reason Phoenix International was founded.

But I had to admit, Ryan Cain ass over head in love was probably my favorite iteration of the man.

Not that I'd ever tell him that.

The way he absolutely crumbled when Maddie looked at him made my chest ache. The way he loved her was the stuff of legends. They'd overcome an evil twin, two sadistic dads, multiple kidnappings, and even a fucking natural disaster.

It was like he'd never even lived until she came along.

And fuck if I didn't know how that felt.

"Court."

I blinked and realized Maddie had left Ryan's side and come to stand in the opening of the great room where everyone usually hung out.

Clasping her hands in front of her, she gave me a worried look. "Are you okay?"

My gaze jumped past her to Ryan, who also arched a brow. Next to him, even Linc had sobered.

I gave Maddie my attention and forced a smile. "Yeah, Mads. I'm good."

The corners of her mouth tipped up. "Okay, but we're here if you want to talk."

I'd rather drink acid. "I know. I appreciate it. Have fun tonight."

"We will," Ryan answered for them both, grabbing her hand and tugging her away with a grin. He looked from me to Linc. "Don't wait up."

Maddie giggled, the sound one of pure happiness. "Bye, guys!"

Linc followed them to the door and closed it behind them. The heavy fall

of his footsteps coming back was a pretty clear warning that I wouldn't be spending the evening watching reruns of *The Office* like I'd planned.

His massive body launched over the back of the couch I was chilling on, his foot damn near clipping my head. He landed with a thud, tossing me a wild grin. "What's the plan for tonight?"

"Nothing," I replied, my tone even if not a little bored.

His grin widened. "Does this mean you've finally decided to give your dick a weekend off?"

I kept my expression stony.

Not that it deterred my best friend. It took a lot to truly bother Linc. The guy was happy playing the comic relief of our quartet. Ryan was the leader, Ash was the brains, Linc was the comedy, and I was the muscle. We all had our roles.

At least, that was how most people saw us. It was the image we'd presented—cultivated—since middle school. But only the four of us knew the truth.

Ash was the neurotic one—the guy who would stay up for three days straight when he went into his manic, hyper-focused state of obsession.

Ryan was brutally efficient. The preppy, pretty boy looks hid a mind that worked, at times, like a serial killer. He used charm and charisma like swords.

I was the silent one. The one always lurking in the background, the one who was constantly trying to prove himself to the whole damn world. As a kid, finding out my dad had an entire other family had rocked me, and he'd constantly let me know that I wasn't as strong as Royal, as smart as Rook, or as committed as Bishop. And while I'd played the part of the carefree playboy, I was man enough to admit that it left me with a constant drive to show the world how useful I was.

And Linc... The ones with the biggest smiles always hid the darkest secrets. He was my best friend. I'd take a bullet for him without question, but there was a side of him that scared even me. He hid it well from us. Sometimes even from himself. But I'd seen it seep out, and we all knew that he was one push away from going full-on dark side.

For tonight, it seemed that Linc was just Linc. The guy who cared too much and was always there for me.

I punched his arm, abandoning my plans to order pizza and binge watch a TV show I'd seen a dozen times already. "I figured I should give you a shot

at getting laid.”

He laughed, tipping his head back. “Fuck you, dude. If you think I need your help with women, you’re still drunk.” His shoulder nudged mine. “Not that I haven’t missed your occasional assist.”

I was unable to stop the knowing grin that spread across my lips. Linc and I had always been close, so much so that it wasn’t uncommon for us to share a woman for a night of debauchery. We hadn’t done it in months. Not since *she’d* blown back into my life.

It was weird. Like my timeline had been divided into multiple chunks: before Becca and after Becca.

“Actually,” Linc drawled, absently scratching his chest, “if you want to go find—”

“No.” I shut that shit down hard. I’d avoided booze and pussy for four days, and it was a little sad how proud I was of that streak.

He sighed. “Just as well. It’s hard, wanting a fast-food burger after you’ve been tempted by wagyu.”

I frowned. “Huh? What does that even mean?”

His lips curved into a smirk. “Just that if my dick has one regret in life, it’s that Bex got pissed and left before—”

I was on my feet and looming over my oldest, closest friend before I realized what I’d done. “Before *what?*”

Linc raised his hands, a knowing glint in his eyes. “Oh, did I say something wrong? You don’t like the idea of me pinning sweet little Bex to my bed and—”

My fist slammed into his jaw, snapping his head to the side.

It was only the fact that I loved him like one of my brothers that had me taking a step back and not putting his ass in the local ER.

Linc stretched his jaw, carefully rubbing the already forming bruise. “Fucking *finally.*”

“What the shit’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded. My skin felt too tight over my muscles, stretched past the point of normal. Maybe I had some latent Hulk superpower, but I had a whole new appreciation for why Bruce Banner ripped through his clothes whenever he got pissed off.

Linc rose to his feet, the movement almost lazy. He hooked his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans. “It means you’ve been living like a goddamn war widow for the last four weeks. I’m sick of your mopey ass.”

I jerked back like he’d punched me. “Excuse me?”

“No, I don’t think I will,” he retorted, eyes flashing. “You’re my best fucking friend, Court, and that’s the only reason I let this shit go on as long as I have. I get it—you lost the girl of your goddamn dreams.”

I reared back. “No, I—”

“Jesus, man.” He shot me a disgusted look. “Stop lying to yourself. No one has ever twisted you up the way little Rebecca Whittier has. Problem is, she isn’t so little anymore. If she was any other girl and you were any other guy, I’d have made a move on her *months* ago.”

Fuck me. I was going to have to kill my best friend. I’d need help burying the body, but the only guys I could ask to help were Ash and Ryan... and odds were they’d kill me for killing him.

I could try waiting until Royal and Rook came back. Or I could call Bishop, but that had its own problems. Knight was busy, too.

“Hell, I would’ve even shared her with you—”

I lunged for him, and he spun away too fast.

“Fuck, bro! Let me finish!” He leapt over the back of the couch, putting it between us. “I knew a menage or whatever wasn’t in the cards the night you carried her ass out of the frat house.”

My gut cramped at the memory of that night. Becca had been drugged and damn near raped by one of my former fraternity brothers. Maddie had saved her by alerting Ryan and the rest of us, but I’d never forget how delicate and perfect she’d felt in my arms.

And how I’d utterly failed her.

I’d pushed her away to keep her safe, and it hadn’t worked.

“Is it so fucking hard for you to admit that you have feelings for her?” Linc pressed. “That you’re not some emotionless cyborg? It doesn’t make you weak to need her, Court. And you aren’t the only one she left—I might not feel the same way you do, but I care about her, too.”

I stared at him, trying to wrap my brain around what he was saying. “You really like her?”

“What’s not to like? She’s an amazing woman. She’s smart, funny, gorgeous...”

The noise that came out of me wasn’t entirely human.

Linc met my gaze. “She’s also head over fucking heels in love with *you*, you fucking idiot. And I think you might feel the same way, if you let yourself.”

I didn’t know what to say. Trying to wrap my head around it was too

much.

The door to the garage opened on the other side of the room and Ash appeared, two pizzas and a six-pack balanced in his hands as he kicked the door shut. He took one look at us, and then his gaze zeroed in on Linc. “Started without me?”

Linc shrugged. “I saw an opening. I went for it.”

Ash shot him a knowing smirk. “Pretty sure that’s how you’ve justified hitting on every woman you’ve ever fucked, too.” Then he looked at me. “Hungry?”

The smell of grease, cheese, and meat wafted over to me. My stomach gave an appreciative rumble. “I could eat,” I admitted.

Linc slowly came back around the couch. “Truce?”

I sighed heavily. “Yeah.”

Ash crossed the room and set the pizzas on the coffee table in front of the massive, U-shaped sectional sofa that dominated the room. With a huge TV that took up the majority of one wall, this was our makeshift movie theater and gaming room, and the general place we all hung out.

Linc dove for one of the boxes, flipping open the lid and grabbing a slice of pepperoni and sausage. He took a massive bite, then huffed a breath around the searing heat. “Shit. Hot.”

“Fucking animal,” Ash grouched, shaking his head. He left and came back a minute later with three plates, which he passed out.

Linc made a face as he accepted the dish. “Remember when we could just eat pizza on our couch and no one gave us shit if we stained something?”

Ash gave him a reproachful look.

“All I’m saying is, bachelor life was a helluva lot easier before Maddie.”

“So, you think life would be easier without her?” Ash challenged, looking annoyed.

Linc shook his head emphatically. “Fuck no. I love Maddie. She’s like a super-hot, not-blood-related little sister. And God knows Ryan’s slightly less of an asshole now that he’s put a damn ring on it.”

I snorted at his descriptions.

“Anyway,” Ash said loudly, turning to toss me a beer, “it’s good to see you coherent. I was starting to wonder if you were just going to fuck away your last semester.”

I frowned, popping the top of the can. “I have independent study this semester. I already put in my internship hours with the firm when Ryan was

on trial for attempted murder. All that's left now is to check in with my advisor every month before I hit Stanford in the fall."

Linc's face fell. "I can't believe you're moving to Palo Alto."

"It's three years, buddy," I reminded him. "And my law degree is something we need."

Both guys nodded, because it was true. I planned to major in international law with a double focus on criminology. Phoenix International was truly international, and our company needed a team of lawyers—that I would spearhead—who were dedicated to knowing which laws could be used in our favor and which we could bend to our will.

"I know Ryan talked to you about our expedited timetable," Ash added, taking a bite of his own pizza loaded with chicken, bacon, and roma tomatoes. The weirdo even had the pizza place put ranch on it instead of pizza sauce, which was sacrilegious to Linc but tasted pretty damn good to me.

Letting my brain shift into work mode was a welcome distraction. It was why I was secretly thankful Royal had put me on an assignment. With my light schoolwork load and the football season over, I needed something to keep me from spiraling any further than I'd gone.

Linc set his plate down and grabbed a beer. "Did you guys ever think we'd be here?"

"Here?" Ash asked, quirking a brow.

Linc waved a hand. "*Here*. I mean, for the longest time, Phoenix seemed like a pipe dream. But now it's really happening. Royal and Rook are down in San Diego on a goddamn recruitment mission."

"An interview with Rook's former CO is hardly a mission," Ash muttered. "And we all agreed—"

"I know what we all agreed," Linc said, a little too sharply. His expression softened. "I guess I just never really let myself think it would be real."

"Why?" I turned to him, wondering why he'd never voiced these concerns to me. To any of us.

Looking more serious than I'd seen him in a long time, Linc put his plate on the coffee table and leaned his forearms on his knees. "I was eight the first time my dad took me into one of his clubs."

My stomach clenched, and I exchanged a look with Ash. He looked just as concerned. Linc rarely discussed his childhood. Even as kids, he'd

deflected all the shit in his life with jokes and smiles.

“I was eleven the first time I had sex,” he added quietly. Ash sucked in a breath, but I knew that story. Linc’s dad, Kent Westford, made my father look like Dudley Do-Right.

To the world, Kent was the man behind over a hundred upscale hotels worldwide. He was a philanthropist who donated to causes supporting orphans, widows, and the arts.

But his hotel empire was a front for a seedy world of exclusive clubs where anything went... for a price. Most of his clubs had a heavy BDSM scene where the word *consent* was missing from the dictionary. He sold people the way a baker sold donuts.

Linc had been drunk when he’d confessed to me that, when he was a kid, his dad had taken him into a club to have his first sexual experience. Two women, easily a couple decades older than him, had done some messed up shit to his pre-pubescent body under the orders of his own fucking father. All because Kent wanted to bring his son into the family business from an early age.

It had gone on for years—Kent bringing Linc with him to his clubs around the world. Sometimes he had Linc watch. Sometimes he encouraged his son to participate. As he grew up, Linc managed to put literal distance between himself and his father. Now Kent was based out of New York while Linc went to Pacific Cross in California. Linc had used damn near every excuse he could think of not to see his father, but it didn’t always work, and he had to go to a club maybe once a year.

Ash leaned forward. “We’re going to stop him, Linc.” He met my gaze next. “All of them. Beckett and Gary were the first dominoes. We just have to put things in motion before Beckett can get to them.”

When we’d started Phoenix, we’d been pawns. Chess pieces for our fathers to move around a board. Taking down Ryan’s and Maddie’s dads in the fall had forced our hand a bit sooner than we’d have liked, but it didn’t change our endgame.

Phoenix International was the opposition to everything our fathers stood for. It protected the weak and gave the helpless a voice. Instead of falling in line the way our fathers had wanted, we were determined to break them and everything they stood for.

Somewhere in the chaos of losing Becca again, I’d forgotten that. I’d forgotten that there were people out there who needed us. Needed *me*.

That was the thing I would pour myself into. Not alcohol, not women. I'd fill the void left by Rebecca Whittier by being better. By making her proud. Even if she'd never know I was doing it all for her.

CHAPTER 7



COURT

Nearly a week later, I drove to the private airport an hour from home. It was early as fuck, and thanks to Los Angeles traffic, I was running thirty minutes late. But the perk of taking a private plane was that being late wasn't really an issue.

After locking up the car, I tossed my bag over my shoulder and headed for the stairs leading into the elegant Cessna waiting on the tarmac. I jogged up the steps, already anticipating my brothers giving me shit for delaying them.

"May I take your bag for you, Mr. Woods?" The breathy flight attendant with big green eyes and red hair pulled back into a tight knot at the back of her head blinked up at me.

"I'm good," I grumbled, moving past her.

"Well, if there's anything I can do, please don't hesitate to ask," she added with a bright smile. Her gaze swept down the length of me before coming back to meet mine. "Anything at all."

Clenching my jaw, I gave her a tight nod and kept going down the aisle. The private jet technically belonged to Cain Industries, but Ryan was letting us take it to Europe. There were a couple rows of plush cream seats, two sets of four chairs around a table on either side of the aisle, and then two long couches. The back of the plane had a private bedroom and bathroom while the front of the plane had another bathroom and a galley style kitchen.

Already seated at one of the tables reading some papers, Rook barely spared me a glance.

I dropped my bag onto the seat across from him and then took the other seat facing him. "Hey."

“You’re late,” he muttered.

“Traffic was a bitch.”

His gaze slowly lifted to mine. “I made it here without an issue.”

“Not all of us had time management beaten into our skulls by the Navy,” I retorted, rubbing my temples, feeling a headache building.

He set down the papers, looking way too much like Royal with his disapproving scowl. “You’re right. Some of us lived the frat-boy life and didn’t have to learn things like discipline and promptness.”

I stared at him. “What the fuck crawled up your ass?”

Sighing, he leaned back in the seat and shook his head. “Sorry, man. It’s been... It’s been a rough couple of weeks.”

I remembered what Royal had said, about thinking Rook had hooked up with Emerson. “Do you want to talk about it?” I asked, hesitant. I’d always kind of felt like an outsider with my brothers. Truth be told, I considered Ryan, Ash, and Linc more my brothers than those bound to me by blood.

For the majority of my childhood, I hadn’t known my dad had a whole separate family living less than six miles away. It wasn’t until I’d heard my parents arguing over King’s death that I’d started asking questions. It had been the surprise of a fucking lifetime to find out I had six—no, make that *five*—brothers. That my dad had been with Holly since before he’d even met my mom in college.

Growing up, I’d never realized that my parents weren’t in love. Sure, they’d fought, but not like Ryan’s parents. My mom wasn’t terrified of my dad the way Linc’s mom was of his dad. And Ash’s parents were so bland that I wasn’t even sure how he’d been conceived. By those standards, my parents were *normal*.

The truth was my parents had married because it had been the best move for them financially and politically. My dad had never hidden Holly from my mom, hadn’t even bothered. In fact, it was the opposite. Their marriage worked because they both knew the score, and they both knew enough to ruin the other if one fucked up the balance they’d set up.

The closest they’d come was when I’d turned thirteen.

That was the year I found out about my parents’ deep, dark secrets. That Dad was a sadistic narcissist. That my parents’ marriage was a total farce, and as soon as they knew that I knew, all bets were off.

Not that I cared. Back then I’d been a miserable fuck who had no idea how to channel all my rage and confusion into something more productive.

Not until Royal got his hands on me months after I'd spiraled out of control.

The first time I ever met my brothers and Holly, I'd taken a taxi to their house. I'd watched them play in their yard and then go inside before I found the balls to knock on the front door.

Bishop had opened the door, taken one look at me, and asked what the fuck I wanted. He'd been almost sixteen at the time, and pissed at the entire goddamn world. They knew all about Jasper's legitimate son. To them, I was the golden boy. The one who had everything while they got whatever leftovers Jasper deemed them worthy of.

Sure, they had a decent house in a middle-class suburb. One of those two-story colonial homes with four bedrooms, so they all shared their space with each other. It had a decent yard full of random sports equipment, but it wasn't the thirteen-bedroom mansion I'd grown up in. Or the seven-thousand-square-foot summer home my parents had on a lake upstate.

It was clear from the jump that Holly wasn't much of a parent. She was there for Jasper and seemed like a ghost whenever he wasn't around. After losing her daughter in childbirth and then King when he was thirteen, she'd essentially shut herself off.

The first couple years of knowing my brothers had been rough. Royal had already enlisted in the army, so I hadn't met him until later on. Rook had been eighteen and finishing his senior year. Bishop was almost three years older than me, Knight was a year younger, and Castle, the baby, was three years younger.

Watching them made something in my chest ache. They had this easy way of being together, sharing inside jokes. They were this unified wall against Dad that I wanted to be part of.

When Dad came back to their house and found me there, I expected him to be furious. Instead he took the time to point out how successful his other sons were. That Royal was on the fast-track to becoming a Green Beret. Rook was on track to graduate as valedictorian and was planning to join the U.S. Navy.

Bishop was class president.

Knight's baseball team was the top-ranked team in North America.

Castle was a veritable genius with an insane IQ. At ten years old, he was already finishing middle school.

Dad had done everything he could to make me hate my brothers. To be jealous, and I was. But I wasn't jealous of their accomplishments; I was

jealous that I didn't have the family they did. That I didn't have brothers to lean on.

Rook had been the first to treat me like a brother. He'd been the oldest at home and had set the tone for the rest. After Dad and Holly disappeared upstairs, Rook asked me to come out and play football with them. He'd included me, and invited me back.

That had meant something. One by one, I'd earned their trust. Their respect. Their loyalty.

And if Rook was having a shit time now, then I would have his back, too.

Sighing, he snatched up the water bottle in front of him. He gave it a weird look. "Who drinks bottled water from a *glass bottle*?" His face screwed up in annoyance, but he took a long drink before screwing the top back on.

"Nice deflection," I intoned, wondering if I was this difficult.

Shit. I was probably worse. Even Linc, my best damn friend with whom I shared everything from cars to women, had been giving me a wide berth lately. And after the stunt with Cori? He'd flat out told me to get my shit together or he'd hold my arms as Ryan and Royal took turns kicking my ass.

With a huff, Rook fell back deeper into his seat, flicking a hand at me. "Fine, I'll tell you what happened with Emerson if *you* tell me what happened with Bex."

My teeth clicked audibly as I ground them together.

Rook arched dark brows, his expression mocking. "Not so chatty now, little brother?"

I watched him for a weighted beat. "What do you want to know?"

He looked stunned, probably because I'd shut down anything and everything that had to do with Rebecca Whittier over the past few weeks. Speaking her name was like invoking a specter I was desperately trying to put to rest.

Except the past few days of sober clarity had made me realize one important thing: that girl was embedded in the very fibers of my soul. When God had made me, he'd given me everything except a heart. *That* piece of my anatomy had been born three years and six months later in the form of my mom's best friend's daughter.

I could still remember the first time I'd met her. I'd been three and, like most humans, I didn't have a lot of solid recollections from that time in my life. But meeting her? Yeah, that shit was seared into my mind's eye for eternity.

A psychologist would probably spout some bullshit for why it was such a strong memory—maybe some chemical reaction to the lighting and smells of the room that day—but all I knew was that the first time I saw her, I spoke a word I'd never uttered before.

Mine.

My mom and Bex's mother had looked at me and cracked up, assuming the *mine* I was referring to was the tiny toy truck I'd dropped into her bassinet as I'd leaned over to get a look at her face, but it wasn't that.

She was mine, and on some primal level, my brain had recognized that.

It was the only shit that made sense, especially as we grew up. I was almost four years older than her. Sure, our moms were friends, but there was no clear reason that the draw I felt to her was so strong. Strong enough that Linc and Ryan used to tease me about it, until I'd bloodied Ryan's nose and busted Linc's lip. After that, they hadn't questioned it when I always tried to include her.

We'd grown up in the same neighborhood. It was a gated community of mansions and rolling hills, but it also had its own parks and playgrounds. We'd all had nannies, and they'd brought us to the same place to play. Some of my earliest and best memories were made with my friends and Bex.

Cutting her out of my life for almost eight years had been brutal. And having had a taste of her back in my life only to have her ripped away by my own idiocy was killing me.

I shook my head, eyeing Rook. "Take it from me, brother, don't blow it. If there's something between you and..."

He grimaced. "Emerson."

"Right," I murmured, "Emerson. Don't throw it away because you're scared or think it's what's best for her."

"I slept with her," he finally admitted.

My brow raised. "And? What? It sucked?"

He grimaced, looking down. "Best night of my fucking life, Court. It was like all the pieces of the puzzle came together."

"So, what went wrong?" I asked.

"Timing," he replied with a shrug. "She's got a daughter—"

"And you don't want kids?"

He shut that shit down fast. "Honestly? I never saw myself with kids. Wasn't something I wanted. I mean, what kind of fucking role model do I have to look up to? *Jasper?*" He looked disgusted, but the expression quickly

smoothed away as he added, “But Elodie... Fuck, I love that kid, man. I can’t even explain it.”

“What went wrong?”

He huffed, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Everything. Em and I had this... amazing night. We’d been dancing around each other for weeks. Months. But she’s the widow of one of my closest friends. Crossing that line... Fuck, man. It was a big step.”

“I get that,” I agreed, nodding.

“When Royal asked me to come with him to talk to Ford about joining Phoenix, I knew I’d see her, but I didn’t expect to realize...” He shook his head, lips pressed into a hard line. “I didn’t expect to feel like, when I walked into her house and saw her smiling and Elodie crawling to me, I was home.”

“Yeah, I’m not seeing the problem here,” I told him with a low laugh.

“Em and I had an amazing night, but Elodie woke up. I mean, she’s a good sleeper, but she’s teething, so I got up. I wanted Em to sleep because she’s been busting her ass being a single mom, you know?” He waited for me to nod. “So, I go into the nursery, and Elodie’s wide awake, chattering and smiling. I swear to fuck, bro, she’s such a cool kid. Super chill. I picked her up and figured I could read her a story. That turned into three, and she started getting sleepy. I went to put her down and—” He cut off abruptly, tearing his gaze away from me and looking out the window.

I wasn’t sure what to say, but I knew that haunted look. I’d been wearing it myself for a while. It was the look of a man who had lost the one thing that made any bit of goddamn sense, and he had no idea how to get her back.

“Emerson decorated Elodie’s nursery, and she hung up pictures for her. So, I’m putting this amazing baby girl back to sleep, and I’m planning to go wake her mom up for round... five? Six? And I see this picture of my best friend and Emerson over Elodie’s crib. It’s their *wedding* picture, man,” he confessed, swallowing hard. “All I could do was stare at the picture of a man who was as close to me as you or Royal or... Anyway, I was like... What the fuck am I doing? Fucking his *wife*? Playing daddy to his little girl? Taking over his life like he can be replaced?”

I grimaced as he shook his head, looking utterly destroyed.

Rook met my gaze, the raw pain swirling in his navy eyes staggering. “I put Elodie in her crib and realized I was the biggest fucking asshole on the planet.”

Ouch. Yeah, that was rough. “What did you do?”

“What could I do? I got dressed and left. And it clearly was the right call—Emerson texted me the next morning and said she was taking a job with her brother’s band. She’s going to join them as their social media manager for the rest of their world tour.” He scrubbed a hand over his face.

“You know what sucks?” Rook continued. “Like just really fucking sucks? It’s not just that I lost the girl of my dreams and the little girl I was head over heels for,” he admitted. “It’s like I lost one of my best friends. There’s no more random phone calls, or videos of Elodie doing something silly or learning something new. No texts... It’s like part of me was amputated.”

“I know that feeling well,” I muttered. It was exactly how I felt about Bex not being in my life. Yeah, I had Linc, Ryan, and Ash. I had Maddie and my brothers.

But none of them were Bex.

“Anyway,” Rook said suddenly, straightening his shoulders and shoving down the rare vulnerability he’d shown. He pushed some of the papers at me. “Here’s the timeline for the meeting, best as Ash could figure out.”

I twisted my neck side to side, cracking the joints, before looking at the papers. It took me a second to realize what I was seeing, and when I did, I swore like a drunken sailor. Not because Ash’s intel was bad—Ash was one of the best hackers on the planet, so if this was where Jasper would be, I believed it.

But he wasn’t in Brussels.

“Paris,” I spat in a flat tone, my head buzzing as my heart pounded. My gaze snapped up to Rook. “We’re going to *Paris*?”

He gave me a confused look. “Uh, yeah. Didn’t Royal tell you?”

“No,” I seethed. For as much of a badass super soldier as my oldest brother was, he was also a meddling little bitch at times. “He told me we were going to Belgium.”

Rook looked confused. “Why would he—oh.” Then the asshole started chuckling.

“Not funny,” I snapped, hurling the papers back at him as the pilot came over the speakers and declared we’d been cleared to taxi for takeoff.

“It’s pretty fucking funny,” Rook laughed.

Fucking Royal, sending me to Paris. Of course the dickwad had known I’d refuse to go if I knew I’d be in the same city as Bex. Probably thought it was hilarious.

“It doesn’t matter,” I retorted. “We’re there to do a job that’ll last two, maybe three, days. I won’t even see her.”

“Sure,” Rook agreed, grinning like a fool.

“I hate you,” I muttered as Bishop exited the plane’s back bedroom and ambled up to us. He threw himself into the chair across the aisle from me as the plane started rolling forward.

“What’d I miss?” he asked, his dark-eyed gaze bouncing back and forth between us.

That only made Rook laugh harder.

I kicked him under the table. “Fucker.”

CHAPTER 8



BEX

I had no idea who the girl in the mirror staring back at me was, but she was hot. Like, stupid hot, in a way that made me blink a million times, worried she'd vanish.

"Holy shit," I murmured, absently reaching up to touch the cropped edge of the black leather halter top that crisscrossed my chest. The built-in bra made my C-cups look a lot bigger.

Camille popped up over my shoulder, a wicked grin on her crimson lips. "Didn't I say you'd look gorgeous as fuck by the time I was done with you, B?" Without hesitation, she reached around me and adjusted the top *and* my boobs to form even more cleavage.

"Cami," I whined, twisting away.

Camille's hazel eyes sparkled as she spun away with a swish of her long blonde hair. It hung in loose waves that hinted she'd just rolled out of bed but that I knew for a fact had taken her damn near an hour to perfect.

"Time for shoes," Cami murmured, disappearing into my closet.

I shot one last look at my reflection, at the top and skinny jeans that looked painted on my body while also making it look like I actually had an ass. Well, a small ass. Between the outfit and the makeup—smoky eyeshadow with a pop of glitter on the lids and a deep berry lip color staining my mouth—I looked ready to hit up the hottest club in Paris.

Or a biker bar.

Honestly, it could've gone either way.

But the point was, I didn't look like little Rebecca Whittier, the girl who always did what people expected and rarely made waves.

No, now I looked like Bex. Category five Hurricane Bex.

“These!” Cami declared, marching out of my closet with a pair of black stiletto ankle boots with silver buckles. My aunt Celeste, Cami’s mom, had bought them for me last Christmas, and I’d worn them only once.

I was usually a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl. I lived in Converse sneakers. So I was pretty damn skeptical about the pointy-toed boots with the four-inch heels that could take out someone’s eye if wielded as a weapon.

“I don’t know, Cam.” I hesitated, wondering how comfortable those shoes would be to dance in. They looked like I’d need to spend at least a week breaking them in. “Can’t I just wear—”

Camille held up a finger with a pointed gold nail, her brows lifting. “Uh-uh, B. You are *not* going to Frisson in sneakers. I forbid it. I told Alex that the girl I was bringing for his cousin was just as hot as me.”

My nose wrinkled. “I think I’m regretting asking for your help.”

Cami’s face softened into a pout I knew well. “Bex, come *on*. You know Alex’s dad is weird. He can’t go out unless he brings his brother, too.”

“Because *that’s* not alarming,” I muttered, wondering what kind of person needed pity dates set up by their dad.

Cami waved a hand, dismissing my concern. “Trust me, girl, you have nothing to worry about. I showed you pics of Eric, and he’s *yummy*.”

I mean, she wasn’t wrong. I made a grumbly sort of noise, ceding the point.

Cami grinned, shrugging. “If it makes you feel better, you can find some other sexy Parisian boy you wanna hook up with, and I’ll be the filling in an Alex and Eric sandwich.”

“By all means,” I said with a teasing grin. “I don’t want to get in your way.”

She tipped her head back and giggled. “Bex, please. I’ll elbow you out of the way myself if you try to clam jam me.”

A laugh burst from me. “What?”

Cami’s grin stretched wider, showing the dimples in her cheeks. “You know. Clam jam. Twat swat. Damn up my beaver.”

“Please stop,” I begged, my sides aching from laughing.

“Have I mentioned how glad I am that you finally moved here?” She threw her arms around me in a crushing hug.

Cami pulled back and moved to the mirror to touch up her own makeup, leaving me to tug on my shoes.

Still focused on the mirror, Cami smacked her now-glossy lips together

before pursing them into a smirk and meeting my eyes in the mirror. “Let’s go fuck shit up, Bex.”



When Cami had first suggested the blind date, I’d balked. Especially when she’d told me that the *date* was being facilitated by the guy’s dad. I mean, what kind of guy needed Daddy’s help getting a date?

I’d felt bad for Alex, thinking how embarrassing it must be to have going out with his girlfriend be dependent on his younger sibling coming along. That was why I’d said yes—for Cami. So that she and Alex could have fun, even if it meant I’d be stuck in a dark booth at the back of the club, sipping a mocktail while Cami and her stupidly gorgeous boyfriend grinded together on the dance floor.

But Eric wasn’t anything like I’d expected.

In fact, when he wrapped his hand around mine and brought it to his lips, it took me a second to figure out how to form words. The fact that Alex and Cami were making out less than a foot away was barely a blip on my brain.

Gray eyes sparkled at me through a fringe of dark lashes as Eric’s warm lips touched my knuckles. “Let me guess,” he began, speaking with a soft accent I couldn’t quite place and still holding my hand. “You thought I was some pathetic wanker who needed his big brother’s help finding a date for the night?”

“Something like that,” I admitted, as the car service Cami and I had taken to the club pulled away from the curb and disappeared into the bustling night traffic. My breath fogged through the chilly air.

Darkness had blanketed Paris, leaving everything under a shimmering blanket of lights from cars, buildings, and streetlamps. The bite in the air made everything seem sharper, clearer, and people waiting to get inside huddled together in groups.

The front of Frisson looked every bit the decadent nightclub, from the purple velvet ropes containing a lengthy line of people waiting to get in, to the burly bouncers dressed in black with ear pieces. The concrete under my heels trembled from the bass of the music thumping inside.

A thrill shot through me as I realized I was doing this. I was going to a

freaking nightclub in Paris on a blind date with a guy who was actually really hot.

Even if his dad was pimping him out.

Eric winked at me with a boyish grin. “My father doesn’t quite understand that, unlike him and my brother, I prefer to focus on quality over quantity.”

My gaze jumped to Alex, and I wondered if my cousin knew that. If she did, she didn’t seem to care, judging by the way his tongue was shoved down her throat and his hands gripped her ass.

“Camille seems to be special. Or, at least that’s what Alex keeps telling me,” Eric added, sounding sincere as he glanced back at them. Then he made a face. “Reckon they know they’re in public?”

I couldn’t help a soft laugh as I watched Camille’s back arch. A few people in the line were starting to notice the show. “More like they couldn’t care less.” I cleared my throat loudly. “Uh, Cami?”

It took a second, but she finally pulled back, her hands still clutching Alex’s shoulders as she looked at me with flushed cheeks and glassy eyes. She shot me a rueful smile. “I suppose we’re being rude, aren’t we? Alex, this is my favorite cousin, Bex.”

Alex straightened and gave me his attention. He had the same gray eyes as his brother, but where Eric’s were warm, Alex’s were icy, almost calculating. He studied me for a beat before a smile that looked like he’d worked in politics all his life changed his expression.

One hand still on Cami’s waist, Alex leaned over and extended the other to me. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Bex,” he greeted, sounding genuine, but I’d grown up around enough of my dad’s politician buddies to know when someone was sincere.

This guy? Not even close.

Not wanting to offend Cami, I shook Alex’s hand, tamping down the sensation of spiders crawling over my skin as his gaze raked down me once more before coming up to meet my eyes. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Same,” I replied, forcing a bright smile.

Cami’s smile only grew as she cuddled against Alex’s chest. I tried not to stare, but it was kinda blowing my mind that my smart, sweet, amazing cousin didn’t seem to notice anything wrong with her boyfriend.

Then again, I’d just met him, so maybe I was the one being too judgy. Maybe Alex had one of those personalities that took some time to get to

know before he showed that gooey center under all the layers of asshole.

Lord knew I'd had my own experiences with *that* type of man.

No, no, no. We're not thinking about him.

"We should go in," Alex declared, letting my hand go and turning to Cami, who nodded.

"Uh, there's a line," I pointed out as Alex took Cami by the wrist and led her straight to the bouncers.

Alex shot me a look over his shoulder like I was an adorable idiot.

Eric leaned in toward me. "I don't think my brother understands the concept of lines," he whispered.

Sure enough, Alex spoke a few words I couldn't make out to the bouncer, and a second later, the man unclipped one of the velvet ropes to let us pass. Alex flicked his fingers at us to follow, and I had to fight not to roll my eyes at his big-douche energy.

"God, he's a pompous ass, isn't he?" Eric kept up the commentary as we followed them inside. "Been this way since he was born. Sadly it's a genetic trait that the men in my family are renowned for."

I shot him an amused look as we went through the front doors and stepped into a long corridor lit by sconces. "You seem to have emerged unscathed."

He shrugged. "I take after my mother, plus I had the benefit of being sent to an all-boys boarding school starting at age eight."

My brows lifted. "Isn't that kind of... young?"

"Mum died," he explained. "She had a rare genetic disorder. After she passed, my father figured the easiest way to raise me would be to let someone else do it."

"Wow," I murmured, imagining how awful it would be to have a parent die and then be shipped off to school all alone. "Did Alex not go with you?"

Ahead of us, Cami giggled at something Alex whispered. They paused at the coat check, shrugging off their jackets and passing them over. When Eric and I did the same, the attendant passed me a ticket that I tucked into my small clutch.

"You are absolutely stunning," Eric told me, sounding a little awed.

I pressed my lips together but was unable to stop the smile that started to spread. Maybe Cami's fashion sense had been dead on after all. "Thank you."

"See?" Cami called, her tone airy as she wagged her elegant fingers. "I told you my cousin was exceptionally gorgeous." She winked at me before

hugging Alex's arm to her chest while he led us down another hallway with an elevator at the end.

Eric's lips pressed into a line, tension furrowing his brow for a millisecond before it smoothed away. "No. He's five years older and has always been in line to take over my father's position when the time comes. Family business, passed from one oldest son to the next."

"Sounds... archaic," I answered. I knew Alex was older than Cami, but I did the math. Eric was probably twenty-three, which put Alex somewhere much closer to the line of thirty than Cami's twenty years.

"It absolutely is," he agreed, "but it allowed me the freedom to choose my own path."

Alex pressed a button for the elevator and turned to us, his gaze hard as he looked at his brother. "Yes, your own path. And how exactly is that going, little brother?"

Eric met his brother's gaze with a level stare. "Splendidly. I mean, it doesn't come with a lifetime membership to Assholes Anonymous like yours does, but we can't all be winners, can we?"

Alex's top lip lifted in a curl as Cami chuckled.

"Oh, come on, Eric," she said, her tone light and teasing as she leaned around Alex, "he didn't turn out *that* bad. I've trained him well."

"Have you now?" Alex said, his voice quiet but with an edge that made me stiffen.

The elevator doors chimed before sliding open. No one moved.

Cami's face fell. "I was just kidding, baby."

"Quite the comedian, aren't you, pet?" Alex remarked, his jaw still tight.

Eric forced a rough laugh. "Come on, Alex. We're here to have fun. You remember what fun is, right?"

I watched the exchange with unease, waiting for something to break the tension. My gaze shot to my cousin, but she seemed intent on studying the dark wood floors under our feet.

"I'm sorry," Cami whispered.

For what? I wanted to demand. For her boyfriend being an asshole, or for him giving off serial-killer vibes?

I was seconds away from grabbing my cousin and marching us the hell out of here. When she'd told me all about her billionaire boyfriend, showing off pictures of them all over Paris, I'd never gotten creep vibes. But now that he was in front of me? Bright red alarms were flashing in my mind.

Alex leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Cami's temple. "Let's not ruin our night."

Cami nodded, the hand not tangled with his balled into a fist at her side.

Alex shot us a cocky smile. "And for the record, little brother, I know how to have p-plenty of f-fun." The acid bite of his tone made me step back, but not before I felt Eric flinch.

"Let's go," Alex added, getting into the elevator car with Camille.

After a beat, Eric went in, and I followed, albeit reluctantly. I spent the silent ride up to the third floor mentally rehearsing how I planned to grab Cami for a bathroom trip as soon as the doors opened. I needed to know what in the actual hell my cousin was thinking.

God, I wished Maddie was here. She'd know what to say.

Then again, if Maddie was here, that would've meant *Ryan* was here. And I could just imagine Ryan Cain putting Alex in his place.

But with Ryan came—

No, Bex, I mentally chastised myself before my thoughts could veer too far into dangerous territory.

Tonight wasn't about *him*, it was about *me*. Well, actually it was turning out to be more about my cousin and her horrible choice in boyfriends, but the point was, I wasn't thinking about Court Woods.

Dammit.

Just thinking his name was like having my nervous system struck by lightning.

Bad Bex. Focus on Cami.

"Are we getting off?" Eric asked me, his voice soft with amusement as I realized the doors were open. Alex and Cami had already stepped off and were watching me, waiting. Cami looked concerned, but Alex looked like someone had shoved a stick wrapped in barbed wire up his ass while he sucked off a lemon.

"Uh, sorry," I stammered, hurrying out of the car as the heavy bass of one song bled into another.

The third floor was clearly the VIP section, if the dark, decadent furniture and mood lighting were any indication. Set above the rest of the club, the VIP balcony had its own bar. Instead of the industrial style of the rest of the club, this area was high end, with cushioned sofas, lacquered tables, and a black iron railing that let the guests look out over the club.

My gaze zeroed in on the sign for the bathroom. "Hey, Cam, let's—"

“Camille,” Alex cut in, turning so he was positioned between us as he cupped her cheek. “Would you dance with me?”

She smiled, her heart in her eyes as she beamed up at him. “Of course.”

“We’ll be back,” Alex informed us, again taking my cousin by the wrist and leading her toward a staircase that I wouldn’t be trying to navigate in these heels. Cami, however, was a study in grace as she floated downward.

“Guess it’s just us, huh?” Eric said from my left.

I turned and gave him a one-shouldered shrug as I fought the urge to follow my cousin and ask her what the hell was going on. She was amazing and deserved a guy who’d treat her a lot better than Alex.

Huh. Maybe I could show her you could move on from a hot-yet-toxic guy and find someone with more low-key energy.

Grinning at Eric, I vowed to make the best of tonight. To give this guy every chance I could, because I deserved a nice guy, dammit.

“Do you want to find a table and talk?” I asked him, waving a hand around the crowded room. “I’d love to get to know you better.”

His smile was full of warmth and hope as he took my hand. “I’d love to.”

CHAPTER 9



BEX

With a soft hand on the small of my back, Eric led me toward a table in the center of the room. I appreciated that he didn't pick one of the booths shrouded in shadows along the wall. I could barely make out some of the people in them, which was probably the point. A single pendant light hung above our table, giving me enough light to appreciate how hot my date was.

Eric pulled out a chair and waited for me to sit before circling to the other side and sitting across from me. As soon as his butt hit the chair, a waitress in a tight black dress appeared with a bright smile.

"Can I bring either of you a drink?" she offered, her flirty eyes dragging over Eric with appreciation before turning to me with a slight lift of one eyebrow. Almost like she was wondering how *I* was here with *him*.

"Bex?" Eric shot me an expectant look, waiting for me to go first.

"Oh, uh." I looked for a menu, but this struck me as an *if you don't know what you want, you don't belong here* kind of place. "Can I get a virgin sangria?"

I half expected the waitress to laugh, but she didn't bat an eye before turning to Eric.

"Water for me, please. Thank you." He gave a subtle nod of his chin, dismissing her.

"Not a drinker?" I asked, kind of surprised.

"No," he replied, leaning back in his chair with a rueful smile. "I've never much enjoyed the taste. You?"

I shrugged, not wanting to admit that the last time I'd had alcohol I'd

been drugged and almost raped. I wasn't looking at tonight with Eric as an actual date, but even so, that wasn't the kind of stuff I was comfortable sharing with just anyone.

But damn, looking back, that night had been the turning point that made all the difference. It had put me on a collision course with my past and present.

I'd be damned if it screwed up my future, too.

"So, are you and Alex close?" I asked, needing to change the subject. Maybe Eric could give me some insight into his big brother that would make him seem less like an entitled frat boy douche canoe.

Eric coughed and shook his head. "Hardly. Separate upbringings aside, Alex and I have never been close. He favors our father while I favor our mum... flaws and all."

I waited until the waitress set our drinks down and turned away before leaning in. "Flaws?"

His cheeks flushed an adorable shade of pink that spread to the tips of his ears as he ducked his head. He picked up the glass of water and swished the contents like it was a fine wine, watching the ice cubes clack together. "My mother suffered from a speech impediment as a child. A stutter," he clarified with a grimace. "I also had a stutter as a boy."

I remembered Alex's taunting comment in the elevator. The way Eric had flinched.

In that moment, Alex leveled up from frat boy douche canoe to ignorant twatwaffle.

"I'm sorry," I offered, not sure why I always felt the need to apologize for someone else's character flaw. Maybe that was *my* flaw. Well, one of many. Staring at the sangria, I started to wish it had alcohol in it.

"Thank you," Eric said, surprising me by reaching across the table and touching my hand.

Stunned, I blinked at him.

One corner of his mouth tilted up in a half smile. "You hear people say that they're sorry a lot in life. But you seem to genuinely mean it."

"Maybe I know what it's like to have people ridicule and mock you for things beyond your control," I hedged, not willing to deep dive into my tragic middle- and high-school years.

"That's a damned shame, love," he murmured, his fingers stroking the top of my hand in a way that wasn't unpleasant. His eyes were soft as he studied

me. “I’ve only known you for a few minutes, and I can already tell that you’re not like the others.”

“Others?” I echoed.

He pressed his lips together. “Look, may I be honest?”

“Please.” It would be a nice change of pace from most of the other men in my life.

“I grew up in a world of unimaginable privilege and wealth,” he confided, his expression somber. “I’d imagine you did as well.”

I inclined my head slightly. While my family might not have been as rich as those of some of the kids I went to school with, I’d never wanted for a thing. There’d been stacks of presents under every Christmas tree and a limit I’d never hit on my credit cards.

No, not *my* credit cards. My parents’ cards, which they paid off every month without question.

Eric blew out a breath, his chiseled jaw tight. “I never asked for it, and while I can see the many things it has afforded me, it also left me with the realization that there’s very little substance in my life. It’s all filters and photoshop, I suppose.”

“That’s a good way of putting it,” I agreed, and sipped my drink.

“When I talk to you, I don’t get that impression.”

I stilled, my head tilting as I tried to puzzle out exactly what he meant. His gray eyes seemed to glow under the dim lights, and he reached for my hand again.

“I refuse to be the type of man my father and brother are,” he told me. “Constantly flitting from one pleasure to the next. One thing my mother taught me was to trust my intuition, and right now, it’s telling me that you are exquisitely different from the other women in my life.”

Okay, as far as lines went, that might’ve been the best one I’d ever heard. But it wasn’t just a line; Eric was a guy who felt the way I did—utterly lost in a sea of false promises and feigned adoration.

It was why I’d come to Paris. For clarity... and healing.

My heart flipped over, and I glanced down at where he was touching my hand before flipping my palm up and lacing our fingers together.

Eric cleared his throat, the blush from before reappearing. “I expected to meet another one of Alex’s friends and prepared myself to be bored to tears before making an excuse to go home early. But you... I like you, Bex.”

My breath caught.

This was what I'd wanted, right? To forget... Well, to forget. To take back control of my heart. The stupid organ had made a serious mess of my life thus far. It was time for me to stop craving what I'd never have and start appreciating what I could.

"I like you, too," I finally replied, not sure I meant it the same way he did. Was I attracted to Eric? I mean, sure. Sorta. He was really good looking in a catalog-model kind of way, with a sharp jaw, piercing gray eyes, and the lean frame of a guy whose form of exercise was probably swimming or running. Maybe cross-country.

"So," he went on, a bit hesitant like he was waiting to be shot down.

I knew that feeling well.

"If I wanted to ask you out on a proper date," he continued, "you might be inclined to say yes?"

No.

The unbidden thought came with a flash of dark, pissed-off eyes that I knew way too well. It was *his* voice in my head. It was always him.

He was on the other side of the damn planet, and my gut was still keyed in to what *he* would say. Would want.

Eric's mom might've told her son to trust his gut, but I'd learned the hard way that trusting my own meant heartache and pain.

And I was over that.

I smiled back at Eric, shoving down the gnawing feeling that even considering going out with him was somehow wrong.

My heart needed to remember her loyalty was to *me*. Not the boy who'd broken her more than once.

"I would absolutely say yes to a date with you."

CHAPTER 10



BEX

“Sugar,” I hissed as I stubbed my toe on the edge of my bed. That was what I got for trying to zip up my dress while kicking around piles of discarded clothes looking for my shoes.

“Are you okay?” The worried voice of my best friend came out of the speakers to the laptop I’d left open on the desk behind me.

The zipper stuck, and I swallowed a scream. I shouldn’t be *this* stressed out.

“Bex?” Maddie called again, worry lacing her tone.

“Here!” I cried, managing to zip the dress and stumble back into the frame of the camera so she could see me.

Maddie’s bright blue eyes blinked. “Are you wearing... plaid?”

I looked down at the black and white skirt. “It’s tweed.”

Her brow wrinkled. “Plaid.”

“Herringbone,” I corrected with a huff, sitting in my desk chair and reaching for the pearl drop earrings.

“Whatever it is... B, are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Of course it is,” I chirped, my voice too bright. Too forced. I paused and took a breath. “Eric’s going to be here any minute, and I can’t find my shoes.” I glanced around my demolished bedroom with a forlorn look.

Maddie studied me in a way that broadcasted she was seeing just how frazzled I really was. “It’s been, what, a week since you first met this Eric dude? You guys have gone out three times already.”

“Four,” I mumbled, remembering I hadn’t told her about our impromptu lunch yesterday. But it was true. In the seven days since I’d met Eric, we’d gone on several dates, each one sweeter than the last.

Dinner at a trendy spot in the sixth arrondissement. A play at Théâtre Mogadore. Coffee at a quaint little patisserie. And lunch yesterday at Le Trumilou.

Every time I was with Eric, I got to know him a little better, and I liked him. I liked that he played the cello but was a fan of alt rock. I knew that he'd rescued a cat named St. Whiskers and managed to hide him at school for three years before being caught. He was terrified of puffins.

Tonight, we were having dinner and drinks with some of his old boarding-school friends. He wanted me to meet the people that were important to him, which had to mean something.

The more layers I peeled back, the more I found there was to like.

But there was something missing, and I was determined not to let date five pass without figuring it out. Which was why I was freaking out. Tonight was the night that I would know for sure.

It had to be.

I looked in the mirror and realized I looked like I was going to dinner with my grandparents and their friends.

"Fine, maybe it isn't okay." I groaned, covering my face with my hands.

Maddie sucked in a breath. "It's gonna be all right, Bex. I think. But it might help if I knew *why* you were freaking out?"

I dropped my hands. "Because tonight's *the night*."

Her eyes went comically wide. "You're going to sleep with him?"

Instant embarrassment heated my cheeks, but before I could stammer out a correction, another voice chimed in.

A voice I knew *way* too well.

"Who's sleeping with who?" Linc demanded, his tone a mix of curiosity and innuendo as he appeared over Maddie's shoulder. He grinned when he saw me, ducking so his face was level with Maddie's. "Bex! Damn, I miss you, girl. I can't believe you're staying in France." His lower lip jutted out in an exaggerated pout.

"Linc," Maddie hissed, pushing on his massive shoulder. It basically did nothing; Linc was too big and strong to be moved. "We're talking."

"Right, about sex, which happens to be my specialty," he replied, shrugging as I contemplated sliding off the chair and under my desk in mortification. His dark blue eyes, just a shade lighter than navy, pinned me through the screen. "Who're you planning on fucking, and do I know him?"

I wasn't entirely sure what kind of sound I made—a cross between a

dying moose and a startled chipmunk—but I knew that this was quite possibly the most embarrassing moment of my life.

“No one,” I finally managed, my hands flapping wildly as I tried to explain. “I meant tonight I’m going to kiss him.”

Yeah, that actually didn’t lessen my humiliation the way I’d thought it would.

Linc’s dark brows shot up. “And who, pray tell, is the beneficiary of your sweet kisses?”

Maddie made a growling sound. “That’s the last time I watch *Bridgerton* with you, Linc.”

He pressed a hand to his chest, his attention on her. “Mads, you wound my very soul.”

“Not as much as I’m going to *wound* you if I punch you in the nuts for not leaving us alone,” Maddie snapped back, arching a brow before pointedly dropping her gaze to his crotch.

Linc twisted his lower half away, crossing his legs. “Jesus. When did you get so violent?” His eyes narrowed. “And why is the idea of you spanking my nuts so hot?”

“That’s not... I didn’t...” Maddie spluttered.

Linc patted her head. “It’s cool, Mads. We just can’t tell Ryan. He’d probably cut *off* my nuts, but it can be our secret.”

“Would you get out of here? I thought you *and* your nuts were going to a party.” Maddie gave him an exasperated look.

Linc grinned. “I was about to, but then I heard you talking about sex.”

“No sex!” I cried, raising my hands. “No one is having sex, Linc.”

His face fell. “Well that’s a damn shame.”

“It is?” Maddie spoke up before I could.

Linc nodded and gestured to the screen. “Hell yeah. I mean, Bex is hot. Tight little body. Awesome rack. She should be getting orgasms on the regular from places other than her own fingers. Fucking shame to hide all that pretty away.” His gaze cut to me, suddenly serious. “Unless he’s a douche, in which case, I’ll be on the first flight to bury his ass.”

Maddie groaned. “Linc, can you just not?”

“What? I’m giving her compliments,” he argued. “I’d tell you the same thing, but I know—for a fact—that you get dick on the regular. And judging by the screams, it’s good dick. I’m proud of Ryan.”

“I am literally begging you to shut up,” she pleaded, turning so red it

bordered on purple.

Linc straightened as a smirk pulled at his lips. “Kinda like the way you were begging Ryan last night for—”

Maddie exploded out of her chair, this time slapping Linc’s chest. “I swear to God, Linc, I’ll kill you. Better yet? I’ll tell Ryan and let *him* kill you. Slowly. Graphically. Starting with *your* dick.”

Linc dropped a hand to cover his crotch. “I was just kidding.” He backed away. “But maybe invest in a ball gag if you don’t want everyone—” He spun and ran out of the picture as Maddie lunged for him.

“Asshole,” she huffed, collapsing into the chair as she shook her head. Then she turned and looked at me. “Any chance I can come stay with you in Paris?”

I laughed. Yeah, my face was still flaming hot, but something about their exchange made my heart clench. I missed my friends and their crazy. “I mean, we have four guest rooms, and you have a standing invitation.”

She ran a hand through her long blonde tresses. “Seriously, what was I thinking, insisting that the guys move in with us? It’s like having children. And without Court here, Linc is like a puppy without a playmate.”

My insides tightened. “Where is he?” The question fell from my lips before I could help myself, and I immediately tried to take it back. “Not that I care. But it’s weird.”

Maddie gave me a knowing look. “He’s traveling for Phoenix with Rook and Bishop. I don’t know the details, and honestly? I told Ryan I’m good being on a need-to-know basis with *that* stuff.”

That stuff being the international company her husband and his friends had started to help people, namely those hurt by their asshole fathers. Court’s half-brothers were also heavily involved, and while I didn’t know all the details, I knew enough.

Enough to know that Court traveling with two of his former military brothers wasn’t about sweet-talking new investors.

It was dangerous. Maybe even deadly.

Suddenly a kiss didn’t seem like such a big deal.

“Bex?”

I jerked, my gaze finding Maddie.

Her face softened. “He’ll be okay. It’s mostly recon, from what I gathered. Minimal danger.”

“That’s... good.” And yet, my heart didn’t seem to get that memo.

No. No. *No.*

This was exactly why I'd been going out with Eric all week—because I refused to spend any more time hung up on Court Woods.

“So, about tonight,” I started, pushing onward.

Maddie's expression said she knew I was trying to change the subject, but because she was my best friend, she let it go. “Why is tonight the night?”

“Isn't it weird that we've been on five dates and haven't kissed?”

Her lips pressed together. “I don't think there's a timetable on that, B.”

“Says the girl who got married to her husband after knowing him for a few weeks,” I pointed out.

She lifted a finger. “One, we were engaged before we ever met. Two, we were being forced into it because of our psycho fathers. Three... I mean, have you *seen* my husband? He's gorgeous. Of course I locked his ass down.”

I laughed, my head falling back. “Right.”

Still smiling, she shook her head. “Seriously, Bex, don't force this because... Just because.”

But I knew what she wasn't saying.

Because of him.

“This is what I want, Maddie,” I insisted. Maybe if I said it enough, I'd believe it.

Sighing, my bestie relented. “Okay. Whatever makes you happy, B.”

I forced a smile and turned my attention back to my missing shoes.

“Have you talked to Cami?” Maddie asked.

My gut tightened into a ball of unease. “Not really.” After the night at the club, I'd tried talking to her about Alex, but she'd brushed off my concerns and said he'd had a rough day. Then she'd been busy with her dance rehearsals. We'd texted, but I was hoping we'd be able to actually sit down and talk about the not-awesome vibes I'd gotten from her boyfriend.

“Sorry,” Maddie murmured, looking sympathetic. “I know you and Cami are really close.”

“Mads, I swear he ticks every single box for an abusive boyfriend,” I told her, my heart sinking. “The way he treats her like an object, the way she defers to him? I mean, he got mad, and she acted like it was all *her* fault.”

“Want me to have Ash look into him?” she offered. Ash was one of the best hackers we knew. If there was dirt on Alex, Ash would find it.

I wasn't ready to go there.

Yet.

“Let’s keep Ash on the back burner,” I replied. “Cami and I are supposed to hang out tomorrow. Alex has a thing with his dad.” I ground my teeth, annoyed that my brilliant, talented cousin didn’t see the red flags that I did.

“Good luck,” Maddie said, genuinely meaning it.

My gaze swept the length of my room once more, and I spotted the tip of a shoe by the bathroom door, under a gauzy skirt. I darted over and unearthed the heels from where they’d been abandoned.

“Gotcha,” I proclaimed, slipping them on my feet. Owning a pair of heels that made my legs look insanely good while also being comfortable enough to wear for hours was like finding a unicorn dipped in fairy dust.

I crossed back to my desk to finish talking to Maddie as someone knocked at my door.

“Miss Rebecca? Your friend has arrived,” announced the voice of Yvette, the house manager who had been with my grandparents since before I’d been born. She was practically a second grandmother to me.

Butterflies erupted in my belly, and I pressed a hand against my stomach. “Thank you, Yvette. Please tell him I’ll be down in a few minutes.” Once I heard Yvette walk away, I turned to Maddie.

The butterflies morphed into a flock of crows, pecking at my insides and leaving me a ball of raw nerves. “He’s here.”

Maddie frowned, a deep crease forming between her eyes. “Bex, you know you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, right?”

“I know that.” I bristled at the implication, even if it rang a little true. “I *want* this.” I quickly ripped off my outfit and grabbed a fitted navy blue dress with a boat neck and lace sleeves. I took off the pearls and grabbed a pair of diamond studs.

She sighed softly. “Then I hope it’s everything you’re dreaming of. But, Bex?”

I held my breath, waiting for her to finish.

“If he doesn’t treat you like the princess you are, Linc won’t even have enough pieces left to bury by the time I finish with him,” she told me, dead-ass serious.

I couldn’t help but laugh and smile. “I miss you, Mads.”

“Back at ya,” she replied with a grin. “Have fun, okay?”

I nodded and ended the video chat, then ran my hands down the dress, trying to smooth away my nerves like invisible wrinkles. Tonight was going to be *fun*. This was exactly what I was supposed to want.

But is it what you need?

I blinked at my reflection in the mirror over my vanity, the quiet question making my heart sink into my stomach. Until a knock at the door drew my attention away. “Come in.”

The door pushed open, and Mom appeared, her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail that made her look like my big sister, not my mom. Dressed in gray scrubs, she flashed me a tired smile. “Hey, sweetie.”

“I thought you were working late,” I said, wincing at my accusatory tone.

She sighed and came inside. “I know, I know. I asked you to come to Paris with me so we could spend more time together, but all I seem to do is work.”

“I mean, I didn’t say that,” I muttered, feeling guilty. My mom was a doctor. She saved lives for a living. It was kinda selfish for me to want her to go on mani-pedi dates instead of performing an emergency appendectomy on a ten-year-old.

That had been Step #3 of Betty Moreau’s *New Life Plan*.

Step #1 had been filing for divorce from my father.

Step #2 was leaving all the *toxic energy* of California.

Step #3 had been to devote her surgical skills to people who actually needed them instead of getting paid stupid amounts of money to be on retainer when one of her rich clients got a nasty case of tennis elbow.

Step #4 was going back to her maiden name. Part of me wanted to ask if I could switch, too. Rebecca Whittier had seen more shit than I cared to recount.

She sat down at my vanity, facing me. “I’m sorry, Bex. I promise I’m going to make more time for us. Between the new position at the hospital and helping Mémé plan her birthday celebration, I’ve absolutely been neglecting you.”

“Mom, I’m eighteen, not eight,” I reminded her, sitting on the edge of my bed. “I don’t need you to entertain me.”

She arched a brow. “Clearly not. You look pretty fancy for a Thursday night.”

“I have a date,” I admitted, a blush heating my face.

“Would this be a date with the same boy I’ve seen drop you off almost every night this week?” she teased.

My jaw dropped. “You know about that?”

She laughed. “Sweetie, I’m still your mom. Of course I know when things

are going on with you.” She paused, smiling at me. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

She stood. “Then I won’t hold you up. Have fun.” She winked. “Be safe.”

“Mom!” Humiliation burned through me.

“What?” she asked with a giggle. “I was young once.” Her smile slipped the way it always did when there was even a hint of Dad in the conversation.

Mom and I both apparently had a thing for guys who had the power to break our hearts. This was all the more reason for me to keep spending time with Eric.

Eric was *exactly* what I should need. Someone safe and reliable and predictable. Someone who treated me like I was an equal, instead of making life-altering, unilateral decisions for me.

Squaring my shoulders, I lifted my chin. I deserved a guy who wanted me for me.

And, just maybe, Eric was that man.

CHAPTER 11



COURT

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Douche Number Three said to the waitress, leaning over and not bothering to hide that he was checking out her butt as she walked away. The guy had been glued to his cell phone the whole time unless he was ogling the staff. “Fuck, look at that ass.”

Douche Number One leaned back and gave a long, *loud* groan of appreciation. “I’d split that open like a ripe apple. She’d feel me for days.”

The waitress, a tiny, curvy woman who barely looked over eighteen, hunched her shoulders and tried to make herself smaller as their words hit her ears. Her cheeks turned red, and not for the first time since we’d started watching what Rook had dubbed the Dinner of Douches.

She and another waitress, also pretty, had been assigned the table by the manager of Aubergine, a trendy, upscale French restaurant that was damn near impossible to get into without a reservation made six months prior. The clientele was elite and catered to by the staff to a disturbing degree.

Then again, the owner was Pierre Dupree, a guy on our radar for being a depraved sadist with a penchant for less-than-willing sexual partners. If it had been up to me, I’d have put a bullet in his head as soon as we’d landed in Paris. But killing a cockroach like Dupree would have lasting repercussions, and we owed it to his victims to make sure they were safe before they ended up as collateral damage.

This was the part we all hated. Playing the long game to make sure shit was handled right.

And that meant sitting on my ass, watching the security feeds from Aubergine that Ash had hacked.

I arched my back, feeling the vertebrae pop back into place. I’d been

sitting on my ass for far too long, because this sure as fuck wasn't typical security. Most restaurant security systems didn't have hidden microphones seamlessly blended into the tables and booths, or military-grade cameras hovering above patrons. No, Dupree had set up the restaurant perfectly to spy on his wealthy patrons.

Ninety percent of the customers weren't up to anything nefarious. They were like the couple in the back corner who had just gotten engaged over a six-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne. Or the sleazy businessmen toasting another company they'd recently liquidated.

We were here for the other ten percent. The ones who ate wagyu beef and lobster while casually plotting murder. Or, in the case of the douchey dinner, an illegal sex-trafficking ring and the upcoming auction scheduled to take place in a week at some unknown spot in Paris for which we needed the location.

Which was why Rook and I were holed up in a hotel room with takeout containers from a local Chinese joint, eating wontons with our fingers while Bishop snored on the couch across from us.

Our hotel was a block away, but even through the screen of the laptop, I could see that the lavish, decadent restaurant was all glitz and glamor. Massive gold-and-crystal chandeliers provided warm lighting. The tables and booths, set discreetly apart to give the illusion of privacy, were made of the richest woods and leathers. Hell, there was a fucking mural of angels and demons painted on the ceiling like the Sistine Chapel. Asking for a burger was probably sacrilegious or some shit.

Waves of disgust and unease rolled off Rook. His shoulders were knotted with tension. It was like he was allergic to the upper class. He'd been like this for the past hour, watching this group of four assholes, each one smarmier than the next, hit on anything with tits that came near their table.

One leaned forward, his beady eyes magnified behind massive black glasses. "Five grand says I'll fuck her tonight."

Number Two tipped back his head and laughed, the sound like a dying donkey. "You're on. No way she says yes."

Two snorted and picked up his single malt. "Who said she has to say yes?"

That brought out a grunt from Number Three, who'd mostly been quiet. Then again, he was stoned as fuck and barely seemed to be sitting upright.

But, like a true pervert, he rallied when the threat of violence and sex

loomed. “I could use a pick-me-up after this week.”

Clearly I’d be following the waitress home tonight.

From the chair beside mine, Rook shot me a disgusted look. “I’m going to need to bathe in bleach.”

I arched a brow. “Before or after you break some knees?”

My brother grinned, his look a little unhinged. “After, obviously.”

A smirk hooked up the corners of my mouth. “I’ll help you bury the bodies.”

“Fuck that. Dipshits don’t deserve the effort a hole in the ground would take. We’ll burn ‘em.”

“Alive?”

He shot me an annoyed look. “Obviously. No point in killing an asshole if they don’t suffer horrifically first.”

A dark chuckle rumbled through my chest, and I turned my attention to the monitor to see Douche Number Four return to the table from the bathroom.

“Jesus, Henry,” One sneered, looking at the red-faced, disheveled man who’d been on the receiving end of their shit all night, “can you at least try to look like you aren’t a dickless sack of shit?”

The other two laughed, and Four turned beet-red. I wasn’t sure of the history here, beyond knowing they’d all gone to the same bullshit prep school and university. Their families had been friends and business partners since before they were born.

“It’s a family thing,” Three laughed, snapping out of his drug-induced stupor and shaking his head. “Beatrice sweats like a whore in church when she’s on her knees for me. It’s fucking nasty.”

Two made a low, hooting sound. “You’ve been fucking Henry’s sister?”

Three looked genuinely disgusted. “Fuck no. But she’s always down to suck my fat cock.” He reached under the table to cup his junk. “After the week I’ve had, dealing with all that family shit, she’s probably swallowed a gallon of my cum.”

Henry looked like he wanted to say something but opted to keep his head down.

One leaned back in his chair, his toothy smile eerily like a shark’s as he watched Henry. “You teach her how to do that, Henry? Teach her how to get on her knees and please a man?”

“Fuck’s sake,” Rook spat, looking close to hurling.

I wasn't too far behind. I looked back at Bishop, wishing like hell I'd done surveillance duty last night so I could sleep through this shit tonight. Lucky motherfucker.

"In fact," One continued, his tone dangerously soft in a way that set my teeth on edge, "maybe you should get on your knees for me now, Henry. Crawl under this table and suck me off."

Two and Three fell silent, their gazes bouncing back and forth between the two men as they seemed to realize this was a little more than giving Henry shit. Two actually put his phone down, clearly more riveted by this scene than whatever was on his screen.

One braced his forearms on the linen tablecloth, his eyes bright with a manic sort of energy as he looked across the table at a pale Henry. "I'm serious. Get on your motherfucking knees and crawl to me, bitch."

Two let out an uneasy laugh, looking around to see if anyone was around. "Fucking hell, Colby. You aren't serious, right?"

Colby didn't back down, his stare hard as he glared at Henry. "Henry knows just how fucking serious I am."

Three opened his mouth.

"Crawl," Colby growled before arching his brows. "Unless you want me ___"

"No," Henry choked out quickly, shaking his head so emphatically, I wondered if it would snap off his neck. He looked close to tears. "It's... Colby, *please*."

Colby's lip curled. "The next time you open that mouth, it better be to—"

"He's here," Three cut in, looking relieved as fuck.

I shot Rook a look, because this was what we'd been waiting for. The arrival of the fifth member of their fucked-up boys' club. The leader of their group. A guy who, at twenty-three, was already making a name for himself globally. He'd recently moved back to Paris and taken over the shipping company his mother had left him when she'd died. He'd wasted no time setting up a network to transport more than just luxury cars and computers across international borders.

No, this motherfucker had figured out how to add *people* as cargo while greasing the right palms to get government and political officials to look the other way.

All four men stood as a unit, watching their friend arrive with a woman on his arm.

Of course he'd bring a girl with him. It was a power move, showing off a shiny new trophy that he'd probably offer up as a party favor for them to share after—

My breath caught.

My heart fucking stopped.

“Whoa,” Rook murmured, straightening and turning to me, alarm in his expression. “Court.”

But it was like he was talking to me underwater, the sounds muffled and disjointed as I stared at the screen. At the petite brunette with the big hazel eyes, smiling as she reached out her hand for Colby to drag up to his lips. He kissed her knuckles, making her cheeks blush the prettiest shade of pink.

I was vaguely aware of Rook waking up Bishop, but I was already on my feet and headed for the door, ripping it open. I bypassed the elevator and headed for the stairs, not giving a shit that we were fifteen floors up. The elevator would take too long, and I couldn't stand there and wait.

Not knowing that down the street, Bex had just walked herself into the goddamn lion's den.

CHAPTER 12



BEX

“It’s so nice to meet you,” I told Colby, offering him a smile as he kissed the back of my hand and winked at me.

“Eric, you asshole,” Colby said, turning to his friend with a teasing glare, “where have you been hiding this delectable creature?”

God, that was the cheesiest of lines, and it was all I could do not to roll my eyes. With that smarmy grin and rich, velvety voice with a slight Irish lilt, this guy had a future in politics.

“Away from you miscreants,” Eric replied, tugging me back to his side before continuing introductions. “Ignore Colby, Bex. We all do.”

Colby jutted out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout that wasn’t fooling me. I turned to the next guy, who gave me a long look before offering a hand.

“Brent Collingswood,” he said, his pointy chin lifted in an aristocratic way that made him look more like a pompous asshole than a distinguished gentleman.

“Hello.” I gave him a polite smile before turning to the next.

“Geoffry Barnes,” he drawled, red-rimmed eyes a little glassy and unfocused as he shook my hand. As soon as he released me, his gaze wandered away.

I glanced at Eric, who gave me a concerned look and a helpless little smile. Like he was saying, *sorry my friends are idiots*.

Shrugging it off, I gazed at the last man. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. Beads of sweat dotted his brow, and his chest heaved like he’d run a marathon.

“Henry?” Colby prompted in a tone I couldn’t quite figure out. “Say hello to Eric’s friend.” He reached back, almost like he was going to sling an arm

around Henry's shoulders, but Henry dodged him at the last second, then froze. Fear trickled into his expression.

Colby laughed, the sound forced and a little caustic. "Forgive us, Bex. Henry and I have a long history of roughhousing. He always seems to think I'm going to tackle him or some shite."

But Henry wasn't laughing.

He did, however, shuffle forward and incline his head to me. "Nice to meet you, Bex."

"You, too," I replied, not sure if I meant it or not. Unsure what to do next, I looked back at Eric and caught him frowning, too.

As soon as he realized I was watching him, his expression smoothed into something neutral. He glanced at his friends. "Give us a moment."

Without complaint, they moved back to the table and took the seats they'd had previously.

Eric pulled me to his side and pressed a kiss to my temple, murmuring, "Sorry, love. We'll make an excuse and leave if you want."

I subtly shook my head and turned my face to his. "No, it's fine. But is Geoffry okay?"

Eric smiled and bumped his nose with mine while lifting a hand to tuck my hair behind my ear. "His grandfather recently passed. They were extremely close. That's why I agreed to see them tonight. He's in town for the funeral and is clearly self-medicating."

"Oh no." I couldn't imagine losing my grandparents.

"Colby and Henry... They've got a complicated past. It's been awkward since they hooked up a few months ago," he added, his tone somber. "Their families will never allow them to be together."

I scowled. "Small-minded assholes."

Eric grinned at me. "I'm sorry I brought you, love. I knew that Geoffry needed a night with his friends, but I couldn't stand the thought of being away from you."

Warmth wrapped around my chest.

Eric's nose wrinkled. "I suppose I sound like a proper bleeding idiot, don't I?"

I tilted my head. "What? No. Why would you say that?"

He sucked in a deep breath, his cheeks turning pink. "We've scarcely known each other a week, and I can't seem to stay away from you." A hand came up to cradle my cheek. "You're becoming my favorite addiction, Bex."

My heart did a little flip, because that was exactly what I wanted to hear... right? For some reason, I couldn't shake off the feeling that this felt wrong. Maybe it was because Eric's friends seemed like a bunch of jerks, and I was putting a lot of pressure on tonight.

But Eric wasn't his friends. You couldn't help who you grew up with; I was proof positive of that.

His voice dipped. "You have no idea how much I want to kiss you right now."

My breath caught. "O-okay." Nervous butterflies erupted in my belly.

"I'm not kissing you for the first time in front of my mates, love," he said with a low chuckle. He closed the inches that had separated us. "But later tonight..."

A smile lifted the corners of my mouth as my heart beat faster. Anticipation flowed through my veins in an icy wave of nerves that left me unsteady. I needed to stop putting so much pressure on a freaking kiss.

And I definitely needed to *not* be wondering if Eric would kiss the way I'd always dreamed of being kissed: dominating and controlling, making me feel safe and precious.

I'd always been drawn to the alphahole heroes, in books and in life. But those guys weren't good in anything but fiction. Dependable. Reliable. Constant. That was what I needed.

Geez, are you finding a boyfriend or a car, Bex?

I mentally slapped myself back into the moment, shoving aside my wandering thoughts.

Eric let out a shuddering breath, probably mistaking my silence for reluctance. "Maybe we *should* go."

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I think it's sweet that you want to be here for your friend. But I can leave if—"

"Absolutely not." He seemed insulted that I'd even suggest it. "But thank you for being so understanding, Bex."

He pressed another chaste kiss to my forehead before stepping back and lowering a hand to the small of my back to guide me to the table.

There were two empty seats, and Colby jumped up to pull out the one next to him while flashing me a winning smile.

"Thank you," I murmured, sliding into the seat and watching Eric lower himself into the chair beside me. Clearing my throat, I looked at Geoffry across the table. "I'm so sorry about your grandfather."

Geoffry paused halfway to lifting a tumbler of an amber-colored liquid to his lips. He gave me a slow, unfocused blink. “Uh, yeah. Thanks.” He tossed back the drink with a grimace and signaled for another.

I looked at Eric, worried for his friend.

Eric’s lips pressed into a thin line, and he reached for my hand under the table.

“So, Bex,” Colby began, turning to me with a megawatt smile, “tell us about yourself.”

“Uh... what do you want to know?” I hedged.

“Let’s start with the basics. How old are you?”

“She completed her senior year at Pacific Cross early,” Eric answered for me, pride bleeding through his tone.

Something in Colby’s gaze shifted to almost predatory. He made a *tsking* noise and sipped his water as he leaned toward me. “Eric, I never took you for a cradle robber. How very wicked of you.”

Eric shot him a look. “I’d encourage you to keep a civil tongue. Her grandparents are Laurent and Ines Moreau. If the fact that she’s here as *my* personal guest doesn’t remind you of your manners, then their name may.”

Colby jerked back, sobering, and I flinched a little.

It wasn’t that I was ashamed of my grandparents; quite the opposite. They were known across Europe for their philanthropy and patronage of the arts. The Moreau name was well established in Paris as eponymous with the leading French banking system. They were at the tippy-top of Parisian society.

But it made me cringe when people name-dropped them.

“My apologies,” Colby murmured. “Eric, your brother is also dating one of the Moreau granddaughters, isn’t he?” His eyes flashed. “Or did you steal this one from him?”

Eric huffed. “Of course not.”

“Alex is dating my cousin, Camille,” I explained with a forced smile.

Brent looked up from where he’d been typing on his phone at the other end of the table. “The ballerina, yeah?”

I nodded. “You know her?”

Brent shrugged. “My mother used to dance. She dragged me to a performance the last time I was in town and raved about her. I remember her mentioning she was Ines Moreau’s granddaughter.”

“My cousin is very talented,” I admitted.

“She’s hot. Pity Alex got to her first,” Brent replied, then went back to his phone.

Okay then.

Eric stiffened and glared at Brent. “Would you put down the—”

“I thought we were meeting to discuss the auction next week,” Geoffrey broke in, running a hand through his messy blond hair. He let out a burp and waved a hand. “Why the fuck are we talking about—”

“Geoffrey,” Eric snapped, his tone sharper and colder than I’d ever imagined it could be.

I jerked and looked at him, shocked by the ruthless fury etched into his normally gentle features.

Colby laughed, the sound grating. “He’s high, Eric. Ignore him.”

“A little hard to do when he’s behaving like a child,” Eric gritted out, his muscles strung tight with tension. “Now isn’t the time.”

“What auction?” I asked, confused. Maybe it had something to do with the gala next month to fund a library expansion project. My grandparents had discussed it in passing, but I’d kinda tuned out. They were trying to rope me into working on more of their projects, and while I was always down to help fund a library or save the polar bears, I also wanted to keep a low profile. Dating Eric this past week was as far out of my comfort zone as I wanted to go right now.

Colby snickered. “It’s a charity auction.”

“What’s the cause?”

Eric shot Colby a withering glare before looking at me, his expression kinder. “It’s a project our families have worked on for years. We sponsor families in third-world countries that need extra funding.”

“Wow,” I murmured. “That’s cool. My best friend and her husband do something kind of similar.”

Colby started laughing. “Doubtful.” At Eric’s sharp look, he choked out a cough. “I just mean, our families have been working together for nearly a decade on this... project.”

I frowned. “Feel free to talk about the auction or whatever else you need to. Maybe I can help?”

Eric squeezed my hand. “Thank you, love, but I think we can shelve the corporate chatter for an evening and just enjoy one another’s company.” He finished the sentence by shooting stern looks at his friends.

Unease rippled over me. Pushing it aside, I reached for my menu.

My fingers had just closed over the edge of the soft leather binding when something cold splashed down my back.

“Oh, no!” a horrified voice cried, and instantly Eric and Colby were on their feet.

Stunned, I turned and saw a waitress with an empty wine glass clutched in her hands. That would explain the cold liquid trailing down my spine. Smelled like... chardonnay.

“What have you done?” Eric snapped, grabbing his napkin.

“I’m so sorry, miss,” the woman apologized, looking near tears. “My foot caught on the carpet and—”

“I want to speak with your manager,” Eric growled.

I placed a placating hand on his chest. “No, don’t.” I gave her a tentative smile. “It was an accident. It happens.”

This girl looked terrified, like I’d start screaming or claw her eyes out any second. The urge to try and make it better was reflexive as Eric got more and more upset.

“Really,” I insisted, “it’s fine.”

“But she got you all... wet,” Colby drawled with a snort.

“Colby,” Eric ground out, his eyes flashing.

Colby held up his hands and dropped back into his chair with a smirk.

I gritted my teeth and looked at Eric, who seemed ready to pop a blood vessel. “Give me a moment to get cleaned up. At least it was white wine, right?”

His gaze cut to me. “I suppose.”

“Where’s the restroom?” I asked the waitress.

She pointed toward an alcove but stopped me when I started to walk around her. She wrung her hands. “I’m sorry, miss, but it’s currently being cleaned. Someone was sick in it... Not food related, she’s pregnant and the smells—” She rambled as she panicked.

Eric made a noise in the back of his throat. “Are you suggesting she *sit* here in the mess you made?”

“No,” the waitress stammered, her eyes huge. “I’ll take you to the back where our private employee restroom is, if that’s all right?”

“Of course,” I assured her before Eric could say something else.

We’d been... dating? Was this dating? Whatever it was, we’d been doing it for a week, and this was by far the most aggressive he’d ever seemed. Maybe he really was related to Alex. I mean, sure, he was pissed off *for* me,

not *at* me, but something about how he was acting seemed off.

Then again, it had been a weird night all around.

I followed the waitress to the back of the restaurant, thankful I'd opted to wear my hair up so that it wasn't soaked with wine. Even now, I could feel it drying and pulling my skin tight with stickiness. Hopefully I could wipe myself off with some wet paper towels and salvage the rest of my night with Eric.

The waitress moved silently, pushing through a door that led to a service hallway, and then stepped aside and pointed. "It's at the end of the hall. Last door on the right."

"Thanks so much," I told her, flashing her a quick grin to let her know I wasn't pissed off that she'd made a human error. I hurried down the hall and pushed open the door to a single bathroom.

I'd just turned to close the door when something slammed into it. I went tumbling backward, my back hitting the opposite wall and knocking the air from my lungs. I gasped in a deep breath and looked up to figure out what the hell was going on, but it took only seconds for him to get inside, lock the door, and pin me with his body.

Hard muscle pressed me into the drywall. A knee slipped between my legs as a large, calloused hand pressed over my mouth before I could scream. Dark, furious eyes framed by the thickest, blackest lashes glared at me.

"What the *fuck* are you doing, Becca?" Court Woods growled.

CHAPTER 13



BEX

With his hand still covering my mouth, all I could do was glare at Court. Glare and... stare.

Because it had been a month since I'd seen Court Woods, and a month shouldn't have made *this* big of a difference.

His dark hair was longer, falling over one eye. His sharp jaw was covered in a layer of stubble that made him look even more dangerous than usual. He was still broad—okay, the man was freaking ripped. Even through our layers of clothes, I could feel the heavy bulk of his muscles, especially where his thigh was wedged between my legs. Our height difference—I was five-five, and he had a solid eight inches on me—meant my lady business was pressed against his leg. All I'd need to do was rock my hips a little...

Bad, Bex! I mentally bitch-slapped myself because *no*. We weren't having *those* thoughts about *this* guy ever again. It was why I'd come to Paris—to put half a planet between us.

Wait.

Court was in *Paris*. Why was he here?

Some stupid piece of my heart that would always belong to him fluttered with hope.

Was he here for *me*?

Holy shit.

Was this—

“What the *fuck*, Becca?” he snarled again, his breath hot and minty against my face. “Tell me you're not this goddamn stupid.”

I blinked. Okay, as far as declarations of love went, that sucked.

Now I was pissed.

I lowered my lashes, pointedly reminding him that his hand was still covering my mouth. I had the strong urge to lick his palm just to see what he'd do. Maddie had a shirt that said, *I licked it, so it's mine*.

If only it was that easy.

Eyes still narrowed, Court slowly dropped his hand but didn't back up. God, he smelled good. Like citrusy soap and faint traces of leather.

His head jerked back an inch. "Did you just *sniff* me?"

Shit. Had I?

"What the hell are you doing here?" I demanded, going on the offense because... yeah. I was pretty sure I'd leaned in and taken a whiff of him.

I'd unpack *that* slip up later, when I was home.

"I'm on a date," I added, a dark thrill shooting through me at the fury that flashed across his face.

It was quickly schooled with a callous sneer. "I'm well fucking aware, sweetheart."

"I-is that why you're here?" I stammered, shock rippling down my spine. "Are you here because..." I had no idea how to finish that thought. I slammed my mouth shut before I could do something stupid.

Well, stupider than sniffing him like I was a shifter in a romance novel.

"Because you're on a date with a lowlife scum?" He arched a brow.

I felt my cheeks flush with anger. "Eric isn't—"

"Don't tell me you're actually defending that douche nozzle." His jaw dropped open, incredulity spreading across his face.

"Court—"

His expression turned mocking. "Oh, is it love?"

"Screw you," I snapped, pushing at his wide shoulders, but the asshole didn't budge. "Get off!"

He pressed against me harder. "So you can go back out there and make an even bigger fool out of yourself? No, thanks. I'll stay here where I can babysit your ass the way you so obviously need."

"If anyone's going to watch my ass, it'll be my boyfriend," I taunted. I wasn't sure that throwing the label on Eric was a great idea, but I did love the way Court looked a little sick at my declaration. "Fun fact? He *loves* my ass."

Jesus, it was like word vomit. I couldn't stop, because I needed Court to have some kind of reaction. *Any* kind of reaction. My masochistic heart craved a flicker of awareness from him, and I'd take it any way I could get it.

And that was exactly why I'd needed to get away from Court Woods. He was everything I wanted and nothing I could have.

"Wow," Court murmured, shaking his head like he was sorry for me. "Pathetic, even for you, Becca."

"Don't call me that!" I hissed.

Court was one of the few people who still used my childhood nickname, and it was a donkey kick to the heart every time I heard it.

"Fine. *Bex.*" Disdain dripped from his tone, like my nickname personally offended him.

And just like that, I was done. Exhausted. Spent. Tired of pretending I didn't give a shit when I did. It had been a weird night, and seeing Court made me realize why.

I wasn't over him.

I was trying to force myself to feel for Eric even a flicker of the inferno I did when I was around Court, but it was as useless as a concrete parachute. My unease tonight wasn't nerves over a kiss; it was anxiety because I knew, down deep, that Eric wasn't the guy I wanted.

Sure, I could lie to my heart, but the sadistic bitch always brought me back to this singular truth: Court Woods was intrinsically woven into the fabric of my soul.

I sagged under the weight of the realization that I'd never be rid of him. Of this feeling.

Maybe it was time to just call it a life and pledge myself to a convent and whatever nuns did. Crap, did I have to be Catholic to be a nun? Or was the basic belief that there was a higher power somewhere, laughing his ass off as he played with the doll known as Rebecca Whittier?

A warm hand slid behind my neck, anchoring me to the present.

I gasped as Court touched his forehead to mine for a beat. "Focus, Becca."

It was a thing people had always given me shit for as a kid. I had this annoying habit of zoning out into a lengthy internal monologue that would've made Shakespeare concerned. My parents had called me flighty. Madelaine had called it Becca-land.

But Court... Court had never judged me. Just smiled and reeled me back in with a touch or a word.

"Why are you here?" I asked, my tone soft and resigned.

As if sensing the shift in my mood, Court finally stepped back and gave

me space to breathe. “Phoenix.”

My head snapped up, my spine going straight. That one word was enough explanation.

“But... *here*?” I frowned. Aubergine wasn’t exactly a hotbed of criminal activity, unless you counted a shrimp cocktail that cost eighty-five euros.

He gave me a terse nod and folded his massive arms over that wide, muscular chest. “How much do you know about the guy you came here with?”

Surprise ignited in my blood, my brows shooting up. “Eric?” I laughed. “He’s... He’s a nice guy.”

His jaw tightened. “No, he isn’t. We’ve been—”

“We?” I cut him off. “Who else is here?”

“Rook and Bishop,” he admitted. “We’ve been watching the group of guys you and your *boyfriend* came here to meet.” He looked like he’d sucked on a lemon. “They’re part of why we’re in Paris. Why we’ve been here for a week.”

My heart sank. He’d been here for a week, and no one had mentioned it? Did Maddie know?

“Maddie doesn’t know where we are,” Court told me, his tone soft as he read my mind.

I gave a slow nod, grateful for that. “I’ve only known Eric for a week, but he seems like a good person.”

His features went hard. “You really think I’d be here if he was? You think we’d make that kind of mistake?”

“Maybe?” Probably not, but I wasn’t ready to admit that. “We came here because Eric wanted to have dinner with his friends. One of them just lost his grandfather.”

“Franklin Barnes?”

I shifted my weight on my feet. “That’s Geoffry’s last name, but—”

“Franklin Barnes was found dead in his flat last week.” Court stared at me.

I shrugged. “Okay?”

“He was shot three times. Twice in the chest, once in the head. He was executed.” His head tilted, his dark eyes gleaming. “Still think we have the wrong guys?”

I swallowed hard. “Just because one of his friends is into some dark stuff doesn’t mean Eric is.”

Court blew out a hard breath and tipped his head back for a second before his gaze returned to mine. “Eric isn’t here to see his friends—they came here to see *him*.”

“So what? That doesn’t make him a bad guy. Eric’s nice and sweet and...”

His brows lifted. “And?”

My cheeks heated as I lowered my gaze. “Boring.”

To his credit, Court didn’t give me shit for that last part. “Sweetheart, I know you’re determined to see the good in people, but you’re wrong.”

“They were just talking about some charity auction,” I started, thinking back. How could a group of guys planning an event to help people in need be evil?

Court’s eyes went wide. “Wait—they mentioned the auction to you? What’d they say?”

I frowned in confusion. “Not much, really.”

His hands came up to grip my shoulders. “Becca, *think*. What did they say?”

“I-I don’t know. Colby brought it up, I think, but then Eric told him to shut up and he told me it was a charity their families all run together to help people from third-world countries.” I stared, wide-eyed and unsure, as Court seemed to process my words.

“Fuck. But you heard the word *auction*?”

I nodded.

He growled and spun away from me, stalking the length of the small bathroom and pausing at the closed door. He didn’t speak or move for a weighted moment, then his fist shot out with an explosive punch to the door.

I jerked, gasping as I looked at where the wood had splintered. “Court!” The sight of blood dripping from his knuckles as he lowered his hand with a hiss had me moving. “You idiot,” I scolded, hurrying to the sink to grab a handful of paper towels.

“It’s fine,” he muttered even as I reached for him.

My skin crackled with electricity as I took his hand in mine. He’d split his knuckles wide open. “You probably broke your hand.”

“No, I didn’t.” He wiggled his fingers, but I caught the barely discernible wince.

“Why did you do that?” I demanded, wrapping up his hand as best as I could.

He yanked it away and stared down at me. “Are you kidding?”

I threw my hands up. “What would I possibly have to be kidding about, Court?”

He jabbed a finger toward the door. “Do you even realize how much danger you’re in here? Jesus, Bex, it’s not a fucking charity auction they’re discussing. It’s why I’m here with Rook and Bishop. It’s a major event where the items being auctioned off are *women*.”

I staggered back a step.

He grimaced. “And you’re apparently dating the guy who’s in charge of making sure they all show up on time.”

Now I was *really* lost. “Are you crazy? Eric runs a cargo importing and exporting business that belonged to his late mother.”

Court gave me a look, and I froze as everything started slotting together.

Auction.

Shipping.

Business.

Oh fuck me sideways with a stick.

I turned and barely made it in time for the vomit to land in the toilet.

CHAPTER 14



COURT

God, I was an asshole. I probably could have figured out a gentler way to break the news to Becca that the guy she was dating was a monster, but I'd never been tactful. Especially not when I was pissed.

And right now? I was fucking *livid*.

But I hadn't expected the news to make her actually sick.

Every time I closed my eyes, I could see her walking into the restaurant with *him*. The way he'd rested his hand on the small of her back like he fucking owned her. Like she was his property.

She wasn't his, and she never would be.

Mine.

Oh, fuck no. I didn't have time to argue with my heart or my brain or whatever little piece of my subconscious still thought that.

With a grimace, I dropped to my knees behind her and rubbed her back in a slow circle, my heart twisting into a pretzel. "Easy," I murmured.

She rested an arm across the back of the toilet seat and lowered her forehead to it, sucking in shuddering breaths.

I reached over and flushed the toilet, then leaned toward the edge of the sink to grab a handful of paper towels. Helping her lean back, I wiped her mouth with a frown. She was too damn pale.

Eyes closed, she scooted away from the toilet and leaned her head against the wall. She drew her knees to her chest before wrapping her arms around her legs. I dropped to my ass across from her, waiting for her to speak.

"Can you just go?" she finally rasped, still not looking at me.

I frowned. "I can't leave Paris until—"

Her hazel eyes snapped open, full of humiliation and tears. "No, I mean

leave the restaurant.”

My spine went ramrod straight. “What about you?”

She waved a hand in the air. “I’ll tell Eric I’m sick and ask him to take me home.”

A low growl rumbled in my chest. “Not fucking happening, sweetheart. You honestly think I’m going to let you get into a car—*alone*—with that guy?”

“I think you’re not going to *let* me do anything,” she snapped back, but there was little heat in her words. She sounded exhausted, and I hated that the most. That she’d given up when the girl I knew used to fight.

The entire time I’d known Becca, she’d fought. As a kid, she’d fought for what she wanted, then for her life when she’d gotten sick. Somewhere along the way, she’d lost that, and *that* fucking killed me. I thought I’d seen a spark of it as we’d reconnected over the past few months. But then I’d gone and fucked it up all over again.

I *always* fucked it up.

I knew it, but damned if I could stop, especially where Rebecca Whittier was concerned. This girl would forever be my destruction and my salvation.

“He’s dangerous,” I tried, keeping my voice even and low.

She shook her head, looking more than a little distraught. I had the irrational urge to smooth her furrowed brow with a kiss. Then I wondered what she’d do if I kissed her, even on the forehead.

Probably slap me. I’d deserve it.

And it’d be worth it, a dark little voice whispered.

She rubbed her forehead. “How the hell did my life get so…”

“Complicated?” I offered with a tight smile.

She met my gaze. “Fucked up.”

No, what was fucked up was my cock jerking in my jeans as her lips formed the word *fuck*.

She grimaced, rolling her eyes to the ceiling with a soft scoff. “So much for my big plan.”

I cocked my head, barely catching her words. “What plan?”

She shook her head again. “Nothing.”

“Becca—”

“You know what, Court? I think I’ve been humiliated enough for one night.” She pushed herself up onto wobbly feet and glared at me when I moved to help her. “Can you tell me something?”

“Maybe,” I hedged. There was a lot about my life that I couldn’t—and wouldn’t—tell her. Shit that she didn’t need to know, and I’d protect her as much as I could from my world. She’d been hurt by it enough.

“Is it me?” The note of vulnerability made her voice crack.

“Bec—”

She held up a hand, lifting her chin. “I’m serious, Court. Is there something about *me* that just says *feel free to screw with me?*”

“Of course not,” I told her, rage flaring in my system, igniting nerve endings. God, Becca was smart and kind and *perfect*. If I hadn’t already planned on killing Eric before, the fact that she was in tears over his lies would’ve sealed his fate.

Fucker was a dead man walking.

“Then why am I constantly the idiot who trusts the wrong people?” Her hands balled into tiny fists at her sides.

“Trusting one asshole doesn’t make you an idiot, sweetheart,” I assured her. In fact, looking at her now, with her hair twisted into a complicated knot, her eyes glittering with fury, and the sexy as hell navy blue dress that hugged all her curves, she looked like a goddamn wet dream. Not to mention those silver heels that made her legs look impossibly long.

An image stole through my mind... her legs wrapped around my waist, those heels digging into my ass, as I fucked her into oblivion.

And just like that, my semi became a full-blown hard-on.

“It’s not just one asshole,” she pointed out, holding up a hand to tick off fingers as she made a list. “My dad. Madelaine. *You.*” The last one was delivered with a pointed look.

I flinched like a little bitch. Only this girl could make me do that.

Put a gun to my head? I didn’t even break a sweat.

But having Becca pissed at me? I was ready to shit my pants. The power she held over me was downright dangerous. The fact that she was my weakness had been exploited enough by my father, and I wouldn’t let it happen again. If that meant I had to push her away to keep her safe, then I would.

When Ryan and Maddie had gotten together, it had brought Becca back into my orbit. I’d done a damn good job of erasing her from my mind, but one moment was all it took for her to become the center of my universe yet again.

And, *yet again*, she’d walked unknowingly into my world and paid the

price.

It wouldn't happen a third time.

Sighing, I shoved my hands into my pockets. "None of that was your fault. You can't blame yourself."

She arched a brow. "I have a clinical diagnosis of anxiety that says my brain can, and will, blame me for anything."

I frowned. "You were diagnosed with anxiety? When?"

"Suddenly concerned about my welfare, Court?" The mocking edge to her voice made me want to punch something else.

Or toss her over my lap as I spanked her ass.

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm always—"

A knock on the door cut me off, and I spun to face it, pulling the Glock from where I'd tucked it into the back of my jeans. Becca inhaled but didn't say anything. She stayed quiet and let me handle things.

Fuck if I didn't wish it could always be that way.

"It's me." Rook's voice was muffled, and I unlocked the door and yanked it open.

He stood on the other side with the waitress I'd paid to spill a drink on Becca. Neither of them looked happy.

Rook hooked a thumb at the waitress. "Eric's asking what's taking so long."

"I tried to stall," the waitress added, looking guilty.

I felt Becca come up behind me but blocked her when she tried to move around me.

A faint smile lifted Rook's lips as he spotted her over my shoulder. "Hey, Bex. Long time no see."

"Hey, Rook." A small hand curled over my bicep. "Court, let me by."

I whirled so fast that she lost her balance. Without hesitation, my hands grabbed her around the waist to steady her. "No."

She tipped her head back to look at me but didn't fight my hold. Instead, she placed her hands against my chest. "He's going to get suspicious if I don't go back out there."

"I don't care," I gritted out.

Sighing, Becca turned to the waitress. "Please tell him I'll just be a moment."

With a nod, the waitress scurried away.

I drew in a deep breath, readying for a fight.

Her fingers dug into the cotton of my black t-shirt. “Let me go back. I’ll finish dinner, and he’ll drop me off at home. I’ll tell him I think we’re better off as friends.” She shrugged with a sad smile. “That’ll be the end of it.”

I snorted in disbelief. “You really think he’s going to let you go?”

“Yes,” she replied, guileless and innocent as ever. She truly didn’t understand the walking temptation she was. “Even if—” She cut off abruptly, her face going pale. “Oh, no.”

“What?” Panic spiked in my blood, and I dragged her closer, eviscerating the scant space between us.

“Cami, my cousin,” she croaked out, her eyes huge, “she’s dating Alex, Eric’s brother. Is *he* involved in this? Is Cami in danger?”

I looked back at Rook. We knew who Alex was. He’d never been flagged in our system, but it wasn’t a stretch to think that Eric’s brother could be involved as well.

Rook grimaced. “It’s not like these guys have a fucking membership roster. We haven’t gotten any intel that he is. Just Eric.”

Becca let out a scoff. “Please. Of the two of them? *Alex* is the asshole. Wait—maybe it’s really Alex, and he’s framing Eric?”

“Then why is Eric here, talking about an auction, with these guys?” I reminded her gently.

She visibly deflated. “Oh, right.”

“Which is why going back out there is a horrible idea,” I added.

“Actually...” Rook mused, rubbing his jaw.

I glared at him, wishing like hell I’d gotten mutant laser beams I could shoot out of my eyes at him. Was he fucking serious?

He pressed his lips together. “I don’t like putting innocent people in danger either, little brother, but we can’t afford for these guys to get spooked for *any* reason. They’ve already pushed the auction date back because of Barnes’s murder. They push it again, they may cut their losses.”

Fuck. That meant they’d get rid of the women currently being held somewhere in Paris like livestock waiting for the auction block. They wouldn’t keep them alive indefinitely. No, they’d kill them and focus on the next auction.

“I’ll be okay.” Becca’s soft voice didn’t waver.

I stared down at her, searching those gorgeous green and gold eyes for any sign of fear or panic. Any hint that this was too much. If it was, I’d walk away with her right now.

That was why what I felt for her was too dangerous. Why I'd never be the hero. Because if push came to shove, I'd let the world burn to protect her.

"I have a tracker," Rook spoke up. He held up a small device and handed it to her. "Keep this on you so we know where you are." He looked at me. "You can follow her home. Make sure she's safe."

I groaned and looked at the ceiling.

"I'll be okay," Bex assured me, giving me a small smile. "I mean, you'll have my back, right?"

"Always," I vowed.

"Then it'll be fine. Trust me."

Her I trusted.

It was the rest of the world I didn't.

CHAPTER 15



BEX

I couldn't stop staring at Eric, but judging by the grins he kept flashing me and the hand resting on my thigh under the table, he didn't know it was because I knew his dirty secret.

I went through dinner on autopilot. Thank God for all the mindless dinner parties and galas I'd attended growing up. I was practically a professional at smiling and nodding at the appropriate places. But the whole time, my mind was whirling with the newfound information.

Looking at each of the men I was sitting with, I kept wondering at what point they had decided people were commodities that could be traded and sold. Then again, my own father had gotten tangled up in this world, too.

When given the option, I declined dessert, even though I'd eaten barely a quarter of my dinner. Everything tasted like cardboard and dropped like lead into my belly. Not wanting to be sick again, I stuck with sipping water and refused to drink the wine paired with my meal.

Relief sank into my bones when Eric tossed his napkin onto his plate. He smiled at his friends. "Gents, it's been a pleasure, but if you don't mind, I'd like to spend some time alone with my lovely date."

I forced a sweet smile onto my lips before neatly folding my own napkin and setting it on the table.

"Alone time, eh?" Colby teased while leaning into me. "You know, Bex, if you ever want a real man—"

"Enough, Colby." The bark in Eric's tone was jarring and not at all on par with the mild-mannered, almost timid guy I'd been dating for a week. And now, instead of plotting how to end this evening with a goodnight kiss, I was trying to figure out how to end things entirely.

So far, I'd surmised that Colby was a Grade-A asshole, Brent was a sniveling little bitch who hadn't gotten over some high school bullshit, Geoffrey was a barely functioning addict/alcoholic, and Henry...

Well, Henry honestly kinda stumped me.

On the surface, he had the same sort of bloodlines and connections as the others, but the way they talked down to him didn't sit right. Henry seemed to be the butt of the joke more often than not, and sometimes the teasing turned downright vicious before Eric called his friends off.

Then there was Eric, whom I was still having trouble wrapping my head around as the bad guy. It didn't add up; he was kind, attentive, and even over-tipped the waitresses who'd dealt with us all night. He'd stopped Colby when Colby had intentionally dropped his fork so one of the waitresses would have to bend over and pick it up for him.

What kind of criminal mastermind who supported sex trafficking bothered to help a waitress?

But in my gut, I trusted Court.

Even if I wanted to strangle him, I knew he wouldn't lie to me. Not about something this important. And I knew that if Phoenix thought there was a problem here, there was a freaking problem. The guys were too good at what they did to make baseless accusations.

Which meant that the guy escorting me from Paris's premiere dining experience was a sociopath.

Not exactly comforting.

I jerked as hands landed on my waist and pulled me in. A moment later Eric feathered a soft kiss over my jaw.

"Thank you for tonight, love," he murmured, his voice like warm honey. His eyes found mine, and he smiled. "You were spectacular."

This was the part where I should be pulling away. No, *running* away. But instead, all I heard were Rook's words.

They may cut their losses.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew that people who trafficked other people didn't "cut their losses" by making it a line item on their tax returns.

Court had said he'd been in Paris for a week now as he and his brothers tried to figure out where the auction would be held.

And I was currently on a date with someone who *knew* the details of said auction.

The wheels slowly cranked in my head, formulating an idea that was

potentially a disaster... but worth a shot.

Sliding my hands up the front of Eric's shirt, I wound my arms around his neck and tipped my head back with an apologetic smile. "I wouldn't call this evening a total loss. Even if I *am* questioning your choice in friends."

His grin gave him a boyish look. "They're my oldest mates, you know how it is."

"I absolutely do," I agreed with a laugh. "We don't get to choose who we grow up with."

"Spoken as though from experience," he replied, his hands tightening for a moment on my waist.

I shrugged. "I'm Malcolm Whittier's only child. You'd be surprised by the things—and people—that I know."

He hesitated just for a heartbeat. "Oh?"

I patted his chest, hoping that I was infusing the right amount of mystery into my words. Enough to make him curious. "Of course." A coy smirk lifted my lips. "Every year we used to vacation with—" I cut myself off with a giggle. "It doesn't matter."

His arms slid around my waist, pulling me closer. "Actually, I'd love to know about how you grew up. I'll admit, I *have* heard of your father. Then again, most of the world runs on computer chips manufactured by Whittier Corp."

I resisted the urge to shudder. "I'm well aware. I swear, growing up my dad and his friends would have dick-measuring contests based on whose business did the best that year. If I had to listen to Kent Westford brag about another hotel opening, or what nuclear conflict General Woods stopped in Iran, I would go crazy."

"Sounds positively tedious," Eric mused as the valet pulled up with his car. "Shall we?"

I nodded and stepped out of his embrace, smothering the urge to shake off my nerves as I moved toward the car. Eric opened the door for me and waited until I was situated inside to close it and move around to the driver's side. I watched as he tipped the valet and exchanged an easy smile with the man before sliding behind the wheel. He flashed me a grin and then pulled into traffic.

Holding my purse on my lap, I watched the facades of buildings and shops blur past while trying to come up with something to say to bring up the auction again. Something to make him give away some detail that might help

Court.

“General *Jasper Woods*?” Eric’s question came so suddenly that I thought I’d imagined it.

But when I turned my head, he was glancing at me, his brow furrowed.

I smiled. “One and the same. I’m surprised you know him. Or do you make it a habit to keep up with the American military rankings?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Not quite, but we are... acquainted.”

“So you’ll be meeting with him while he’s in town?” I kept my gaze as neutral as possible.

Eric’s eyes narrowed a fraction, his fingers unfurling and closing around the steering wheel.

Fuck it. Gamble big, win big, right? That was a saying?

I made an *ah-ha* sound. “I mean, it makes sense. The *auction*.”

His gaze whipped to me so fast the car swerved. I gasped and threw out a hand to the dash for support. Several cars honked behind us, tires squealing as the evening traffic tried to avoid collisions. Finally, Eric got it together enough to pull over, idling near an upscale lingerie boutique.

“You know about the auction?” His voice was low, controlled.

I barely held back the urge to swallow as I met his gaze, stunned by the blazing intensity. Slowly, I arched a brow. “Did you miss the part where I said my father is Malcolm Whittier? The same Malcolm Whittier who created the cybersecurity systems currently used by men like General Woods?”

God, this was such a gamble. My heart was pounding in my chest like a war drum, and if Eric decided he wanted to hold hands now, he’d find my palms dripping with sweat.

He still looked skeptical.

I shrugged one shoulder and studied my nails. Hopefully he was buying my *I-don’t-give-a-damn* bravado. “The only reason I even know about the auction is because Daddy is missing Mémé’s eightieth birthday celebration.” I rolled my eyes with a dramatic flair as the lie slid off my tongue like ice. “Business.”

“But the auction is two days after her party,” Eric pointed out. “Wouldn’t he have time?”

Holy shitballs.

He’d told me the goddamned date and it was in less than a freaking week!

Stay calm, Bex.

“Uh, he usually would, but he’s finishing up some other deals and the

timing is just off.” I winked at Eric. “Honestly I think it’s because he can’t stand to be around my mother. And seriously, I’m so sick of them fighting. It’s easy to see why she filed for divorce, but it’s about eight years too late. It’s a shame, because my grandparents still think of him as their son.”

Total lie. I’d hear Papa ranting about how Dad had never been good enough for his baby girl. If Dad showed up at the party—which he definitely had *not* been invited to—Papa would probably punch him.

Eric shook his head, a slow grin creeping across his lips that made his eyes sparkle. “Bex, you never cease to surprise me. Just when I already think you’re incredible, you reveal a whole new layer of utter perfection.” He reached out and grasped the back of my neck. “You’re everything I’ve been looking for and never thought I’d find.”

My breath caught in my lungs as he leaned in and I realized, in horror, that he was about to kiss me. The very thing I’d gone into this date wanting was now a revolting idea.

His eyes darkened as his tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip, and I knew I’d have to make a choice—let him kiss me, or fake a heart attack.

And I really sucked at acting sick.

The one time I’d tried to fake the flu to avoid going to school—courtesy of Madelaine making middle school a living hell—I’d blasted my forehead with a hair dryer for a few minutes before going to find my mother. My mom, with all her medical powers of deduction, called me out for faking when she put her hand against my head and almost got second-degree burns.

Not my finest moment.

But when I’d broken down—literally—and told her why I couldn’t go to school, she’d let me stay home, and we’d spent the day together, shopping and bonding. It was one of my favorite memories.

The sharp honk of a car horn behind us had Eric jerking back with a scowl. He glared in the rearview mirror at the car flashing its lights, waiting for us to move from where he’d double-parked.

“Keep your knickers on,” he grouched, waving a hand to acknowledge the other driver as he pulled back into traffic. He shot me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, love. What can I say? You’ve utterly bewitched me.”

Three hours ago, I would’ve loved to hear him say those words. But now, knowing what I did, the heart sank like a lump of charcoal in my gut. My skin crawled where he’d touched me, and I forced down the urge to shiver.

He kept talking as he drove, mostly mundane topics, but every time he

shared something about himself, I wondered when he'd gone from poor little rich boy to monster. What did it take for a person to make the decision to become evil? Or maybe he'd been born that way, and if so, what effed-up genetics were part of his cocktail?

I responded with as many answers as possible, but it was like a switch had been flipped. Like my acknowledging his dark, depraved secret meant the veil of formality had been ripped away.

He wasn't some guy who'd been cast out by his father and brother. He was a shark, silently moving through turbulent waters and using the chaos to disguise his moves. The look of disdain in his eyes when he talked about his father and the cutting way he referred to Alex as inferior made one thing painfully obvious: Eric Lambert-Durand was a stone-cold sociopath.

The more he relaxed, the more I started to wonder what I'd ever seen in him.

Well, mostly I'd seen that he wasn't someone else. That was the only prerequisite I seemed to require nowadays.

I did know that, by the time he pulled the car into the circular drive of my grandparents' house, I was ready to lose my shit. My nerves were shot, and I was over the small talk. I needed space to think through my options.

Putting the car in park, Eric turned and grabbed my hand. "Bex, I'd love to see you again."

I forced a smile onto my lips, wondering if he felt the tremble in my fingers. "Me, too." I could keep up the lie for a few more minutes. I lived with my mom and grandparents; it wasn't like I could invite him in to spend the night.

Oh, God.

A fresh wave of nausea welled up in my stomach. Had he been with any of the women he'd trafficked? Forced them?

A phantom memory of hands unbuttoning my shirt punched the air from my lungs. It had been months since I'd had a flashback to the night I'd been assaulted. Well, almost assaulted.

I'd been saved just in time by Maddie and the guys. The drugs I'd been given had messed with my memory, but every now and then, a glimpse would surface like the words in a Magic 8 Ball before sinking back into my subconscious.

Like the scent of fresh soap and leather as Court had carried me home and tucked me safely into bed.

I'm sorry, Becca.

Sometimes I thought those were the only words he knew how to say.

“Bex?” Eric squeezed my fingers again, his expression concerned. “Are you all right?”

I placed my free hand over my stomach. “Honestly? I’m feeling kinda off.”

“You barely touched your dinner,” he mused, his brow furrowing.

“Probably something I ate at lunch,” I replied, reaching for the door handle. “I’m sure I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“Wonderful. The weather is supposed to be clear—I was thinking of taking my family’s helicopter to Brussels tomorrow. I have business there, and thought it would be wonderful for you to join me. There’s a fabulous restaurant where we could eat before returning. Or... we could stay at my family’s flat for an evening or two.”

I stared at him for a beat, not sure how to reply.

Concern trickled into his expression. “Bex?”

“Uh, sure,” I stammered, unable to form an excuse for why this was never going to happen. Right now I just needed to get out of this car. “What time?”

He grinned. “I’ll pick you up at ten, does that work?”

“Absolutely,” I assured him, gently pulling away and opening the car door.

“Bex?” he called as I was about to close the door.

I froze and peered inside.

His dark eyes were fathomless pits. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to have you in my life. You’re extraordinary.”

A weak smile tugged at my mouth. “Eric, I can honestly say I’ve never met anyone quite like you, too.”

“Get some rest, love. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow,” I echoed as I stepped back and closed the door. I turned and headed for the front door and used my key to unlock it. Once inside, I quickly set all the locks and leaned against the heavy wooden barrier, catching my breath.

Inside my purse, my phone buzzed with an incoming message. I already knew it would be from Court, but I wasn’t ready to deal with him.

The house was dark and quiet, with only a few dim lamps lit downstairs and along the curving staircase. I needed a shower and my snuggliest jammies before crawling into my bed. Tomorrow I’d text Eric and tell him

I'd gotten worse and had to cancel.

I was mentally rehearsing my excuse as I walked into my bedroom. I kicked the door shut and reached for the light switch. Warm light flooded my space, illuminating the man waiting on my bed.

My heart jumped into my throat, and I fell back against the door with a gasp. "How the hell did you get in here?"

Court stood up with a slow smirk. "Your grandparents' idea of a security system is a joke, sweetheart." His dark eyes swept the length of me. "You okay?"

I opened my mouth to say yes, but the word stuck in my throat. All of the stress and emotion of the night—hell, of the past *year*—crashed over me at once.

A pit of darkness opened in my mind, and then I was freefalling into it without any idea where it would end. The world spun as I slid down the door, tears flooding my eyes as I started to shake hard enough for my teeth to chatter. I caught the flash of fear in Court's eyes a second before I squeezed my eyelids shut.

Before my ass could hit the floor, I was caught and lifted up, cradled against a warm chest, and held by strong arms.

CHAPTER 16



BEX

I buried my face in the fabric of his jacket. The supple leather absorbed my tears as I sniffled and breathed in the scent of the coat mingled with fresh soap.

Tomorrow I would mentally bitch-slap myself for falling apart all over Court Woods, but tonight I was going to leach comfort from him like a sponge, the way I had when I was little. Once upon a time, he'd been my protector, the one who made the bad things better.

I still remembered the day Doug Pearce had pushed me down when I'd tried to take the last swing on the playground. My ass had barely hit the ground when four shadows fell over me. Court, Ash, Ryan, and Linc stood behind me, having seen what was about to go down from the other side of the playground, where they'd been playing a game of pickup soccer with other fourth graders.

Court had helped me up and checked me for injuries while the others threatened Doug until he pissed his pants in front of all of Cloverleaf Private Elementary Academy. I knew for a fact Ryan, Ash, and Linc hadn't touched Doug, but he'd had a black eye the next time I'd seen him at school, and the knuckles on Court's right hand had been split.

No one gets to hurt you, Becca.

But then everything had changed, and the guy I'd thought would always have my back had abandoned me. He had been the one who hurt me.

Rubber bands wrapped around my chest, squeezing until I was sure my lungs would pop. My breaths came in choppy pants as tears clogged my throat and I turned my face into Court's neck.

His arms tightened around me, a silent promise that he would keep out

the world for tonight. “Becca,” he murmured as my sobs devolved into hiccups, “sweetheart, I need you to look at me. Come on, let me see those gorgeous eyes.”

I lifted my head and blinked up at him.

He moved a hand to my cheek, his thumb stroking away the last tear that tumbled free. “There’s my girl,” he whispered, his dark eyes like twin blocks of burning coal. “Baby, did something happen?”

A hysterical laugh bubbled out of me. “You mean other than my life?”

His jaw tightened. “I mean with that asswipe. I never should’ve let you go with him. Did he—”

“He didn’t hurt me,” I assured Court, smoothing a finger across his jaw until it relaxed.

He exhaled long and hard. “Thank Christ for that.” His lips pressed against my hair, and I snuggled closer to his chest without thinking. My ear pressed against hard muscle, and I focused on the steady thumping of his heart.

“Sorry,” I whispered, sniffing again.

He snorted. “For what?”

“Breaking down like an idiot?” I couldn’t keep the self-deprecation from my tone.

“Baby, I’m here anytime you need me,” he murmured, running his hand down my back.

“I just... I guess it all caught up with me,” I went on, resisting the urge to remind him of all the ways he’d abandoned me over the years. For tonight, I’d let myself believe the lies.

Just one night.

With a shaky laugh, I covered my face with my hands. “I’m a freaking disaster.”

Gentle fingers wrapped around my wrists and tugged. “No, you’re not. You’re....” Court blew out another breath, his dark eyes pained. “You’re fucking amazing. I promise we’ll get this punk out of your life. How’d he take the breakup?”

I sat slowly on the edge of my bed, knowing I must look guilty.

Court’s eyes narrowed. “Becca.”

“Hear me out, okay?”

His expression went cold, flat. “Tell me.”

Maybe if I started with the good news? “I know when the auction’s

happening,” I blurted out.

He stiffened, the air around him going still. “And how would you happen to know that info?” His voice remained deadly calm, almost terrifyingly so.

I bit my lower lip. “I might’ve played up that my dad didn’t exactly keep that world a secret.”

Something dark and unreadable flashed in his eyes. “Becca.”

“And maybe I also name-dropped your dad, and Linc’s... *and* the fact that we all used to vacation together,” I finished, pushing the words out so fast that they ran together.

Court took a breath, then another. He paced a few feet away before turning back. “What. The *fuck*. Were you thinking?”

My heart slammed in my chest. “I was thinking I could help! Eric—”

“Is a motherfucking psycho, Becca!” Court snarled. “And you just basically gave him a free pass to show you his crazy.”

I ducked my head, my shoulders hiking up. “Yeah, he actually seemed pretty excited that we were on the same team.”

“Of fucking course he was,” he spat, sparks practically flying from his eyes as he pinned me with a ruthless stare. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Helped your ass out?” I snapped, suddenly cranky. Jesus, it wasn’t like I’d married Eric. I’d fudged a few truths to get info from a seriously bad guy to help Court and Rook.

“More like put yourself directly in his crosshairs,” he hissed. “Jesus, how could you have been so stupid?”

I jumped up. “I’m *not* stupid.”

He shook his head, jaw tight. “No, Becca, you’re not, which is why I can’t for the life of me figure out why you further insinuated yourself into a situation you wanted out of.”

I snapped my mouth shut. Okay, I *had* done that, but I’d done it to help *him*.

“What? No answer?” he mocked with a snort. “For someone who doesn’t want shit to do with me or Phoenix, you sure as hell are good at finding ways to keep yourself in my orbit.”

I jerked back like I’d been slapped, his words cutting through me like a thousand knives. “Are you kidding me? I left my home and an entire freaking continent to get away from you! Until tonight, I had no idea that Eric was mixed up in your shit.”

His jaw clenched, a muscle ticking.

“You want me done, Court? I’m *done*. Get out and forget I ever existed. That’s what you’re good at, right?” I arched a brow at him, wanting—no, *needing*—to make his heart ache the way mine did.

Instead, he took a step toward me, his long legs eating up the distance between us in a single move. His toes bumped mine as he towered over me. “Oh, sweetheart, you have *no* idea.”

Something in his dark gaze made me shiver, my insides lighting up with anticipation. I balled my hands into fists at my sides so I wouldn’t do something *really* stupid. Like kiss him. Right now, I was a trembling ball of emotion.

There had always been a connection between Court and me. It was as undeniable as the ocean being blue and grass being green. No matter what I did or how far I went, that wouldn’t change.

But I still never could’ve imagined what he’d say next.

“Pack a bag.”

I blinked, not sure I’d heard him right. “What?”

“Pack a bag,” he repeated, his tone firmer. “Unless you want me to start packing for you.”

“Where exactly am I going?” I asked, too confused to keep on being pissed.

“With me,” he replied, like the answer was obvious.

An astonished laugh burst from me. “Excuse me? No. No *way*.”

“Let’s recap what’s going on,” he started. “You met a guy who is a known human trafficker.” He ticked up a finger. “You started dating said asshole.” Another finger, and another. “Then you decided to not only let him know that you like him, but you cosigned on his lifestyle.”

“I didn’t—”

He pressed the final finger to my lips. “You *did*, which, to a guy like that? Is like finding a unicorn wrapped in bacon. Plus, you doubled down by letting him think you’re in with the big players—my and Linc’s dads.”

“I... I’ll still break things off with him. I can text him tonight and say I’m sick. I’ll be sick for a few days and then say I’ve had a chance to rethink—”

He scoffed and shook his head. “Sweetheart, Ash did a little more digging into Eric. Did you know his last girlfriend filed a restraining order and pressed charges for assault?”

My heart sank like a rock. “What?”

“The case was officially put on hold when she went missing a month later. The girl before that? Also gone without a fucking trace.” He paused, his lips pressed together. “You starting to see how bad you messed up yet?”

A sense of dread settled low in my belly as I remembered the almost manic look in Eric’s eyes. He’d been so excited... Oh, God, what had I done? And his last two girlfriends were *missing*?

Court’s hands settled on my shoulders, wrenching my attention to him before I could fully spiral into panic. “Pack a bag, Becca.” His words were softer, kinder now. “I can’t keep you safe while you’re here.”

“Where am I going?” I mumbled, numbness setting in. “Back to California?”

“No, you’re staying in Paris,” he replied, “but you’ll stay with me.”

“You?” The word came out like a squeak, and I knew I must’ve looked like a googly-eyed cartoon character with the way I was gaping at him.

He tensed like he was readying for a fight. “Yes, me. I can’t protect you if you aren’t near me, and I’ll be damned if I let you get hurt again.”

Again.

That word echoed between us like the clanging of a gong. We hadn’t spoken about that summer, but maybe now we would. Maybe it would give me the closure I finally needed on that part of my life so I could move on for real.

Well, after my life wasn’t in danger anymore.

Also, again.

My life was like a soap opera. Just when things couldn’t get any crazier, the long-lost evil twin surfaced. Then again, my best friend was currently living the life of her long-lost evil twin, so I guessed I could kinda check that box off?

“Becca?” Court’s hands tightened on my shoulders.

Crap, I’d totally spaced out. “What about my family? Will Eric—”

He shook his head. “I doubt he’ll come after them. Your grandparents are too high profile in this city, and your mom is, too, in her own right. You’ll tell him that you had to go finalize some things at PC. Ash will create a paper trail in case anyone looks into it,” Court finished, shoving his phone into his back pocket. His dark brows lifted. “Bags aren’t gonna pack themselves, baby girl.”

I scowled. “Don’t call me that.”

An amused smile drifted across his full lips. “You really want me to stop

calling you that?”

“Yes,” I retorted, though I wasn’t entirely sure. He’d started calling me baby girl when I was, well, a baby. He’d known me *that* long. Then it had been Becca. Now it was still Becca, but he liked to sprinkle in the occasional *sweetheart* or *baby* to really fuck with my ovaries.

Court Woods was gorgeous. I knew that. With dark hair that always looked perfectly mussed, a body that would make a Greek god envious, full pouty lips, and a killer jawline, he looked like he’d just stepped out of a fantasy. Like G.I. Joe and Adonis had a baby.

Having him say anything in that rumbly voice of his was cause for an IPE. Instant Panty Explosion. But the reverence and adoration he usually reserved for when he called me Becca... Yeah, *that* messed with my head. Every wall I’d meticulously built to protect myself went crumbling into dust the second he spoke my name.

And now I’d be staying with him? As in sharing a bathroom and sleeping under the same roof?

“What am I going to tell my mom? My grandparents?” I asked, shaking my head. “No, Court, I can’t just leave.”

“Tell them that you’re going back to the States for a week or two because there was a mix-up with your credits,” he replied with a shrug. “If we need, Ash can—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumbled. “Ash can work his magic and *un-graduate* me.” I glared at him.

He gave me a little smirk. “If you’re tossing around words like *un-graduate*, you might actually need to head back to PC.”

“So, why don’t I do that then? I can go back to California and hang out with Maddie until this blows over,” I argued.

“Which, again, puts you on another continent. I can’t protect you from that far away,” he reasoned.

“Why do *you* have to protect me?” I challenged, crossing my arms. In this dress, the small movement pushed my boobs up and out.

And Court one hundred percent noticed.

His focus dipped to my cleavage and lingered for a moment before he lifted his gaze. The stark hunger in it almost had me stepping back.

Or leaning in.

God, he messed with my head like no one else could.

“Truth?” He tilted his head, studying me.

I nodded, my mouth dry as cotton as I stared up at him.

Slowly, like he was afraid I'd spook and bolt, his hands reached for me and settled on my hips. "I'm not going to pretend you and I don't have shit to wade through, Becca. There's a lot of stuff you don't know—"

"Because you never told me," I cut in, frustrated and still hurt by all the lies and deception that littered our past.

He gave a single nod. "I know, baby. But I think it's time we fixed that."

"Meaning?" I whispered, and snagged my bottom lip between my teeth.

His gaze snapped to my mouth, and his grip on me tightened as he tugged me closer. Close enough that I felt the hard length of his cock against my belly. I sucked in a gasp, every muscle freezing as my mind went into a freefall.

"Meaning I'm done running from this. Us," he clarified. "I've spent the last few weeks miserable as hell because I thought I was doing the right thing by pushing you away. Fuck, make that the last few *years*. All I ever wanted was for you to be safe, Becca. And tonight, I think I finally figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

My entire universe hinged on his next words. Something shifted in my soul. A feeling that whatever came next would alter me forever.

Court lowered his forehead to mine, inhaling the air I exhaled like he was devouring me. "That the safest place I can keep you is with me."

CHAPTER 17



COURT

Sometimes, I really needed to fucking think before I acted. I absolutely knew that Becca would be safe with me, but I hadn't thought it out beyond shooting down the few very valid points she'd made. And now that she was in my car and I was taking her back to the hotel, I was starting to have doubts.

"You're quiet," she remarked from the other side of the car.

"I'm thinking." Not a lie.

Her big hazel eyes were wide. "About?"

"My next step," I replied.

It was quiet, but I heard her huff. If that wasn't enough, she turned her body away from me.

"What?" I finally demanded when the silence felt like a guillotine hanging over my head.

"Nothing," she snapped, her voice frigid. "Just let me know when *you* figure out what *you're* going to do."

I frowned, turning down the road that led to the hotel where we were staying. "You're pissed." That was nothing new, but this time, I wasn't entirely sure why.

"Gee, ya think?" She rolled her eyes so hard I was pretty sure I heard it.

Sighing, I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. "What did I do now?"

She twisted to face me. "You're aware that I'm here, right?"

Why did this feel like a trick question? I flicked my gaze at her, unsure. "Yes?"

"Does it ever even cross your mind to talk to me?" She stared at me for a

beat, disbelief and hurt in her eyes.

“Becca—”

“I’m serious, Court,” she interrupted, holding up a hand. “You routinely make unilateral decisions for me because you think you know what’s best, but did you ever think to just stop and ask me what I want?”

Okay, well when she put it like that, it sounded bad. What sucked was I knew she was right. I did tend to make decisions that directly affected her, but only because I knew she’d make the wrong choice.

Oh, fuck. That sounded bad even in my head, so I knew it would be even worse if I said it aloud.

But how did I explain to her that watching her walk around was like watching my heart beat outside my body? That nothing else mattered if she wasn’t happy and safe?

Then again, she didn’t look happy now. And while being with me was safe, she wasn’t out of danger yet.

“Okay,” I said, my voice soft. “The plan right now is to get you to the hotel I’ve been staying at with Rook and Bishop. Once we’re there, you can tell us everything you know about the auction, and we’ll all talk about our next steps. Does that work for you?”

Her lips formed a tremulous smile. “Yeah, Court. That works for me.” She hesitated and then added, “Thank you.”

I drew to a stop at a red light and turned to give her my full attention, watching the way shadow and light played off the angles of her face. God, she was so beautiful that it hurt to look at her.

I’d done a lot in my life—played Division 1 college football and created an empire with my friends and brothers. I was on the verge of graduating from an elite college with a degree in pre-law. I’d already been accepted into Stanford Law for the fall semester. I could actually say that I’d helped save people’s lives.

And yet, none of it mattered unless Becca was looking at me the way she was now—a small smile, her eyes soft and pleased.

I’d give it all up for her, and that scared the shit out of me.

Linc and Ash had frequently given Ryan hell when he’d fallen for Maddie. They’d pushed him and teased him, encouraged him to work for her. I’d never really joined in, mostly because I’d understood how he felt. I knew what it was like to desperately want to be good enough for the girl next to you but know you’d never measure up to what she truly deserved.

No, I'd never deserve Rebecca Whittier. In fact, I was done even trying to earn the right to be at her side.

The one good lesson I'd learned from my father was that if you really wanted something, you had to take it. Damn the fallout. Fuck the consequences.

I wanted Becca.

Now.

Tomorrow.

Forever.

And starting tonight, that's the way it would be.

Even if that meant doing grown-up shit, like talking about secrets I wished could stay buried. Truths I knew would break her heart.

Then again, maybe if I did it just right, I'd break her heart open in the perfect place that would let me finally slip in and claim it as mine.

I bypassed the valet stand at the front of the hotel and opted for street parking. Once I killed the ignition, I turned to her. "Wait for me to open your door."

Her lips quirked up at the ends. "Is this your attempt at chivalry?"

Resting an arm along the back of her seat, I leaned in close enough to hear her breath hitch. "No, sweetheart. It's me needing to make sure there isn't someone I need to shoot first."

She gulped down a breath and gave me a shaky nod. "Okay. I'll stay here."

Huh. Was it really that easy?

I slipped out of the car and walked to her side, my gaze moving around the mostly empty city block. I'd intentionally parked on a street that was off main roads and away from touristy hubs and popular restaurants like the one she'd been at tonight.

While I didn't think anyone knew we were in town, I wouldn't risk her life on it.

"All good," I finally told her, holding out a hand. When she didn't hesitate to wrap her fingers around mine, I was barely able to hide my smile. I reached into the back and pulled out her stuff, stacking the duffel on the suitcase to wheel with one hand while I reclaimed hers with my other.

"I'm sorry." She spoke so quietly that I almost missed it.

I turned, one eyebrow lifting. "What?"

She looked up at me, the streetlamps catching the golden flecks in her

eyes. “I said, I’m sorry.”

“What could you have to be sorry about?”

She gave a tiny shrug. “Complicating your life?”

I stopped us by one of the side entrances that opened into a courtyard with seating and smoking areas for hotel guests. “Don’t ever apologize for being in my life,” I told her, dead fucking serious. “I’ll take you any way I can get you.”

Her eyes widened for a second. “Court—”

Leaning into her, I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Becca, we’ve got a lot to talk about. There’s a lot of stuff I should have told you that I didn’t.”

“Stuff about my dad?” Fear trickled into her eyes, and she nibbled her bottom lip.

Fuck if I didn’t want to kiss the worry away. But she wasn’t ready for that, and I hadn’t earned the right.

Yet.

I stiffened on instinct as the door was pulled open. A second later, Bishop popped into view.

He grinned. “Bex!” He swept her into a massive hug, lifting her off her feet.

And I wanted to punch him in the dick.

Asshole.

“Mind if I get this shit inside?” I groused, as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and giggled.

Bishop walked backwards, still carrying Becca, and gave me space to get inside.

Finally over it, I snapped, “Put her down. We need to get upstairs, not draw attention.”

Bishop slowly lowered her to her feet. “God, he’s a moody fucker. You look good, Bex.”

She blushed, ducking her head so innocently it was all I could do not to pull her into my arms and take her straight back to the car. Drive her as far away as we could get. Find a place where no one could ever find us.

“He’s had a rough night,” Becca agreed, shocking the shit out of me when she came back to my side.

Bishop’s brows lifted as he shot me a curious look. Without missing a beat, he grabbed the suitcase from me. “Rook filled me in a little.”

“There’s more,” I said, my tone grim. This wasn’t a social visit; Becca

was here because she was in danger. “Let’s get up to the room.”

Nodding, Bishop led the way. He used his keycard to activate the elevator and access our floor.

Ash had scouted locations and picked this property. While we weren’t sure of the exact location of the auction, we knew a lot of deals between these fuckers went down at Aubergine. There were too many meetings there with too many players we’d identified as part of the network of flesh peddlers. Staying close to the restaurant seemed like the best idea.

The hotel itself was smaller and decidedly less ostentatious than a lot of other Parisian hotels. But that also worked in our favor. The boutique hotel was lax on things like cybersecurity, which let Ash slide in and do his thing, essentially erasing any traces of us in the city by using aliases and glitching security feeds to keep our faces hidden when we left our room.

It wasn’t a foolproof plan, but it was good enough to handle recon.

I knew the day was coming that I wouldn’t be able to hide behind anonymity, or bank on some of the sleazeballs seeing me as just an extension of my father. One day I wouldn’t be the guy doing the groundwork. I’d be the guy with the law degree untangling red tape and knowing just how far I could bend certain laws.

We all had our roles to play in setting up Phoenix.

“How’ve you been, Bex?” Bishop asked, leaning against the elevator wall and giving her a lazy once-over before turning to smirk at me.

Fucker knew exactly what he was doing. Instead of taking the bait, I exhaled and leaned against the opposite wall before averting my gaze toward the ceiling.

“Oh, you know,” Becca chirped, a false note of happiness souring her tone. “Parents getting divorced, moving to the other side of the planet. Oh! But I did meet this guy. Seemed pretty cool for a sex trafficker.”

Bishop chuckled. “Yeah, some of them are real charmers.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Too bad. I really saw us going places.”

“Oh?”

Becca nodded, keeping up the game. “Yeah, you know. Marriage. Babies. Maybe a cat?”

“You’re allergic,” I reminded her, my tone sharper than I’d intended, remembering the time she was five and tried to befriend a stray kitten. Her eyes had swelled shut, and hives had sprouted all over her arms and hands.

“A dog then,” she corrected, sighing dramatically. “Buzzkill.”

“He really is,” Bishop chimed in. “I begged Royal to send Knight with us, but *nooo*. He had to send Mr. Ray of Fucking Sunshine.”

Becca giggled, the sound doing funny things to my chest while making me pissed that I wasn’t the one making her laugh. Why was it always so goddamn complicated?

Bishop leaned in closer to Becca, cupping his hand around his mouth to stage-whisper at her. “Personally? I think Royal knew—”

“Let’s go,” I snapped as the elevator door opened onto our floor with a chime. I motioned for Becca to exit first, and when Bishop followed, I elbowed him in the ribs.

“Oof,” he hissed, glaring at me.

Becca turned, eyes wide. “Everything okay?”

“Perfect, sweetheart,” I assured her with a smile, stepping up and placing a hand at the small of her back to guide her down the hall to our room. I let out a relieved breath when she didn’t move away from my touch.

“Touchy bastard,” Bishop groused behind us.

“Pretty sure *my* mom is the one he married,” I pointed out with a smug smirk over my shoulder.

Bishop flipped me off while Becca slapped my stomach with the back of her hand and told me, “Be nice.” She gently shook out her fingers and mumbled something under her breath. I wasn’t entirely sure what she’d said, but it sounded a lot like, “Are your abs made of bricks?”

I fought back a grin and pulled up short at the last door in the hallway across from the emergency stairs. Never hurt to have a quick exit if needed. I reached back and grabbed the keycard from Bishop to unlock the door.

After rapping my knuckles against the door in a quick pattern, I pushed the door open.

“What was that?” Becca gave me a strange look.

“What was what?”

“The weird knocking thing,” she replied, gesturing to my hand.

“To let me know who was on the other side of the door,” Rook said, appearing out of one of the bedrooms.

The hotel room was a decent size for Europe. Not the palatial size of most US suites or even some of the more modern European and Asian ones, but it had two bedrooms and two bathrooms. The bedroom I had was the master, with its own en suite and king-size bed. The other room had two full beds and a bathroom that was also attached to the main living space. There was a tiny

kitchenette and a desk that we'd turned into our command hub.

I'd offered to give Rook or Bishop the solo room, but they'd joked they were used to sharing space with other guys and I was the entitled prince who needed his own space.

It was bullshit, but I'd taken the solo room nonetheless.

"Whoa," Becca murmured, her gaze sweeping the space and lingering on the four computers and six burner phones all plugged in on a couple of power strips.

"Drink?" Rook offered, walking to the small fridge and grabbing a beer.

"Yeah," I replied, needing something to take the edge off.

"Definitely," Becca chimed in.

I gave her a look.

"What?" She planted her hands on her hips and glared at me. "I think, out of everyone in this room, I'm the one who has the most solid reason to get shitfaced."

Bishop laid a hand over his heart. "You don't have to convince me, babe."

I resisted the urge to deck my brother, instead focusing on watching Rook pass a beer to each of us. I didn't open mine until after Becca cracked hers and lifted it to her mouth. She tried to hide it, but there was no missing the way her nose scrunched up and her mouth twisted.

Smirking to myself, I opened mine and chugged half of it. I set it on the edge of the coffee table and carried her bags toward my room. "You can stay in here." I wheeled her suitcase into the dark room and flipped on a light for her.

She crowded against my side to get a look, her gaze snagging on the solitary bed. Her swallow was audible. "Uh, cool. But I can always get a room of my own—"

"No." All three of us shut that idea down.

Rook walked around and sat down on one of two matching armchairs. He sprawled out and scrubbed a hand over his face with a yawn. "It's safer for you here."

"You can share my bed," Bishop offered.

I finished drinking my beer and hurled the empty can at him. He dodged it easily with a laugh.

"It's safer for you to be nearby," I told her, ignoring the way she gaped at me in shock. Gritting my teeth, I flashed her a tight smile. "I can sleep on the

couch.”

She nibbled on her lower lip. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Yeah, of course.” I met her eyes, wishing I could just say *fuck it* and tell her we were sharing the bed. But she was already skittish, and I wasn’t a complete asshole.

But having her in my space was one step closer to admitting exactly what I knew—we were inevitable.

“Court mentioned that Eric told you about the auction?” Rook spoke up.

Becca looked past me. “Yeah. I don’t have a ton of details, but maybe it’ll help?”

“Better than what we have now, which is jack shit,” Bishop replied, frowning.

“The auction is happening a week from tomorrow,” she said. “Two days after my grandmother’s birthday celebration.” She blanched, her face going pale as she turned and looked at me. “I can’t miss Mémé’s birthday party, Court.”

I looked at Rook over her head. He shook his head, but I knew what her grandmother meant to her. “We’ll figure it out, Becca.”

“Let me put it another way,” she tried, her eyes hardening, “I’m *not* missing her birthday.”

“Is Eric invited?” Bishop asked.

She frowned. “Well, yeah. I asked him if he wanted to come before I knew he was a psycho. His brother will be there with Cami, too.”

Bishop switched his attention to me. “How are you selling her absence?”

I leaned against the wall. “She has to return to California to tie up some loose ends with graduation.”

Bishop nodded. “That could work.”

“What could?” Rook looked at Bishop, somehow seeming the most in charge despite being the only one sitting down.

“You two have a past,” Bishop pointed out. “Let’s say Bex goes back to your fancy-ass school, sees you. You two... reconnect. You agree to come out here as her date. With your history, you could sell that you two are together.”

“Except Eric thinks she’s hung up on *him*,” I pointed out.

“Okay... then you followed her here, but make it clear you finally want to be with her,” Bishop reasoned.

I tipped my head to the side. “And that accomplishes what exactly?”

He held up a finger. “One, it puts you in play. We don’t have to hide you being here.”

“Actually, if we could create enough chatter about there being a divide between you and the guys, our dad might reach out, if he knew you were in Paris,” Rook agreed.

My brows shot up. “Now we’re bringing our dad into this?”

Bishop held up another finger. “Two, *not* having to hide your presence gives us a lot more flexibility. You can hide in plain sight *next* to Bex.”

“So, you want to sell that Court decided to give up his friends, his school, and his entire life for *me*?” Becca let out a belly laugh. “No one would ever believe that.”

Rook and Bishop stared at me, the challenge blatant in their gazes. I shifted my weight from foot to foot and turned toward her, dropping some of the shields I’d always kept up where she was concerned. I’d convinced myself they were necessary to function, but now I was starting to see that by trying to protect us both, I’d only been hurting us.

“Court, tell them this is ridiculous,” she insisted, her eyes searching mine. “You’re not... we’re not... This is stupid. It’ll never work.”

I lifted my hand and cradled her cheek, grinning softly as her breathing hitched.

“Oh, I don’t know, Becca.” I swept my thumb across her soft skin, feeling her tremble slightly. “I bet we could sell it.”

Her lashes fluttered for a second as her eyes closed. “Court...”

I turned us so my back was to my brothers and they couldn’t see her. Couldn’t see *us*. “We really need to talk, Becca.”

Her eyes opened, and the uncertainty in them was like a dagger to the gut. “We do. But...”

“But not now,” I finished for her.

She nodded mutely and stepped back, breaking my hold and peering around my arm to see Rook. “Can we finish planning how to save the world in the morning? I’ve had a really long day.”

None of us pointed out that it was after two in the morning.

“Yeah,” Rook said, pushing to his feet. “Get some sleep, Bex.”

Her gaze lifted to me once again, her lips parting like she was about to say something, but then she stopped. That perfect mouth closed, and she retreated into the bedroom, grabbing the door and slowly closing it.

I moved back so she wouldn’t hit me with it before turning to face my

brothers.

Bishop was grinning like an idiot. “Feel free to thank me, little brother.”

“Fuck off,” I snapped, glaring at him. “You put her on the spot, and—”

“—and got your ass in the game?” He snorted and shook his head. “Jesus, Court, I’m helping you out.”

“I don’t need your help,” I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck with a groan.

Rook looked back and forth between us before sighing. “This isn’t a blind date, Bishop. Leave him alone.”

Bishop’s face fell.

Rook glared at me. “And you, get your shit together. She’s a sweet girl, Court.”

“Meaning?” My muscles tightened, coiling as I readied myself to knock his ass out. I was barely hanging on to my sanity.

“Meaning figure out what you are to each other, and either let her go, or...”

“Or?” I challenged.

He met my gaze. “Or man the fuck up and lock her down.”

CHAPTER 18



BEX

S nuggling deeper into the soft sheets, I inhaled the rich, comforting scent that surrounded me. For a moment, time was suspended and I was content. Safe. Happy.

And then my scent memory kicked into gear, and I shot up in bed, damn near falling off the edge as my heart threatened to gallop out of my chest. I looked around the room wildly, probably looking like a caged animal. But not a sexy animal like a tiger or a jaguar. I no doubt looked more like a deranged cockatoo with my hair sticking up all over the place.

I wasn't a delicate, light sleeper like the princess of some fairy tale. I was known to thrash and starfish in the middle of the bed. And I sometimes woke up the next morning wearing less clothes than I'd gone to bed in, with no memory of how I'd taken them off.

Glancing down, I sucked in a sharp breath because, yeah. I was totally naked.

My clothes were strewn around the room—my tank top tossed over the chair by the window, my flannel bottoms at the foot of the bed. And my panties were...

Oh, hell. Where *had* they gone?

A knock on the closed door almost gave me a heart attack.

"Becca? Hey, can I come in and grab some clothes really quick?" Court called, his deep timbre muffled by the door.

"No!" I shouted.

"Everything okay?" His tone took on a concerned edge. And then, because of freaking course, the doorknob jiggled ever so slightly, like he'd put his hand on it, preparing to breach the perimeter.

Which wasn't the only perimeter I kinda wished he'd breach.

I slapped my forehead. Literally slapped it with an audible crack, like that would set my hindbrain back on a much safer path.

"Ow," I yelped, rubbing the sore spot on my brow. I needed to remember that slapping sense into myself was a freaking metaphor.

"Are you okay?" The worry in Court's voice ratcheted up another notch, and the elegant doorknob tipped down. "I'm coming in."

"No, no! You can't come in!" I flailed in a desperate lunge, trying to grab my pants from the bottom of the bed, but the damn sheets twisted around my waist and legs.

"What's going on?" he demanded, but didn't push the door open.

"I... I... uh..." I grabbed for the pants again, praising all the baby cherubs when my fingers touched flannel. I gave a quick jerk, but they were freaking stuck. "For real?" I huffed, pulling again with all my strength. It took a second, but they came free with a *whoosh*. The cuff of one leg—which was soft and fuzzy and comfortable—suddenly became a weapon as it slapped my open eye.

"Fuck, shit, damn!" I swore, dropping the pants and covering my eyes as tears instantly started welling. I was blind. I'd have to go to the doctor and explain that I'd lost my vision because of a freak flying flannel incident.

"What the fuck?"

I froze, realizing Court's voice sounded way too clear to be on the other side of the door. Lowering my hands, I looked up at him from a single, watery eye.

Court stood a foot away from the bed, looking like he had no clue what to do next. His hands opened and closed at his sides while his gaze slid from my teary face to my very naked chest. He swallowed hard and slowly dragged his gaze back up to my face. The lust in his eyes was momentarily eclipsed by concern. "What the hell happened?"

"My pants attacked me," I said, sounding utterly pathetic. "I think I'm blind."

"You can't see me?"

I blinked my open eye. "Partially blind," I amended.

He stepped forward and halted. "Can I... I need to check your eye."

"Sure," I muttered, dropping my hands to the sheets pooled around my waist. I quickly yanked them up, situating them so my boobs were covered.

Court sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and twisted to face me. "Let me

see.”

I took a shaky breath and tried to blink my injured eye open. The air hitting it burned, and I hissed out a breath.

“Easy,” he murmured, reaching for my face and holding it between his large hands. He leaned in, his gaze clinical as he searched my gaze. “Can you see me?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. My left eye was throbbing, but I could see, so maybe I’d be spared that trip to the doctor.

The corner of his mouth tipped up, and I pressed my lips together to hold in any morning breath. While I looked like a recently reanimated zombie when I woke up, Court definitely *didn’t*.

The extra stubble shadowing his jaw gave him a killer bad-boy vibe. This close, I could see the gold flecks in his walnut-colored eyes. There was a small scar under his right brow that I didn’t remember. He smelled like warmth and cedar, and I wanted to snuggle into him like my favorite blanket.

“I think you’ll live,” he deduced with a soft smile, but he didn’t let me go. His calloused thumb gently wiped a tear from my cheek.

“Okay,” I whispered, not wanting to break whatever spell had woven itself around us. This moment was perfection, and I wanted to bottle it up and save it forever.

“Becca?”

I leaned into his touch without thinking. “Yeah?”

His brows pulled together. “Why are you naked?”

And just like a pretty, iridescent bubble popping on a summer breeze, the peace around me shattered, and I realized that the only thing keeping Court from seeing my naked body was a white Egyptian cotton sheet.

I jerked back. “Uh…”

He grinned and got off the bed like a gentleman, even if his hungry gaze dipped down to the sheet wrapped around me. “Not that I’m complaining. If you feel like getting naked in my bed—”

I cleared my throat. “Where are your brothers?” My voice was pitched to a decibel just shy of the screech of an eagle.

His tongue darted out to wet his lips. “Rook has a meeting with a source from his SEAL days. Bishop is grabbing breakfast.”

“Oh. Okay.” At least I wouldn’t be flashing all the Woods brothers my kibbles and bits.

Cutting me a break, Court turned away. “Hey, is it cool if I take a

shower? Unless you want to go first.”

Crap. I’d kicked him out of his room *and* his bathroom. “Yeah, sure. I need to call my mom and let her know what’s going on.”

He arched a brow.

“I know,” I huffed. “When I said ‘let her know what’s going on,’ I meant I’ll lie to her face using the crazy-ass story you came up with.”

He grimaced. “I know you hate lying, Becca, but it’s for the best.”

My spine stiffened. “Of course it is. That’s how you always justify it, right, Court? You decide what’s best, and the rest of us are expected to go along with it.”

He bowed his head. “Becca, I don’t want to fight.”

“Right,” I muttered. “Because it’s not worth fighting over, is it?” I wasn’t sure exactly what I was saying, but by *it*, I meant *me*.

Yeah, I’d left California—more like fled—to put space between us, but there was some dark, hidden part of my heart that had been hoping he’d come after me. That he’d fight for me.

That hadn’t happened.

Even now, he was here only because he had to be.

“You know what?” I said suddenly, “maybe a trip back to California is a good idea.”

“What?” His eyes narrowed.

“Yeah,” I continued, forcing the words through my teeth, “I can stay with Maddie and Ryan. Linc and Ash are there, so I’ll be safe.”

“I already said you’re not going to California, Becca,” Court replied, his tone firm.

The only thing keeping me from getting up was the fact that I was literally naked under the covers. “I need to be safe, right? I can be safe there. I bet Linc would bring me back for my grandmother’s birthday. He could even be my date, to spare you.”

“*Spare* me?” he snarled. “No one, least of all Lincoln motherfucking Westford, is coming near you.”

“He’s your best friend,” I snapped.

“Exactly,” he shot back, “which means I know *all* the ways he’d love to fuck you.”

My mouth dropped open. “Linc and I are friends,” I spluttered. “*Just* friends.”

His disbelieving expression had me flipping through my memories of all

the times Linc and I had goofed off. Yeah, he was an incorrigible flirt, but it was harmless.

Right?

Court shook his head and blew out a hard breath. He tipped his head back, looking at the ceiling for a long moment. “Becca... Can we not do this right now? Please?”

Dammit. All it took was a *please* and those big brown eyes to have me considering that maybe *now* wasn’t the time for this fight.

Then again, maybe Court felt like it would never be the right time. He could just keep pushing off all these uncomfortable conversations indefinitely, because I didn’t matter enough—

“No.” He moved back to the bed and sat, grabbing one of my hands.

Surprised, I looked down at where he’d laced our fingers together. Had his hand always been that big? Or was mine just stupidly small?

“This isn’t me trying to get you to drop it,” he added, his tone kinder and gentler. “This is me asking for a ten-minute pause so I can take a shower, you can get some coffee, and then we can sit down and talk.” He squeezed my fingers. “Really talk. There’s a lot that I think we need to say to each other.”

And suddenly, talking was the *last* thing I wanted to do. Nope. I actually preferred my ostrich way of handling things. Head in the sand had worked for me for eighteen years, right?

“Becca,” he murmured, using his other hand to lift my chin. “I mean it. No more running away for either of us. I can’t keep doing this.”

My eyes widened. “Oh, *you* can’t do this anymore? Well, since *you* can’t, I guess that fixes everything.”

He had the decency to look ashamed. “I know it’ll take more than words to earn back your trust, but I’ll do it. I swear I will.”

“Why?” I blurted out. “Why *now*? Court, I’ll stay here, okay? It’s stupid to fly back to California for three days and then fly back. Carbon footprint and all that, you know? The environment—”

His index finger feathered over my bottom lip, rendering me speechless. His mouth curved into a wicked, devastating smile. “You’re rambling, baby.”

“You shouldn’t call me that,” was all I could think to say.

His head tilted. “I think I like calling you that.”

It was like I could hear my synapses attempting to fire, to form a response, but I couldn’t. As always, being around Court was like being restored to factory reset. Instead of remembering all the ways he’d hurt me

and let me down, I was ready to trust him with my heart.

“Do you need the bathroom before I take a shower?” he offered, leaning back but still holding my hand and touching my face.

I blinked once. Twice. Then nodded.

“All right.” Letting me go, he stood up.

I started to get out of the bed and froze when I remembered that I was *still* naked. “Uh.”

Court did that guy thing where he grabbed his shirt by the back of his neck and yanked it off in one smooth tug. If his nearness caused my neurons to misfire, him shirtless was going to liquefy my brain.

Tan skin stretched taut over hard muscles that looked like they’d been created using the same mold as a Greek god. Each ab was perfectly outlined, and it took all my willpower not to let my gaze follow the trail of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband of his sweatpants.

But it was the gold, orange, and red phoenix tattooed on his ribs that snagged my attention. The mythical bird wrapped in flames, that rippled across his skin as he breathed, looked ready to set the world ablaze.

“Becca?” He sounded utterly amused.

My gaze snapped up to see he was holding his shirt out to me. I stared at it dumbly for a second before grabbing it. I tried not to focus on the fact that it was still warm and smelled like him as I pulled it over my head.

“Fuck,” he murmured, heat flaring in his irises. “You look good in my clothes.”

I adjusted the collar, which had slipped off one shoulder, but then it slipped off the other. I was basically swimming in his shirt, but I was woman enough to admit I liked it.

Fine.

Loved it.

I rose from the bed, feeling my cheeks heat as the cool air brushed my bare legs. The shirt landed a few inches above my knees, but I still felt exposed and raw in front of him. Especially when he flashed those hungry eyes at me.

Ducking my head, I hurried into the bathroom and closed the door. I leaned against it for a moment as I took a deep breath and looked at my reflection in the large mirror over the double vanity.

“Breathe, Bex,” I ordered myself. I slowly counted to five in my head and then pushed off the door and hurried into the separate toilet area of the

bathroom. I'd unpacked some of my toiletries last night, so I washed my hands and brushed my teeth when I finished emptying my bladder. Locating a hair tie, I twisted my unruly hair into a knot on top of my head and braced myself to leave the space.

Court was standing near the foot of the bed, a pile of clothes in one hand. He smiled at me as I walked by, careful to keep enough distance so we wouldn't touch.

But then he caught my wrist. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Uh, sure," I managed.

He handed me his cell phone. "Ash is supposed to text me, and it's important. Can you knock on the bathroom door and let me know what he says?"

My brows shot up. "Isn't that, like, need-to-know type stuff?"

His lips twitched. "It's not that kinda stuff. It's the not-so-official summons for you to return to Pacific Cross. In fact, forward it to yourself so you have it, just in case you need to show it to anyone."

"Like Eric?"

Storm clouds gathered behind his eyes. "If that fucker contacts you, I need you to tell me immediately, okay?"

I nodded. "I will. What's the code to unlock it?"

He gave me a strange look before finally saying, "Zero-eight-twenty-two."

I paused, the number registering in my brain. "My birthday?"

His face relaxed into a softness that I rarely got to see. "Yeah." He started to move around me.

"Court?"

He stopped instantly, giving me his full attention. "Yeah, baby?"

I caught my bottom lip between my teeth, suddenly embarrassed and unsure. "You..." I took a deep breath. "You really want to talk later?"

He moved in front of me, his hands framing my face and holding me like I was the most precious thing in the world. "Yeah, Becca. I've let you go twice now, and I hated myself every time. I can't do it a third time. I won't survive it, baby."

I swallowed hard, working not to cry.

"I know I've let you down before, but I won't. I'll do whatever it takes to prove that I need you in my life."

I shrugged. "Sure, Court. Whatever you say."

His eyes slid shut, and he leaned forward to press a kiss to my forehead. “Give me ten minutes.” Then he was gone, disappearing into the bathroom.

Letting out a wobbly exhale, I hurried up and grabbed a change of clothes before wandering out into the main living area to the kitchenette. A fresh pot of coffee was waiting for me along with my favorite hazelnut creamer. Smiling, I made myself a cup and took it to the couch.

I’d just settled in when Court’s phone pinged with an incoming message. Setting the coffee aside, I typed in my birthday and saw he had a new text. “Damn, Ash.” I did the mental math—if it was eight in the morning here, it was two a.m. in California.

I hit the text icon, and the message opened into an image.

It took me a second to realize that what I was seeing was a perky set of very naked breasts attached to a blonde with big green eyes. Her lips were stained crimson and slightly open, her eyes hooded.

UNKNOWN: I miss you, baby.

Before I could *nope* my way out of the text thread, a second one came through. This time it was a waxed va-jay-jay with a silver piercing spread wide open by long, pointed green nails.

UNKNOWN: My pussy needs you.

Horrified, I exited the text thread, but stopped cold as I realized there were other texts in his phone. Ash’s name was in there, but it was buried under several others.

Nicki. Sarah. BethAnn.

Knowing I shouldn’t but unable to help myself, I clicked on the first one.

Nicki was a tiny redhead who seemed to have an affinity for black lingerie.

Sarah had pierced nipples.

And BethAnn? She just wanted to let Court know that she and her cousin were “DTF again” whenever he was free.

Nausea roiled in my gut. I stared at the phone until the screen went dark, mentally willing away what I had seen.

But there was no denying it. And if the texts weren’t enough, I could hear Cori asking Maddie about the woman she’d seen naked in Court’s bed.

I didn’t know how long I sat there, my coffee growing cold as my insides went numb.

I was such an idiot.

Court flashed me a smile and said a few sweet things, and I crumbled.

Every. Single. Time.

I won't survive it, baby.

Tears of humiliation burned my eyes.

“Did Ash text, baby?” Court’s voice was like a bolt of lightning zipping down my spine. He came up behind me, his hands settling possessively on my shoulders as he bent to kiss the top of my head.

How many other women had he kissed like that? Called *baby*?

“No,” I finally managed, my throat tight as I shook off his hold and stood. I pasted a cold smile on my face and handed him the phone. “But you got a few other messages.”

Frowning, he took the phone and unlocked it. His thumb moved over the screen, and I saw the second he realized I knew. His face went pale under his tan skin. “Becca.”

“Save it,” I snapped, storming around the couch.

“Fuck. Becca, wait. You don’t understand.”

I whirled around. “You know what, Court? I might not be the smartest person in the world, but even I know what sexting looks like.”

His eyes were wild. “They sent *me* those pictures.”

“Oh,” I laughed coolly, “so it’s *their* fault? You’re just a helpless victim? Because you certainly gave enough of a shit about them to save their contact info.”

His jaw clenched. “Let me explain.”

“No,” I snapped. “I’m done letting you explain. I’m done letting you tell me how I’m so important to you, but all you do is lie to me. And I’m... I’m done being the idiot who keeps letting you do it.”

Spinning away, I raced into the bedroom and slammed the door before locking him out of the room and my heart, once and for all.

CHAPTER 19



BEX

Every time Court knocked on the door, threatened to break it down, or called my name, I caved a little more. My brain started rationalizing all the ways that maybe I had misread the signals that multiple women sending him nude images gave off.

I considered calling Maddie and waking her up to talk, but that seemed like a shitty way to wake up my bestie. It was after eight, so Cami was in the studio rehearsing by now. I didn't want to bother her.

After taking the time to come up with lame-ass excuses that my mom and grandparents would let slide to excuse my absence for the next few days, I headed into the bathroom, where I put another locked door between myself and Court before climbing into the shower.

There wasn't much that a hot shower couldn't fix, or at least make a little better.

Thirty minutes later, I felt a little more human as I towel-dried my hair and pulled on fresh clothes. I balled up Court's shirt and hurled it under the sink. I left the bathroom feeling slightly better than when I'd gone in, but relief hit me hard and fast when I heard voices other than Court's on the other side of the door.

Banking on Rook and Bishop giving me a buffer from the asshole, plus missing my morning coffee fix, I opened the door and stalked through like a woman on a caffeine-fueled mission.

The three brothers stood in the center of the room, and they all turned to look at me as I emerged.

I flashed Rook and Bishop a big smile, pointedly ignoring Court. "Morning, guys."

“Becca,” Court started.

I lifted the still mostly full coffee pot and turned to him with a saccharine-sweet smile. “Unless you feel like being treated for second degree burns, I suggest you back all the way up.” I lifted my hand with the pot, unafraid to use the liquid gold as a weapon if needed.

Court somehow managed to look hurt, frustrated, and pissed off. “Can we just talk?”

“Nah,” I returned, pouring myself a fresh mug. “I’m good. If you need someone to talk to, try Nicki or BethAnn. Personally I thought BethAnn had the nicer smile, but Nicki’s definitely hotter.”

“Oh shit,” Bishop muttered, his dark eyes wide.

Rook shot Court a death glare. “What the fuck did you do?”

Snarling, Court turned to them. “I didn’t do shit. I got a text—”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted, arching a brow, “but I’m pretty sure I counted higher than one.”

He ground his teeth together. “It’s not what—”

“Question,” I posed, ignoring him again and walking around to stand in front of his brothers. “If multiple women are sending you naked selfies, would you think that was an accident? A coincidence? That the naked selfie fairy shot the wrong asshole in the ass?”

Bishop snorted a laugh. “Tell me you’re not that fucking stupid, man.”

“Jesus fuck,” Court swore. “Can you stop acting like a child for a goddamn minute and let me explain?”

“Oh, *hell* no,” I snapped. “You don’t get to act like I’m some delusional girlfriend acting like a paranoid idiot. I know what I saw, Court. Maybe stop covering your ass for five seconds and own up to the truth.”

“That’s a valid request,” Bishop chimed in, coming to stand behind me.

“I can’t do this. I have a call with Royal in fifteen,” Rook muttered. He stabbed a finger at Court. “Fix this.” And then he stalked away to the other bedroom. He slammed the door hard enough that the decorative table on the wall between the bedrooms trembled.

“Those girls meant *nothing*,” Court insisted.

“And yet, you keep their pictures,” I pointed out.

Bishop wandered to the couch and perched on the edge, watching us like we were his new favorite reality show.

Court threw his arms up. “Because they sent me those pictures last night. I didn’t have a chance to delete and block them like the others.”

“Oh, bad call, bro,” Bishop muttered with a wince.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him, my tone acidic. “I’m well aware that Court had an extremely active social life lately. Cori told me *all* about meeting one of his sleepover buddies.”

“Goddamn it,” Court growled. “I haven’t been with anyone since her! And I sure as shit haven’t talked to anyone since I started talking to you.”

I set my coffee down just so I could give him a slow clap as I eyeballed the clock. “Congratulations, Court. You haven’t talked to another woman in sixteen hours.”

His phone gave a chirp from the dining table, then started to vibrate with an incoming call.

“You should probably get that,” I suggested. “Don’t want to keep your harem waiting.”

“Becca,” he snarled, a tendon in his neck throbbing.

“How does it work?” I asked, tilting my head as I feigned curiosity. “Do they pick days? Or do you have someone assign them, like shifts?”

He spun and grabbed his phone before hurling it into the wall. It shattered into a hundred pieces.

My heart pounded, but I forced my outward appearance to stay calm, unruffled, as I grabbed my coffee and took a sip. “I thought you were waiting on Ash to send you something.”

“I can’t win with you,” he hissed, shaking his head.

“Wait, have you actually been trying?” I asked, not willing to give him another single centimeter.

Court pinched the bridge of his nose. “What do you want me to say, Becca? I never claimed to be a damn monk.”

“Did I ask you to be?” I shot back.

“Seems like that’s what you want,” he returned, just as pissed as I was now.

Good. It was easier to hate him when he was mad at me.

Bishop cleared his throat. “Maybe you guys should take a step back. Neutral corners and that shit.”

“No. Court wanted to talk, so let’s talk,” I retorted.

“Not about this,” he gritted out, crossing his arms. “You know what? Let’s just do what Bishop said. We’ll take a minute and cool off.”

I pointed to my chest. “I don’t need to cool off. What could I possibly need to cool off for? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Except jump to the wrong conclusions,” he said flatly. He scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Why does it matter?” I pressed. It was kinda like when you had a bruise and you kept pushing on the spot to see if it still hurt.

It totally did, but I couldn’t seem to stop fighting with him.

Before he could answer, I plowed on. “It’s not like *I* matter, right? I’m just that kid who used to follow you around before you realized she was too annoying to keep around.”

“That’s not even close to the truth, and you know it.”

“No, Court, I *don’t* know it because *you* could never be bothered to tell me the truth about what happened that summer,” I hissed. “The only time you came close was after *I* found a video where Madelaine claimed she knew some big secret you’d been keeping from me, which... not surprising, considering you also kept to yourself the fact that my dad was involved in all sorts of shady shit.”

“I made mistakes, Becca,” he said. “I fully admit that, and I want us to move forward with everything out in the open.”

“Maybe I don’t want to,” I replied with a nonchalant shrug. “Maybe I want...” Shit, what did I want?

“What?” he challenged, waving his hand in a *go ahead* motion.

“Make it good, Bex,” Bishop whispered.

Court glared at him. “Shut the fuck up.”

“You know what?” I started, the dumbest of all dumb ideas forming in my head. “You’re right, Court.”

He gave me a wary look. “I am?”

“You have a past, and that’s fine.”

“Everyone does, Becca. Even you.” He gave me a hard look.

I frowned. “What?” Uh, unless kissing counted, I was underwhelmingly without a past.

He scoffed. “What was it you said when we were in Montana? I wasn’t your first, second *or* third?”

I quickly searched through my memories of the time we’d spent in Montana, hiding out from Maddie’s and Ryan’s insane fathers and creating a plan to take them down. And yes, that was when Court and I had had our most intense falling out—after I found out he’d lied about why he’d abandoned me years earlier.

Not just Court, but everyone had been lying to me. I’d been hurt, angry,

and embarrassed that everyone seemed to know more about my own life than I did. That people kept making decisions for me, especially ones that I thought had my back.

Court and I had said a lot to each other that night. But I'd never forget the moment he said *You've always belonged to me*. The truth was, he was right. My heart had always belonged to the boy next door. My hero, my friend, my everything.

But then he'd doubled down by reminding me, *I was your first kiss, remember? I was meant to be your first everything*.

He'd been right, but I'd been hurt and pissed, and I'd lashed out the only way I'd known how. *I'll give you that you were my first kiss, but you weren't my first. Or my second. Not my third either.*

The pain in his eyes had been worth the tiny momentary triumph that had surged through my veins. But my claim had been a lie.

Well, unless you counted me, myself, and I, then sure. I'd had three sexual partners.

But I wasn't about to tell Court he was right. That even when I'd tried dating or getting close to other guys, no one held up to the ideal of the perfect guy that my childhood self had invented.

No one except him.

It was stupid. I mean, I'd been a kid. What did I know about love and forever? But something in my bones knew that every guy I'd ever held hands with, kissed, or touched who wasn't Court Woods felt wrong.

At this rate, I was going to need an exorcism to extract him from my DNA.

Unfortunately, that meant I needed to either come clean... or keep up the lie.

It was a no-brainer.

"What? Only guys deserve orgasms?" I folded my arms and shifted my weight, popping one hip out in defiance. "Did you expect me to enter a convent? Die an old, virgin spinster? Oh, or maybe I should be waiting for my one true love to sweep me away."

Court's eyes flashed. "Don't."

"Don't what?" I needled. "I may not have been with hundreds of people, but I guess some of us prefer quality over quantity."

"Oh, I'll give you quality," he growled, moving closer to me.

"No, you won't. Not now, not ever. I'm not interested in you, Court." I

sucked in a breath, praying he wouldn't see through the outright lie.

He smirked. "You're lying."

"Don't believe me?" I challenged. I spun and looked at Bishop. "How would you feel about going out with me?"

Bishop's eyes went wide. "Uh, what?"

"A date. You. Me." Oh, God, I hadn't thought this through. If he said no...

Well, the convent was still an option.

Court snorted. "Becca, come on. My brother isn't going—"

"Okay."

I don't know who was more shocked at Bishop's decision—me or Court. But I recovered fastest, flashing Bishop a big smile that felt too tight across my face. "Awesome. Tonight?"

"No fucking way," Court spat. "Even if you two were serious, you can't just go running around Paris, Becca."

"Just so happens we're conveniently staying in a hotel with excellent room service," Bishop replied, grinning.

Court glared at him with enough ice to freeze fire. "You're going on a fucking date with her in our hotel room? What, are Rook and I the chaperones?"

Bishop scoffed, pulling out his phone. "Bro, give me a little credit. I may not be racking up the notches on my bedpost as fast as you, but I *do* know how to date a woman. And... done." He winked at me. "I just booked us our own room here. We can be alone all night."

Wait.

What?

All night?

Court turned and studied me, no doubt waiting to see if I'd crack and retreat.

Instead I lifted my chin, defiance rolling through my veins. "Awesome. I can't wait."

CHAPTER 20



COURT

In the years I'd known I had brothers, I'd gone through an entire spectrum of emotions. Shock, longing, annoyance, anger, happiness. Even love.

Apparently blistering hot rage was a whole new thing.

After Becca practically danced back to her room, I rounded on my brother, absolutely intent on breaking every one of his appendages, starting with his dick.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" I hissed, my hands clenching at my sides. I could already imagine the satisfying way the cartilage in his nose would shatter under my fist. "This isn't happening."

Bishop barely spared me a glance as he looked up from his phone. "Yeah, it is."

"No, it fucking *isn't*."

He stood up, not that it mattered. We were almost the exact same size, making him eye level. "Yes. It is." He paused. "Unless you give me one good reason why it shouldn't."

I let out a frustrated growl. "How about because we're in the middle of a goddamn op?"

A brow lifted. "And we're also in a holding pattern until we know more. We're not even leaving the damn hotel. Hell, I requested a room on the same *floor*."

"She's—" I cut myself off.

"She's *what*?" he pressed, edging closer until his boots touched mine. "Yours? She's a person, not a toy, Court. You don't get to call dibs."

I snorted in disbelief. "So, what? You're into her now?"

He met my gaze and held it. “She’s beautiful, smart, and fun. What guy *wouldn’t* want to date her? Until there’s a ring on her finger, or you grow the fuck up, then I don’t see how it’s any of your concern.”

Fury pounded in my veins, so blinding that my vision went unfocused. “Are you serious right now? You know we have a history.”

“And?” He cocked his head.

“This isn’t some damn game,” I hissed, poking his chest with my finger. Fucker had pecs made of goddamn iron. “Becca is a sweet girl.”

He threw his arms in the air. “Jesus, she’s not a *girl*, Court. When are you going to wake up and realize that *Bex* is all grown up? She doesn’t need you protecting her from schoolyard bullies anymore. She’s a grown-ass woman. Maybe your problem is that you can’t see that.”

No, my problem was that was *all* I saw.

The round, perky curve of her tits. The full ass. The flat stomach. The wicked glint in her eyes when she smiled. Even down to those slim fingers that I’d imagined wrapped around my cock way too many times.

All the muscles in my back tightened. “I see her just fine.”

Bishop gave me a hard look. “Then do something about it, Court.”

“Maybe I’m trying, but my brother is cockblocking me,” I snapped.

He snorted a laugh. “Bro, the only thing cockblocking you is your own cock.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you’re a dumbass and she’s right—you really did expect her to sit around with a chastity belt on, waiting for you to finish getting your dick sucked and fucked by half the female population of California.” He gave me a disgusted look. “It’s the twenty-first century, dude. Women can have casual sex, too.”

“Did I ever say they couldn’t?” What the fuck was going on?

“You implied Bex couldn’t,” he responded.

“That’s different,” I insisted, but the argument sounded shitty, even to my own ears.

Bishop clapped his hands down on my shoulders. “Court, you can’t have it both ways. Either you want her, or you don’t. If you do, go tell her right now, and I’ll cancel the room. But if you can’t? Then get out of her way.”

“You mean *your* way?” I knocked his hands away.

He grinned. “That, too. I’m not going to apologize for appreciating what you’re intent on throwing away.”

“You’re my brother,” I finally snapped. “Aren’t you supposed to have *my* back?”

“Who the fuck says I don’t?” He moved around me. “So? What’ll it be? Are you going to talk to her?”

I ground my teeth together, my jaw aching as my gaze cut to her closed bedroom door. My eyes dropped, but not before I caught Bishop’s smirk.

“Exactly what I thought.” He made a *tsking* sound under his breath as he walked by me, and that was all it took for me to spin and shove him.

Bishop stumbled forward a few steps, surprised but regaining his balance quickly. He turned and glared at me. “Don’t.”

I shifted my weight to my back leg, bracing myself for him to fight back. My blood craved the violence, needed it to soothe some savage part of me that was going apeshit at the idea of Bishop and Becca alone in a hotel room together.

“Stay the fuck away from her,” I ordered.

The door across from us opened and Rook leaned a shoulder against the frame, watching us with annoyance. “You two fuck up this room, and it’s coming out of your paychecks.”

I glared at him. “He—”

Rook held up a hand. “I don’t give a fuck. We have more than enough shit to deal with without you two whipping out your dicks to see whose is the biggest.”

“Mine is,” Bishop chimed in.

I snorted, not even bothering to reply to that.

“Bishop’s right,” Rook added.

Bishop blinked in surprise, then smirked. “See? Told you mine was bigger.”

“Not *that* you idiot,” Rook muttered, shaking his head. He looked at me, holding my gaze. “Either you’re in or out with her. If you’re out, then it shouldn’t matter what your brother or any other guy does with her.”

“And if I’m not?” I glared at them both.

“Then say so, and I’ll never look at her again,” Bishop told me, his voice conveying absolute honesty.

“What happened to the good, old-fashioned bro code?” I mumbled, not wanting to deal with these annoying feelings and what they meant.

“It absolutely applies, but only if you’re willing to admit that you have feelings beyond friendship for her.” Rook made it sound so simple.

I'd been ready to do just that. I'd thought she and I were on the exact same page when I'd gone to take a shower, then I'd come out and everything had gone to shit. Now she was going on a date with my damn *brother*?

Bishop and Rook watched me, neither willing to give an inch. As if making me face up to the feelings I had for Becca would lead to some kind of miraculous revelation. Like this was one of those bullshit primetime teen soap operas where the main character suddenly realizes he's in love with the girl next door.

I didn't need a special moment to know I'd been head over heels in love with Rebecca Whittier since the day I'd understood what love was.

And I'd been running from it ever since.

But if this was what she wanted... Fine. I'd been an idiot for thinking we could actually, what? Be happy together? Just *be* together?

I pulled my shoulders back and let out a heavy breath. "You know what? Do whatever you want, brother. As far as I'm concerned, she's fair fucking game. I've always felt a little protective of her because she was like a little sister, but she isn't. She isn't anything to me."

The sharp inhale at my back made me die a little inside, but turning to see Becca standing behind me broke what was left of my cold, dead heart.

Her hazel eyes swam with tears, the slender column of her neck working as she tried to swallow around the emotions.

I forced a cold smile. "Have fun tonight, sweetheart, but make sure he wraps it up. I know how concerned you are about numbers and all that shit, and Bishop's count might be higher than mine."

She stumbled back a step, looking at me like I was a stranger.

Good. As soon as this was done, I wouldn't see her again. And it would be easier for her to move on if she hated me.

I looked over my shoulder at Rook, who looked pissed. "I have an errand to run for Ash. I'll be back tonight unless you need me here sooner."

He wordlessly shook his head.

"Perfect." I grabbed my wallet from the side table near the door, brushing past Bishop.

"You're making a mistake," he warned me, too quiet for Becca to hear.

I paused. "No, I'm not. This is what's best for everyone."

"Idiot," he muttered at my back as I yanked open the door and slammed it shut behind me.

On that we could agree: I was absolutely an idiot.

Becca could never be mine. I'd been a damn fool for thinking we could ever move beyond our past.

CHAPTER 21



BEX

Court's words haunted me the rest of the day. They played on an endless loop, slowly driving me insane.

She isn't anything to me.

Part of me wanted to call Maddie, talk to my best friend about how much Court had hurt me—yes, *again*—but there was a quieter, darker part of me that couldn't do it. That couldn't bear to hear the pity in her voice, the apology on her lips.

It was humiliating.

You'd have thought that, by now, I'd be used to Court Woods humiliating me, but it seemed there was never actually a rock bottom. Each time I thought I'd hit it, it turned out there were another twenty levels or so of my pride left that he could shred.

What did it say about me that I kept giving him chances to hurt me? That I kept showing up at his feet like some deranged puppy that could be kicked a million times but was still looking for a little bit of affection? A glimpse of love...

Disgusted with myself, I opted for distraction. I pulled out my Kindle and flopped down on the plush mattress, tugged the sheets and comforter up to my chin, and dove back into a fictional world where the alphaholes ended up head over heels in love with the main character.

Yes, multiple alphaholes, because sometimes a girl needs her own harem.

I finished one book and started the next without a pause. My stomach gave a slight rumble, and when I checked the clock, it looked like it was almost time for my *date*.

As if I'd conjured him with my thoughts, Bishop knocked at the door.

“Bex?”

Clearing my throat, I sat up and ran a hand through my ruffled hair. “Yeah. You can come in.”

The door cracked open, and he stuck his dark head in a minute later. He flashed me a tight smile. “You okay, gorgeous?”

I gave a half-hearted snort because I was pretty sure I looked the antithesis of gorgeous. Unlike Bishop, who somehow looked like a combination of a dashing rake from a Regency romance and an MC biker. The mix of devilish gentleman with more than a hint of danger was enough to send most hearts—male and female alike—into palpitations.

Honestly, the Woods brothers were unfairly hot. They had insanely muscular builds, and none of them was under six-two. And because they all were former elite members of the armed services, they were ripped as hell. Dark hair ran in the family, thanks to their dad, but Court was the only one with dark eyes. The others had shades ranging from almost turquoise blue to gunmetal silver.

Bishop’s were a gentle deep blue the color of the ocean. His cheekbones were a bit sharper than Rook’s or Court’s, giving him an almost pretty-boy look. Especially when he flashed a charming grin.

“I’m okay,” I finally answered.

He came into the room and closed the door before leaning against it. He crossed his legs at the ankles. “We don’t have to go out tonight. I know you were just trying to get at Court.”

I bit my lower lip, embarrassed at how easily he’d read the situation. “I mean, kinda. But I *do* like you.”

“But not the way you like Court,” he finished with a kind smile.

My shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry.”

“Shit, girl.” He chuckled, pushing off the door and coming to sit on the other side of the bed. “Don’t apologize. Heart wants what the heart wants. I’m just sorry my brother’s too goddamn stubborn to see what’s right in front of him.”

I dipped my head, but my inner masochist had me asking, “And what’s that?”

He leaned over and touched my chin with his index finger. “You’re an amazing woman, Bex. And he’s a fucking moron.”

A tremulous smile twitched across my lips. “Pretty sure the only moron is me. I’m the one who keeps setting myself up to be let down again and again.”

He exhaled a heavy breath. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Please."

"None of us had a great upbringing, but I think Court had it the worst." He pressed his lips into a tight line for a beat. "The General is a fucking asshole. He's exacting and demanding and outright sadistic. I mean, look at the shit he put all of us through. His test *killed* my brother. And damn near killed *you*."

I rocked back. "You know about that?"

He gave a grim nod. "Yeah. I mean, Court doesn't talk about it much, but I know the gist."

"That's more than he's told me," I muttered.

He cocked his head. "You two have never talked about it?"

I met his gaze. "Until a few weeks ago, I had no idea it even happened."

His brows shot up. "You forgot getting kidnapped for a week?"

My spine stiffened as irritation swirled in my blood. "Yeah, but in my defense, I was also really sick."

He inclined his head, ceding my point. "I only heard about it after the fact, and I definitely don't know the details, but I know it was bad."

"I'm sure it was." There was no masking the bitterness in my tone.

"Did you know Court was sent to military school for a few months after?"

My head snapped up, my jaw dropping open. "What?"

Bishop grimaced. "You aren't the only one who paid a price, Bex. I'm not trying to excuse him or the shit he's done to push you away, but what happened to you fucked him up in a lot of ways."

I frowned, my forehead wrinkling. "But *military school*?" It was one thing for General Woods to want his son to be *in* the military, but military school basically spelled out juvenile delinquent in our world. I was stunned that he'd take the hit to his family's social status.

Lauren Woods, Court's mom, came from old money. Like the kind that started before the United States was even an idea. They were proper and believed strongly that indiscretions were handled privately.

"He sorta... shut down after what happened to you. I think you were still in the hospital for a good chunk of it. The General was at our house one night, and I heard him yelling on the phone. Before he left, he told my mom that Court had gotten into another incident. He was livid and kept mentioning he was sending Court away to get him straightened out." Bishop sighed heavily.

“I had no idea,” I whispered, my hand drifting up to cover my mouth. That year was still a blur. The doctors claimed it was because I’d been so sick and so close to dying that my brain had barricaded the memories away.

All I really remembered was needing Court, and him never showing up except once to tell me I needed to leave him alone. I’d been young and ill, and I’d just lain in that hospital bed as my heart shattered.

Now, looking at it through adult eyes, I realized that the boy who’d come to visit me wasn’t the boy I’d known.

His eyes had been hard and flinty, somehow icy and fiery at the same time. He hadn’t smiled—in fact, his lips had been pressed into a line so harsh that the skin around them was white. And his cheeks had been hollow, while his normally carelessly windswept dark hair had been buzzed short.

Like he was enlisting in a thirteen-year-old’s version of boot camp.

“The General came to see us a couple of times a month, and it was hell,” Bishop confided, his voice low. “He was mean—he’d hit us when we were too loud or asked questions. He wanted little toy soldiers, silent and obedient as they waited for his next command. We hated when he came over, but we didn’t see him every goddamn day. Not like Court did.”

My heart sank like a boulder.

Growing up, Court had always had bruises, but I’d seen the way he played with his friends. They’d treated me like I was made of glass, but they’d tackled each other off the deck for fun.

“He *hurt* Court?” My voice wobbled.

“He hurt all of us,” Bishop amended, “but I think he hurt Court the most, yes.”

I wasn’t sure what to do with this information. It was easier to be mad at Court when I didn’t have to think about the hell he’d been through as a kid.

And I’d never known any of it. Court had kept that part of his life hidden from me.

He was always keeping secrets. Wasn’t he tired of it? Of all the hiding? I knew I was exhausted from always being kept in the dark.

I drew in a long breath. “It doesn’t excuse him for spending the entire fall lying to me. If anything it just proves that he has a pattern of dishonesty, especially when it comes to me.”

“You’re right,” he agreed without flinching, “but us Woods brothers aren’t exactly stellar at sharing our emotions or feelings. I mean, I trust my brothers with my life, but there’s a lot of shit I keep from them.”

I arched a brow. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Like what?” I asked, genuinely curious. Then I quickly backpedaled. “Forget I asked.”

“No, it’s cool,” he replied with a soft smile. He blew out a breath and looked up at the ceiling. “I haven’t told my brothers that I’m bisexual.”

My eyes rounded. “Why not?” As much as Court and his brothers were alpha men to the extreme, I couldn’t see any of them being bigoted and rejecting Bishop.

He chewed on his bottom lip. “Honestly, I realized it when I was in high school, but the idea of the General finding out was enough to make me keep it to myself. And as evolved as the United States Marine Corps claims to be, guys who come out as gay or bi are often treated differently. I guess I just got used to hiding who I am, and now it’s been so long that I don’t want it to make things weird.”

“Thank you for telling me.” I reached for his hand, humbled that he’d entrusted me with his truth.

He squeezed my fingers, but there was no spark. No chemistry. “Don’t give up on him, Bex. I know it’s asking a lot, but he’s been through shit none of us even know about, because he keeps it bottled up.”

I leveled a gaze at him. “I get that, but I can’t let myself keep hoping for something that will never happen.”

His lips quirked. “Did you see how pissed he was when he left?”

I nodded.

“Trust me,” he finished with a grin. “I think today was the kick in the ass Court needed to realize he’s out of chances with you.”

Hope flickered in my chest, a single tiny flame that threatened to turn into a bonfire if left unchecked. “I don’t know.”

“Please, Bex,” he whispered, those soulful eyes searching mine. “Don’t write him off yet.”

I exhaled, suddenly bone weary even though I hadn’t done anything all day except read and chill out. “Fine.”

He gave my fingers one last squeeze, then got off the bed. “Hungry?”

“Starving,” I admitted.

“Rook is ordering some pizzas. They’ll be here any minute, and maybe you can talk to Court when he comes back.”

Nodding, I climbed off the bed and stretched. I followed him into the

living area and ate dinner with them. We watched a movie, and by the time I went to bed, Court still wasn't back.

I could tell Rook and Bishop were nervous about it, until Rook got a text that seemed to relax and piss him off at the same time. When the brothers exchanged a look they thought I'd missed, I knew the truth.

Court wasn't coming back for me. Whatever bridge we'd started building this morning had been burned to the ground. This time I wasn't sure which one of us had struck the match.

That little bubble of hope inside me popped, and I crept back into my bed.

I wanted to be angry, to rage at the world. But I just lay in silence as tears dripped down my cheeks until sleep was the only thing left that would claim me.

CHAPTER 22



BEX

I was cold.

No, I was freezing.

Shivering, I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs. Tucked into a corner of the small room, I heard only the roar of the wind through the trees. It slammed against the sides of the house, battering it like a hurricane.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I dropped my head to my knees and swallowed a sob. My throat ached from all the screaming and crying I'd already done, and the heat of my forehead seared through the jeans and burned my knees.

My head felt heavy, muddled. My bones ached. I just wanted to sleep.

Something crashed outside, and I jerked. My head snapped up to see a tree bent nearly in half outside the lone window in the small space.

I'd pulled the comforter off the single bed in the room and wrapped it around my thin shoulders as best as I could, but I was still so cold.

My eyes stung with the need to cry, but I was out of tears. My throat burned, and I reached for the bottle of water. My fingertips brushed it, knocking it over.

"No, no!" I cried, clumsily grappling for it before it could fall over.

It was like watching a disaster in slow motion.

The clear plastic teetered on the rim, wobbling for a moment before tilting away from me. What was left of my water splashed onto the dusty floorboards as the bottle rolled away.

I scrambled forward. The fabric of my jeans tore as they snagged on a rough piece of wood. A splinter pierced my skin, and I recoiled with a cry. The bottle tumbled under the bed and out of sight, leaving a thin trail of

droplets in its wake.

That was my last bottle of water. The other empty containers mocked me from a few feet away, where I'd arranged them in a neat row of three. The empty box of crackers was next to it. I'd licked all the crumbs from the bottom hours ago. How long had I been here? When would it end?

A sob ripped from my throat as I started to cry again, my insides tumbling around with fear, hunger, and exhaustion. I wanted my mommy. I wanted my friends. I wanted—

The glass of the window exploded into the room, shards skittering across the floor as a tree branch smashed into it.

I screamed again, rolling to my side as the wind howled louder. A deafening roar consumed me, threatening to rip the walls of the cabin apart as the storm raged on.

With nothing left to do, I tried screaming for help one more time. Only one name came to my lips, because he'd never let me down. He'd always saved me. He was my hero.

Something else slammed into the tiny space, and then the floor was shaking as something thumped across it. Something grabbed my shoulders, wrapping around my tiny arms and lifting me.

"No!" I screamed and wriggled, curling tighter into a ball. "Let me go!"

"Becca."

I knew that voice, but my brain was beyond comfort. Beyond comprehension. I slapped out. "No!"

"Becca."

My chest heaved with heavy, gut-wrenching sobs as I tried to curl into a ball. "Please, no!"

"Becca!" Strong hands grabbed my shoulders, shaking me into awareness. My eyes snapped open as I gasped.

"Hey, hey," Court whispered, his face inches from mine. He hovered over me, his dark eyes wide with concern. "You were having a nightmare. Wake up, baby."

"I..." I swallowed roughly, sniffing back tears. I blinked a few times, the tears blurring my vision. I managed to focus and saw Rook and Bishop crowded in the open doorway of the bedroom, each holding a gun. Light from behind them spilled into the space, casting shadows that made me anxious.

"I'm sorry," I gasped, humiliation burning through me as I turned back to Court. My chest heaved as I cried. "I'm so sorry. I—" My voice cracked.

Court made a soft, strangled sound and lifted me into his arms. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist like a toddler, burying my face in his neck as I tried to slow my heart rate. He turned us, sitting on the bed and leaning against the headboard with me curled around him like a spider monkey.

“Can we do anything?” Bishop asked, his voice uncharacteristically solemn.

Court’s hand calmly rubbed up and down my back in soothing strokes. “No, I’ve got her, guys. Go back to bed.”

“We’re here if you need us,” Rook murmured, and then the door closed, enveloping us in darkness again.

My breath caught, and Court shifted.

“Don’t leave!” The words tumbled out of my trembling lips before I could snatch them back. Panic held my lungs in a vise as I clutched at him, my nails digging into his bare shoulders.

Both his arms wrapped around me, steel bands that would keep out the world. “I’m not going anywhere, baby. I was going to turn a light on for you. Can I do that?”

I nodded against his neck, embarrassment rolling through me as more tears fell from my eyes and landed on him.

“Okay,” he murmured, slowly peeling one hand off me. The bedside light flickered on a moment later. His hand came right back to my hip, anchoring me in the present.

The thundering roar of my pulse pounding in my head started to slow. My sobs turned to soft hiccups. Eventually I relaxed the death grip I had on Court, embarrassment surging in like a tidal wave on the heels of my panic. I tried to pull away, but he seemed content to keep me right where I was.

I sank into his hold, once again soaking up his comfort.

A shudder rippled down his massive frame, and this time he pulled back just enough to duck his head and meet my eyes. “Want to tell me about it?”

I dropped my gaze, humiliation burning my cheeks. “Just a nightmare.”

But it wasn’t *just* a nightmare. It was a recurring night terror I’d had since I was ten. It felt so real that I’d gone to therapy over it. I hadn’t had this dream in months.

“Becca, you were screaming like someone was after you,” he remarked softly, his thumb brushing the bare skin of my hip where my pajamas had twisted. “Jesus, you scared the shit out of me.”

I still couldn't meet his gaze. "Sorry."

His hand lifted, gently pushing my chin up so I had to look at him. "Talk to me, sweetheart."

"You left," I blurted out, my heart aching like a bruise.

He winced and ducked his head. "I know. I just couldn't be here and watch you with my brother. Not when..."

After a heavy silence, I pressed, "Not when what?"

"Does it matter?" His tone was bitter. His gaze collided with mine, and the agony in his eyes was like a thunderclap going off in my head.

"Nothing happened," I finally whispered. "Bishop and I are friends."

His brow furrowed. "Then why—"

"I was trying to piss you off," I muttered.

He let out a humorless chuckle. "Mission accomplished, baby. I can't remember the last time I was that furious."

"Why didn't you come back?" I asked.

"I did, but after you were asleep." He shut his eyes and shook his head. "I had Rook text me when you went to bed. I couldn't stand seeing you. Or *not* seeing you, if you and my brother put that hotel room to use."

I sighed. We really were a fucked-up pair.

"I came in about an hour ago and was lying on the couch when I heard you screaming." His gaze pinned me to the spot. "Wanna tell me what that was about?"

I shrugged, trying to play it off. "It was a nightmare, Court. I had a bad dream. I—"

"Tell me about it," he cut me off, but his tone was so gentle. So kind.

I studied him for a moment. The way his dark hair was mussed like he'd been stabbing his fingers into it over and over. The five o'clock shadow of stubble that made him look older, sexier. His eyes were fathomless, endless pools of darkness, ready to devour me. Those plush lips that I knew for a fact could be soft and teasing or hard and dominating.

Suddenly I was acutely aware of the fact that my core was centimeters from his cock. He was wearing only a tight pair of black boxer briefs, and my yellow ducky jammies consisted of a thin pair of shorts and a camisole. Awareness cracked through me like a lightning bolt, my nipples pebbling.

To his credit, Court didn't say anything. Didn't move—hell, he barely *breathed* as he waited for my reply.

Sighing, I dropped my chin to my chest. "It's always the same. I'm in a

tiny little cabin in the middle of a storm. I can hear the wind outside, and it's so loud. Like the freight-train roar they talk about before a tornado. I'm alone and scared. A tree breaks through the window and glass sprays everywhere."

I shivered, the details slamming back into my skull. "I'm cold, and I'm hungry and thirsty and..."

"And?" He prompted when I didn't keep going.

I lifted my gaze. "And I think I'm going to die. But I keep yelling for help, because I know that someone is coming. Someone will save me if they can just hear me. Find me."

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing as his hands tightened on my waist. "Becca, you were screaming—"

"I know," I muttered, shaking my head.

"You were screaming my name," he finished. His brows pulled together. He looked conflicted, in pain. Uncertain in a way I'd never seen before. "Becca, fuck. I swear, I got to you as fast as I could."

I wrinkled my nose. "Court, you were asleep in the other room."

"No," he whispered, shaking his head. "I mean when you were a kid, and my dad kidnapped you. When you almost died so he could prove a fucking point."

My muscles locked up and, as if he knew I was getting ready to bolt, Court's arms wrapped around me again. "Don't."

I drew in a shallow breath, feeling like a deer that had been spotted by a hunting party. "Court—"

"Becca," he countered, "please, let me tell you what really happened that night. That week. Hell, what happened to *us*."

I studied him for a long moment, not sure I was ready to hear the whole truth. I knew fragments. But I had been sick back then. Really sick. And I'd nearly died.

Memories were a funny thing. Some were crystal clear, like watching a movie in 4K high definition. And others were like trying to grab sand in a windstorm. No matter how hard I tried, the grains kept slipping through my fingers.

My memories of Court were the clearest, though. Always had been. It was like my brain had decided he was worth the effort of capturing as much detail as possible. Like the way he'd smiled after he'd lost his two front teeth. He must have been seven, which would have made me three. But I remembered the color of his shirt—green-and-white striped with a smear of

chocolate from the ice cream cone he was trying to eat before it could melt under the broiling August sun. The dirt caked under his fingernails from a day spent playing in the backyard with me. The fact that his left shoe was untied, like it often was.

And that was just one of a thousand memories of him.

But things got confusing right after my ninth birthday. That was when I was diagnosed with cancer for the second time in my life. More specifically, acute lymphocytic leukemia.

I'd first been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma when I was an infant. I'd been told how I'd easily beaten it after six months of treatment. How my scans for the next five years always came back perfect. Enough so that doctors told my parents I no longer needed them. That if it hadn't come back in five years, then odds were it wouldn't.

Only cancer hadn't been done with me, and this time when it came back, it hit me worse than before and had spread by the time it had been caught. I'd needed a bone marrow or a stem cell transplant, but neither of my parents were a perfect match. Everyone we knew was tested, but I had a weird blood type, which made finding a donor hard.

I went through chemo and miraculously didn't lose my hair. I lost a lot of weight. I couldn't keep anything down. More than once I'd had a feeding tube inserted to get calories into me.

The cancer ate away at my body for months, and I lived in this weird limbo state. My parents started fighting more. My mom cried all the time.

Oddly enough, Court and I got really close. His family still lived next door to mine back then. Our schools were connected under the same prep-academy umbrella, so we even rode to and from school together.

When I passed out on the playground, Court heard and left his history class to come find me just as the ambulance was loading me in. He jumped inside and refused to leave me until we got to the hospital and the doctors told him that he had to stay back so they could run tests on me.

Nights were the hardest, but Court would stay up late texting with me when I couldn't sleep. When I told him I was having bad dreams—a byproduct of chemo and stress—he began sneaking into my room each night. He started out sleeping on the floor, but then moved into my bed when he realized he could sometimes chase away the nightmares just by being close.

One night, when I couldn't sleep, we turned on my favorite movie, *Little Women*. When we got to the scene where Teddy promised to kiss Amy before

she died, I sniffled and lamented that I'd probably never get my own first kiss.

That night, I had.

Court's kiss had been gentle and tentative, full of the awkwardness that came from him being just barely thirteen and me being nine. It was innocent and sweet, and that was the moment I knew I loved Court Woods.

Less than a month later, he'd disappeared from my life and broken my heart.

No, not broken my heart. Because what we'd had wasn't just puppy love or a crush. He was the other half of me, and he'd crushed my very soul.

I didn't remember much about the next month. It was a blur of twisted memories that never made sense. Mom had always told me it was because I'd been at my sickest and had nearly died. The doctors had told my parents to brace for the worst when, in the eleventh hour, they found a donor match that saved my life.

But that month had forever changed my life, and I'd never quite known why. I had an idea, thanks to a cryptic message left for me by a dead girl, but Madelaine hadn't had all the answers.

No, if I wanted answers, the only person who could give them to me was the man whose lap I was currently cuddled on.

I'd been too angry, too hurt, to hear him out before. Or maybe too scared. My life had been rocked by a lot of revelations over the past few months, but it was better than the alternative. I was so sick of being protected and lied to.

"I need you to tell me the truth," I told him, barely managing to get the words out around the lump in my throat.

His eyes drifted shut like he was in pain, before he gave a terse nod. "I'll tell you anything. Everything. Whatever you want."

"No more lies?" I whispered, half begging.

His gaze locked on mine. "Never again, Becca."

"Okay. Tell me."

CHAPTER 23



COURT

Eight years earlier

The slam of the front door made the walls of the entire house shake. It was like a gunshot going off, followed by a roar I was all-too-familiar with.

“Court! Get your ass down here!” Dad bellowed. I could picture him standing in the middle of the marble foyer, bracketed on either side by the dual curving staircases as the massive bronze-and-crystal chandelier above him swayed, not immune to his wrath.

I looked up from my science homework and glanced out the bedroom window, wondering if it made more sense to bail and take my chances with the twenty-foot drop. I could probably hide at Becca’s. I’d seen her dad’s car leave hours ago with her in it, probably on their way to another appointment.

My stomach clenched, remembering how pale she’d been when I’d left her this morning. The bluish bruising under her eyes was getting worse. She’d lost so much weight. Every time I saw her it was like she was shrinking. She was so tiny—*too tiny*—and always looked so down. I hated it. I missed the girl who always made me laugh.

Nine-year-olds shouldn’t worry they were going to die. It wasn’t fair.

Her bedroom window faced mine, and despite the distance between our large houses, we still talked on the phone at night, sitting in front of our windows so it was like we were together.

Anger built in my chest as I heard Dad yell for me again. I hated him so much. Hated the way he yelled at Mom and me. The fact that he was a giant liar and had a whole other family on the other side of town.

I had five brothers. Five. It had been six, but one of them died a few months ago. Mom and Dad had been fighting about it when I'd come home from soccer practice. They hadn't known I was there, but I'd heard it all. Mom had been screaming, yelling that I wasn't going to end up like King; that Dad couldn't hurt me if he still wanted access to Grandpa and Nana's money.

It had taken a lot of listening to figure out that it meant Dad had been part of something that killed a brother I'd never known existed until after he died. Something he wanted *me* to do, too, but Mom wouldn't let him. Dad had slammed the door so hard the walls shook when he left, and he didn't come back for almost two weeks.

He'd gone and stayed with his other family. I knew because Ash helped me find them, and I'd gone over there. I'd watched Dad leave, kissing a woman who wasn't my mom like he was one of those guys who went to work and was saying goodbye to his family.

I watched from the shade of the bushes across the street as the woman left next, driving away in a shiny red SUV. I waited until the boys—my *brothers*—trickled out into the yard to play football together. I waited until they'd gone back in before I'd finally sucked up the courage to go over and knock on the door.

“Court! Where the fuck are you?”

I pushed back from my desk and took my time crossing my large bedroom and opening the door. I knew he hated it when people didn't jump to obey his every command—a byproduct of being a general in the United States Army for several decades—which made this little rebellion one I particularly enjoyed.

It was a few minutes after he'd shouted that I appeared at the top of the steps, arching an eyebrow. “What?”

Dad—or the general, as my brothers called him—glared up at me, his cheeks mottled red. He was in his early fifties but still in great shape. I knew he hit the gym every day, determined to stay in top physical condition.

“Get down here,” he growled, stabbing a finger toward the floor.

I arched my brows. “I'm doing homework.”

“I swear to fuck, Court, if you don't get down here—”

“What?” I challenged, squaring my shoulders. I’d hit a growth spurt last year and shot up to eye level with him. I was still mostly arms and legs, but I’d been using our state-of-the-art gym myself. Not that it seemed to do much yet.

Besides, Mom would have his balls in a vise if he laid another hand on me. She’d gone out of town with Mrs. Whittier for a spa weekend yesterday, but we both knew all it would take was a call from me, and she’d be on the phone with a divorce attorney before I could say *parental abuse*.

And dear old Dad would be fucked. Or, rather, his shiny new company would be. The U.S. Army didn’t pay much, which was why he needed Mom. He needed her money and the billions her parents had left her when they’d died.

After the argument, Mom sat me down and explained a few things about herself and Dad. The big thing I’d learned was that Mom didn’t give a shit that he had six kids with another woman. Their marriage had been arranged between their families when they were in college, or so she’d told me. She didn’t love him, and didn’t care if he didn’t love her, but she did love me, and that was where she drew the line.

She told me how my brother, King, had died because my dad made him do some wilderness survival test in the middle of nowhere. All of my older brothers—Royal, Rook, and Bishop—had done it when they turned thirteen. But earlier this year, King had fallen in a ravine when it was raining and hit his head on a rock. King had only been six months older than me, and Dad planned on me doing the same test they had.

Turned out all those times he took me camping and showed me how to build a fire and track deer weren’t just to spend time with me. It was to make me into the man he wanted.

But I hated him. I’d never be that man. I’d *never* be like him.

My parents had a complicated past, but I didn’t give a shit. I was counting the days until I was eighteen and could live my own damn life. In the meantime? I decided Mom was right—I didn’t care what Dad did as long as he left me alone.

“It’s time,” the General hissed, breathing hard like a pissed-off dragon.

An icy chill swept across my skin, because I knew what time he meant. I’d turned thirteen last week. Dad had casually mentioned a “camping trip” at dinner last week, and Mom had thrown a glass at his head. She’d said absolutely not, and I’d figured that was the end of it. “No. Mom said I’m not

doing it.”

He glared at me. “It’s time to be a man, Court. There’s a car waiting outside.”

My hands shook. “No.” I lifted my chin, defiance and bravado twisting my guts. “I don’t want to.”

He sneered up at me. “Of course. Too fucking scared. What a little bitch I managed to sire.”

“Well, thank God you have six other sons,” I drawled, then snapped my fingers. “Oh, wait. You’re down to five now, right?” I shot him an openly mocking look.

He bristled, his chest puffing up. “Your brother was too weak to handle the one test I gave him.” The cruel twist of his lips showed just how little he cared that he’d been directly responsible for his own son’s death.

I clenched my jaw. “Fuck you. I’m not going.”

“Yes, you are,” he gritted out, his steely blue eyes flashing.

“No, I’m not,” I retorted, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “I can always call Mom.”

Threatening to call my mom was pretty pathetic, but I knew it would work. I’d heard them arguing about the test for the majority of the week. Mom had put her foot down and said absolutely not. My father might’ve commanded thousands of men in his decorated career, but he didn’t control my mother. Not even a little bit, and especially not after King had died last year.

Dad had grown up in a military family that was obsessed with strength. Apparently *the test* had started with my grandfather. Some fucked up survivalist trial to make sure his sons were man enough to be worthy of the Woods name.

My dad carried out the same fucked-up tradition.

Until my mom stepped in after King’s death. Her father had been an attorney, like her, and had crafted an iron-clad prenup for my parents. Mom threatened to expose Dad’s cheating and enact the prenup, which would’ve left him with absolutely nothing.

He countered that she’d been just as unfaithful, to which Mom reminded him she had plenty of money, for her and I to live on, in accounts in the Caymans, plus I would come into parts of my massive trust fund when I hit certain age milestones—sixteen, eighteen, and twenty-one. It was enough money that my great-grandkids were set for life.

But of course Dad would wait for Mom to be gone to make me go. I should've known something was up when Dad suggested Mom and Mrs. Whittier should go on a weekend trip because Mrs. Whittier needed a break. I'd even told her that I'd make sure to check on Becca while she was gone.

"I can't," I told him, my stubbornness and fear mixing together into something that felt a lot like denial. This wasn't happening, and maybe if I ignored him, he would forget.

"Court."

Something in his tone made me stop. It was almost like he was... happy? Frowning, I looked back and, yeah, he was fucking smiling.

An uneasy feeling twisted in my gut. It was the smile he wore when he was about to beat me at chess. The smile he wore when he had someone backed into a corner and knew he was about to win.

"Come down here, son," he beckoned, waving a hand.

"Dad—"

"I promise you'll want to see this," he vowed, still grinning. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

I took a step forward and stopped, narrowing my eyes. "I'm not playing your games."

"Aren't you?" He lifted a quizzical brow. "I tell you what—I bet that you'll be on your way to the airstrip in the next ten minutes."

I frowned. "I'm not going, Dad. Mom said, remember? You can't make me."

"And you, son, are entirely too predictable," he mused, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. His eyes glittered as they looked up at me. "What's rule number one, Court?"

My dad had a lot of rules that he'd drilled into my head, but I knew instantly which one he was talking about.

The more you have to love, the more you have to lose.

His smile widened. "Nine minutes."

"Who?" I breathed the question, fear spiking in me. Was it one of my brothers? Mom? Linc, Ryan or Ash?

"Come and see," he entreated, holding the phone out to me.

I wanted to be strong, to tell him to fuck off, but I wasn't the monster he was. I cared about people. Loved people. And if he hurt one of them because of me?

I thundered down the steps and swiped the phone, expecting to see my

mom or one of my best friends tied up.

My heart stopped beating at the tiny form in the middle of a cabin. Tears streaked her cheeks, her big hazel eyes wide as they looked around the small room in desperation and terror.

“Becca?” I croaked.

“Well, since your mother and Mrs. Whittier decided to take a break, I told Mr. Whittier that you and I would take Becca camping to our cabin this weekend so she can have a little vacation, too.”

All I could do was gape at him and then stare back at Becca. *My Becca.* She was so scared and all alone.

Dad’s hand came down heavy on my shoulder, drawing me closer. “There’s one small complication,” he said, almost sadly.

I looked up at him, my vision blurring from rage. I’d never hated him more than I did in this moment.

Dad reached into his pocket and pulled out an orange bottle of pills. He gave a soft sigh. “It seems we forgot her meds.”

Horror curdled in my stomach as my vision tunneled. *No, no.* Becca *needed* those meds. It was the only thing giving her a fighting shot against the cancer that was ravaging her tiny body.

Dad handed me the pills. “Be a good boy and get these to her, would you?” When I didn’t move, he took my hands and wrapped my fingers around the bottle. He turned to walk away.

I lurched forward a step. “Dad.” My voice cracked.

“It’ll take you thirty minutes to get to the airstrip.” He checked his watch. “Flight’s two hours. Another hour to be dropped off at the starting line. Then you just have to get to the cabin where she’s waiting for you. And her medicine.”

I had no words. I knew the exact cabin he was talking about. It was a ninety-minute flight to a private airfield, but the cabin hadn’t been used in recent years except when my brothers had gone through their trials. That was the point: they were left at the base of the mountain with nothing and had a week to make it to the cabin, where they’d find food and water and a satellite phone to call for an airlift out.

There were no trails. No roads. Just dense forest, a few mountain stream runoffs, and some sheer cliffs. If you made a wrong turn, you had to backtrack and find the right way. The fastest anyone had found the cabin was Royal; it had taken him three days and two hours. That beat our father’s

previous record of four days and eight hours.

“Oh, wait. You said you had homework, didn’t you? Too bad. I actually just found a bone marrow match for Rebecca. I’m having them flown in from Guatemala in five days. They can do the procedure next week... if she’s back by then.” Dad winked at me.

I wanted to scream. To punch the shit out of him. But none of that would help Becca. I was frozen in place, my mind whirling as I gaped at him.

“Since you’re my son,” he went on, “I arranged for the driver to come back and give you a ride to the airport. If you want to go.” He looked at the Rolex on his wrist. “But I also told him to give you until five to get in the car.”

My gaze swung to the grandfather clock in the entryway. It read 4:58.

I watched as the long hand slid over the 59 notch. I glanced desperately up the stairs, wondering if I had time to pack. To grab my phone and send a text to Mom or—

“Don’t even think about it,” Dad snapped. “One phone call to your mother or anyone else, and Becca will never make it back. And it will be all *your* fault.”

Shoving the pills in my pocket, I bolted for the door. It took me less than ten seconds to get in the car.

The motherfucker had been right. I’d been heading to the airstrip in less than ten minutes.

CHAPTER 24



BEX

Present Day

I thought I'd seen Court Woods experience every possible emotion—happiness, sadness, fury, playfulness—but I'd never seen him look so ashamed. It made me ache to hug him, to make it all better.

He cleared his throat. “It took me a little over four hours to get to the drop-off spot. And then another four days, twelve hours, and sixteen minutes to find the cabin. The storm that hit came out of nowhere, and I kept getting turned around. I thought I'd never find you... then I heard you screaming.”

A shudder rolled down his frame, his dark eyes full of anguish. “At first I thought it was the wind. When I realized it was you... Becca, I'll never forget that sound. You aren't the only one who has nightmares—I have them, too. And in them, I hear that scream. Then it goes quiet, and when I find you, you're...” He shook his head with a sniff.

“I'm right here,” I reminded him, my voice soft.

“Yeah, but I still close my eyes and see the girl I found. Becca, you were so sick. It took them almost another six hours to get to us because of the storm, and the whole time, all I could do was beg you not to die.”

My eyes widened.

Court's jaw was tight. “Baby, you were burning up. Then you had a seizure. They didn't know if you'd survive the medevac flight back to Los Angeles. It took them almost a week to get you stable enough for the

transplant.” His eyes drifted shut. “And it was all my fault.”

“What? No, it wasn’t. Court, that was your dad, not you.” I frowned at him, but he wouldn’t meet my gaze, so I tugged on his hair until he looked up.

He shook his head. “He told me that caring about people left you vulnerable, but I never believed it. I mean... Fuck, we were kids.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “We were *kids*. I can’t believe my dad was part of this.”

He grimaced. “I didn’t know about that until later when I heard our moms fighting. Well, it was more like your mom laying into my mom and threatening to go to the cops.”

“Why didn’t she?” I wondered.

Court looked like he wanted to sidestep the question, but then he sucked in a deep breath. “Fear. My dad threatened your parents. Plus he had the donor lined up for you when you were strong enough... They did what they had to do.”

“It broke their marriage,” I whispered. “And when I came home from the hospital, we moved. I missed being the girl next door.”

His eyes shut, as if pained by my confession. “Every time I looked out my window and saw your house, it made me sick. Sick and angry. I was so furious for so long.”

“Bishop mentioned military school?”

His lips twisted into a sardonic smirk. “Yeah. That was a fun few months. Hell, I was so twisted up, even Mom agreed to send me away.”

“What changed?”

“Royal,” he admitted. “He came to talk to me. Told me I could keep acting like a punk, or I could put in the work and do better. *Be* better. So, that’s what I did. I focused on being better, bigger, stronger. Making sure my dad couldn’t ever hurt me or anyone I loved ever again.”

“Court,” I murmured, my heart aching for him. For *us*. For what we could’ve had.

“Becca...” He sighed, his hands tightening on my hips like he was ready to push me away.

Not happening.

Not tonight.

Not ever again.

I looped my arms around his neck, linking my fingers behind his head. “I

don't blame you for what your father did, Court."

"Don't you get it? As long as I care about you, you'll always be a target," he insisted. "Pretending not to care was the only way to keep you safe."

"You realize we haven't been friends, or whatever you want to call it, in a long time, and that didn't stop bad shit from happening to me," I pointed out. "Madelaine made my life hell for *years*. I was bullied, treated like crap, and pushed around for pretty much my entire teenage life."

His eyes flashed.

"I was drugged and almost raped. I was freaking kidnapped by Maddie's dad." I let out a sharp laugh. "And let's not forget that I decided to date a guy who thinks it's normal to buy and sell human beings like dolls. You didn't play a part in *any* of that."

"I should have," he hissed, his fingers digging into my hips. "I should've protected you—"

"So, which is it?" I demanded. "You're never supposed to let me out of your sight? Or you're supposed to stay as far away from me as possible?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but then snapped it shut. A frown creased his brow.

"Exactly," I murmured, loosening my fingers to delve them into his thick hair. The strands were shorter at the nape of his neck, and I pressed the pads of my fingers against his skin to massage away the tension.

He let out a shuddering breath before leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine. "I'm sorry."

"For what this time?" A soft smile pulled at my lips.

"For not being honest with you years ago," he admitted. "Pushing you away was a mistake. I thought it was for the best, and maybe in some ways, it still is."

I tensed, bracing for another round of being pushed away. "No," I told him. "Stop trying to do what's best for me and just give me a chance. Court, I don't blame you for what happened to me back then. I never did, and I never will."

He watched me, his expression wary.

"But I *do* blame you for how you've handled things lately," I admitted. "For the way you just act like I'm a doll you can put on a shelf and expect to stay still. I'm not a little girl anymore. I haven't been for a long time. I'm stronger, and I know what I want. It's what I've always wanted."

His gaze held mine, the fire in them catching me off guard. "Don't say it

if you don't mean it, Becca."

I blinked, my breath catching at the intensity pouring off him. "I don't understand."

One hand left my hip and wrapped around my chin, his long fingers easily holding my jaw in place. "I'm not a kid anymore, sweetheart. The things I want, the things I *need*, might be more than you can give."

My heart slammed against my ribs, my body prickling with awareness. "I'm not a little girl anymore either. I can handle it."

A pale version of a smile ghosted across his full lips. "Think you can handle me?"

I straightened my spine. "You're still expecting me to be the sick, broken girl from when we were little, but I'm all grown up now. And I'm *not* afraid of you."

He smirked, his hand sliding down my neck to wrap around my throat. He applied the lightest pressure to my pulse point, letting me feel the power of his hold. Making me aware of the fact that he could cut off my air with a flex of his fingers.

A dark thrill shot through my blood like lightning. I stayed impossibly still even as my pulse pounded in my chest, throbbing all the way down to my core. I had the urge to rock against him, knowing he was hard beneath me.

"Do you know the real reason I wanted to get you away from Eric?" His voice was soft, almost teasing. But the edge to it had my breath catching.

"Because he's the bad guy?" I guessed.

"Because I saw the way he looked at you," he corrected. "Like he owned you. Like you were *his*."

I licked my lips, my throat suddenly bone-dry.

"See, baby, I know the look of a man who wants to see you naked, spread out under him as you shatter." His thumb pushed down a little harder on my windpipe.

I swallowed, the sound audible. "Oh, really?" It was all I could think to say; my brain was being short-circuited by his touch.

One corner of his mouth hooked up in a feral, wolfish smirk. "Fuck yeah, Becca." He leaned in, his lips brushing my ear as he added, "I look at that man in the mirror every goddamn day."

I gasped, the sound sharp and desperate as he thrust his hips up, grinding his hard length against my core.

“Court.” His name left me as a needy whimper. My fingers curled into his hair and pulled hard. I tried to roll my hips against him, aching and pulsing with a kind of need I’d felt only in my dreams.

The hand on my waist stopped me from moving. From rubbing myself against his erection like a cat in heat.

“You need to be sure this is what you want. That *I* am what you really want,” he said, his teeth catching my ear lobe and biting it. A streak of pain melted into warm pleasure as the nip turned into a soft suck.

Who the hell knew earlobes were a freaking turn-on?

He pulled back, meeting my gaze. “See, I’m not sure you *can* handle me, princess,” he murmured, his voice a guttural rasp that I felt between my legs. His dark gaze flicked over my body, his tongue darting out to lick his bottom lip. “You talk a big game, but if you think I’m anything like the two-pump chumps you’ve let between your legs, then you’re out of your beautiful fucking mind.” His lips brushed my ear once more. “I’ll fucking wreck you, Becca. I’ll ruin you for any other man, and I’ll never let you go.”

Oh, God. My blood heated, simmering in my veins as my head spun. He straightened, still keeping a possessive hand around my neck as he stared down at me, his expression full of fury and fire.

I sucked in a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. “I’ve *always* been able to handle you, Court Woods.”

His hand reached for me again, tracing my jaw. “Think so? Care to prove that point, princess?”

I lifted my chin, wordlessly accepting the challenge. Daring him to do his worst.

He smiled, the look almost feral. He gave a low chuckle. “Be sure, baby girl, because if you’re mine, every motherfucking inch of you belongs to *me*. That tight ass, these perfect tits, and that sweet cunt will be *mine*. Hell, your fucking period is gonna need permission to come if it wants to touch *my* pussy.”

My insides clenched with need, wanting what he was describing.

Was his speech supposed to send me running? Because all I wanted to do was make him prove it.

He cocked a brow. “So before you go thinking you can handle me and saying shit you’re clueless about, keep those pretty lips shut unless you’re ready to wrap them around my cock.”

My eyes went wide as I stared up at him, barely breathing.

His expression was knowing, but there was a look of uncertainty in his gaze. Like he was waiting for me to realize this was too much and go running. To let him off the hook from exploring this chemistry between us.

Heat unfurled low in my belly.

Game. Fucking. On.

I stared him dead in the eye and blinked once.

Twice.

My past, present, and future teetered on the edge of a knife.

It had always been this way for us.

All or nothing.

My gaze jerked to where his cock was threatening to punch through his boxer-briefs before flicking back up to him. I slowly lifted a single brow.

And opened my mouth wide.

CHAPTER 25



BEX

Court studied me, his dark eyes alight with an intense lust that I felt like a caress. The hand wrapped around my throat slid up my neck, his thumb pushing into my open mouth. “Suck,” he ordered. “Show me what this mouth would do to my cock.”

My lips automatically sealed around the digit, my cheeks hollowing as I sucked his thumb deep, imagining it was something a lot bigger. I squirmed a little as arousal flooded my pussy. Under me, his cock was long and thick, hard and ready.

He made a soft, humming sound before pulling his thumb out partially and then thrusting it back inside the wet heat of my mouth.

My tongue curled around his skin, my lashes fluttering shut as I put all those years of reading romance novels to use, calling upon all the erotic imagery that the authors made seem so natural.

Romance authors deserved way more credit than they got.

I gently scraped my teeth against the pad of his thumb, smiling around him when a judder rippled through his frame.

“Fuck, Becca,” he rasped, pulling his thumb out. His dark brown eyes blazed. “Say it. I need to hear you say it.”

It was like standing on the edge of a cliff, staring out into the void. I had no idea what lay beyond, but I had to trust something would be there to catch me when I fell.

That Court would catch me.

“I’m yours, Court,” I told him. “I’ve always been yours.”

He surged forward, his lips claiming mine in a bruising kiss that felt like a dam finally breaking free. The resulting torrent swept me away, and all I

could do was cling to him as he kissed me.

I parted my lips with a gasp, and he took full advantage. His tongue tangled with mine, stroking it into submission, and I let him take control. A low groan vibrated from his chest as he pulled me closer, angling my head exactly where he wanted me.

Needing more, I tried to grind myself against his lap, but he let go of my face to clamp his hands down on my hips, halting my movements. His kiss slowed from the initial frenzy, turning lazy and gentle.

With a frustrated whimper, I pulled away. “Court. Please.”

His eyes snapped open. “You’ll get what I give you, baby. Unless you’ve changed your mind and can’t handle it?”

I gave an annoyed huff and shook my head.

His lips curved into a grin. “Do you have any idea how adorable you are when you’re pouting?”

“Do you have any idea how much I really need you to—” I started to blurt out, but cut myself off.

His eyes lit up. “Oh, no. Finish that thought, Becca.”

Heat crept across my cheeks. “I just need *you*.”

His brow lifted. “I’m right here.”

If I’d have been standing, I would’ve stomped my foot. “I need you to touch me.”

“I *am* touching you,” he pointed out. But then, just because he could, he leaned in and kissed the tip of my nose. “You mean like that?”

“Court,” I whined, my skin feeling pulled too taut.

Still grinning, he lowered his lips to my shoulder. “Like this?”

I let out another aggrieved sigh, wondering if it was possible to combust from embarrassment or need.

A hand glided up my ribcage before his fingers lightly pinched one of my nipples. “That?”

I sucked in a sharp breath, feeling the echoes of his touch like there was a direct line between my nipple and my clit. “More.” His hand squeezed around my breast, holding it through the fabric of my cami. He kneaded the sensitive flesh in his palm, but it wasn’t enough. “*Please*.”

“Since you begged so nicely,” he murmured, his fingers tugging the neckline of my top beneath my breasts, baring them to his view. “God, I can’t wait to fuck these tits.”

I’d barely had time to let *that* visual settle in when his head lowered and

he caught one tight bud into his mouth, sucking hard. I arched into him, letting out a strained cry as his teeth nipped at the aching tip of my breast.

“Oh, fuck, yes,” I managed to get out, my head spinning as he turned his attention to the other nipple. I clutched his head to my chest, wondering if my nipples would bruise from the sucking and the biting.

Some baser instinct hoped he would leave marks. I wanted to see them in the mirror tomorrow for proof this wasn't another dream my brain was tricking me with.

Court picked me up and flipped me onto my back, his hips pressing my thighs open so he could settle between them. I wrapped my legs around him, trying to tug him down.

His teeth bit a little too hard into my nipple, and I yelped.

He glared down at me, reproach in his eyes. “Unless you're saying ‘stop,’ I'm in control, sweetheart. Got it?”

I nodded and willed my body to relax, even though it felt like I was being decimated by an inferno that made my blood boil. My insides felt raw and scorched, aching for more.

His lips curved into a smile, and he lifted up, planting his hands on either side of my head to brace his weight. “That's my girl. Let me take care of you the way I always wanted to.” He lowered his head, kissing me again as the hand that was on my hip slipped around to splay across my belly. A finger teased the elastic waistband of my shorts, the smooth glide making my tummy flutter.

“So soft,” he murmured, his tone reverent as he looked down at where he was touching me.

I followed his gaze, not surprised to see fading teeth imprints on my pale chest. My nipples were an angry shade of red, the color of raspberries in the snow. I watched his index finger lift the band of my shorts, and then his hand dipped inside the fabric and into the lace of my panties.

The first brush of his fingers against my slit had me trembling.

“Fuck,” he groaned, sounding pained. “So fucking wet for me.” He cupped my pussy, grinding the heel of his hand against me as he gave me another deep kiss.

He licked into my mouth, tasting me again with a throaty moan. Just when I was positive I was going to scream, he slid a thick finger inside me. He broke our kiss with a pant. “Jesus, you're tight.”

I let out a strangled cry as he worked his finger in and out of my body

with shallow thrusts. My heart slammed against my ribcage at the foreign sensation. I was suddenly, glaringly aware of how tiny my own fingers were in comparison to his.

And this was just a *finger*.

I'd felt the size and length of his cock when I'd been on his lap. I knew that biology said it would work, but my brain was having serious doubts.

His thumb slipped in lazy circles around my clit, making my hips buck up. His finger sank even deeper, and when he curled it inside of me, my eyes fluttered shut.

"Mmm," he hummed in approval and added another finger, stretching me wider.

With a groan, I embraced the unfamiliar burn, rolling my hips to match the slow, steady rhythm he'd started. My toes curled as he pressed harder against my clit, stroking the nub firmly.

"Oh, God," I managed to gasp out, feeling like my lungs were going to shatter. Or collapse. My release spiraled higher and faster than it ever had. My thighs started to shake as everything south of my belly button coiled.

And then it stopped so abruptly that the world tilted around me.

I let out a plaintive, "No." The desperate whine in my tone shocked me, but Court just chuckled. The warm sound vibrated between us. His mocha-colored eyes were alight with amusement.

My eyes went wide as he lifted two glistening fingers to his mouth and sucked them in deep. His eyes flared. "Sweet as a peach," he rasped, coming down to kiss me again.

Tasting myself in Court's kiss was strange and kinda hot. I wrapped my arms around him, greedily clinging to his touch however he offered it.

"I want to hear you scream," he whispered against my lips.

My body flushed as I remembered we weren't exactly alone. "Your brothers—"

"Will leave us the fuck alone if they know what's good for them," he replied. "But if you're still thinking about my *brothers*, I'm doing something wrong here."

Before I could figure out how to answer that, he lifted himself away from me and got off the bed.

Pushing myself up to my elbows, I missed his weight pressing me into the mattress. "Court—"

With a smirk, he grabbed my ankles and yanked me to the end of the bed.

I let out a wholly undignified squeak as my ass stopped halfway off the edge. His hands were immediately at my waist, stripping off my shorts and underwear.

His gaze darkened as he drank in the sight of me. My top was still pushed down under my boobs, and my lower half was completely naked. Feeling exposed and vulnerable, I tried to close my legs.

With a growl, Court wedged his body between them, keeping them splayed. “No,” he snapped.

“But...” I started.

He arched a brow and slapped a hand over my pussy. My entire frame jolted at the contact, my core clenching at the sharp sensation.

I gaped at him. “Did you just spank my lady bits?”

His eyes narrowed. “No. I just spanked *my* pussy. I warned you, Becca—now you’re mine. Every single delicious inch of you.”

Oh, hell. It was like he’d dumped a package of pop rocks into my veins. A full-body shiver swept through me, and I took a big breath before releasing it and sinking onto my back.

The curl of his lips made my heart feel too big for my chest.

“Now, where were we?” he mused softly, thumbing his bottom lip as he eyed me.

When he dropped to his knees, my breath caught. His massive shoulders pushed my thighs wider, spreading me open. He leaned in, licking up my slit with the flat of his tongue in one long swipe.

“Fuck, yes,” he muttered, his hands wrapping around my thighs and pulling my pussy onto his mouth. He sucked my clit into his mouth, repositioning his hands so one was splayed flat across my belly, pinning me down. When he pushed two fingers back into me, the pressure of his hand pushing my pelvis down as his fingers pumped into me was almost my undoing.

Electricity shot through my limbs, making my toes curl and my hands clench. His teeth gently nipped at my clit before he sucked it into his mouth once more, flicking his tongue over it.

I exploded with a sharp cry, my back arching off the bed. My hands fisted around the covers as I convulsed, the walls of my pussy spasming around his fingers so hard that I worried they’d break.

Court’s pace never slowed, and I somehow tumbled headfirst into a second orgasm. I forgot how to breathe as he kept sucking and licking my

clit, curling his fingers to hit that mythical spot I thought only actually existed in romance novels.

I was still twitching, my brain shooting off pathetic attempts to get my muscles back online, when he stood up. I didn't even bother attempting to push myself up. My head lolled to the side as I panted, watching him shove his sweats down.

"You're so perfect when you come for me," he praised, his eyes glowing with pleasure and hunger as he reached inside his boxer briefs and wrapped a fist around his length. The corded muscles of his forearm flexed as he squeezed his cock, and all I could do was lick my lips.

"Ready for more, baby girl?" He pushed his boxer briefs down, his cock jutting out toward me like an arrow aimed right for my pussy.

A tendril of panic wrapped around my heart as I watched his fist close over his cock again, giving it several rough strokes that left him groaning.

Could I do this? Was I actually going to have sex with Court Woods right now?

Hell, yes, my hindbrain answered for me. He touched me with his free hand, his fingers slipping through my folds as he collected my arousal and spread it all over his cock with a grunt.

"Shit." He froze over me, grimacing. "I need to grab a condom."

"Uh... I'm on the pill," I confessed. Not that I'd started it because I needed it; I'd just always had irregular periods.

His dark eyes studied me. "Have you ever had sex without a condom?"

I shook my head. Not technically a lie, because I hadn't had sex at all, so the condom was kinda irrelevant. Unease trickled in as I remembered all of his previous conquests. "Have... you?" I cringed inwardly as I waited for his response.

His mouth tightened, and I got the feeling that he was embarrassed about the other women. "I've always used protection," he admitted. "And I was tested before I came to Paris—we all get full workups before we go into the field."

I exhaled hard in relief. "Do you... I mean, we don't *have* to use a condom?" Why was I posing it like a question? Ugh, talk about unsexy.

An animalistic glint entered his eyes. "So, in a way, I'd be your first and you'd be mine," he murmured, moving closer and dragging his cock through the wetness between my legs. "I'll definitely be your last."

The feel of his bare shaft rubbing against my core was perfection. This

was everything I'd always wanted. This wasn't just something physical—though the physical was pretty freaking great—but it was knowing Court and I were on the same page. That this insane attraction I'd battled wasn't just one sided. That we could finally be together.

“Yes,” I breathed, accepting his declaration as truth.

I pushed back a tiny spark of alarm as he stood between my legs, his cock poised at my entrance. The soft, blunt head of him pressed into me and my breath caught.

I could do this. I *wanted* to do this.

Court leaned down, one hand holding my hip as the other cradled my face like I was the most precious thing in the world. “This is how it always should've been, Becca,” he whispered, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “You always should've been mine.” His hips flexed and he surged inside of me, burying himself balls deep in one thrust.

The scream that tore from my lips wasn't sexy. It wasn't erotic. It was pure pain, because holy forking shitballs, I was pretty sure his cock had just split me in half.

Of all the ways I'd ever imagined dying, death by cock strangely hadn't made the list.

Court froze above me, his body coiled tight with tension. He slowly dipped his head, eyes wide as he stared at me. “Becca?”

A tear tumbled down my cheek, the agony between my legs pulsing in waves. “Okay, I might've lied about how many guys I've been with.” My frame trembled, and it was all I could do not to shove him away.

“Fucking hell,” he swore, looking horrified. “How many guys have you been with?”

“Counting you?” My eyes slid shut, mortification heating my face. “One.”

CHAPTER 26



COURT

Holy *shit*. What had I done?

My cock gave a jerk, reminding me that I was still balls deep in the tightest pussy I'd ever had.

Because she was a fucking *virgin*. And I'd just rutted into her body like a goddamn psychopath.

"Becca," I rasped, shaking my head like that could somehow make what she'd said less true. But I could see the pain making her jaw tight, the tears shimmering in her eyes. Her nails were gouging into my shoulders enough that I'd be shocked if I wasn't bleeding.

Oh, fuck me.

Was *she* bleeding?

I started to pull out, only to stop when she winced. "Ouch—please don't move. That makes it worse."

I dropped my forehead to her chest for a beat, taking a breath and trying not to move a muscle. "Baby girl, why the hell didn't you say something?"

"I—"

She was cut off by a frantic pounding at the door.

"What the fuck? We heard a scream," Rook called.

"Bex, are you okay?" Bishop demanded.

"Oh, God," she whispered, more tears falling as she twisted her neck to look upside down at the door across the room. Panic filled her eyes. "We're fine!"

"We heard you scream," Bishop pointed out again. "Bex, if you're hurt —"

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered, wondering if this could get much worse.

The doorknob twisted then, and I realized that, yeah. It could get worse.

“Don’t fucking come in here!” I roared, making Becca jump under me. Her pussy rippled around my dick, and I ground my teeth together to keep still as she whimpered in pain.

There was a beat of silence, and I could picture my brothers on the other side of the door, debating whether or not to come in.

Becca shot me a scared look, but I had a feeling it was less about me defiling her perfect body and more the idea that my brothers might come spilling through the damn door any second like a pair of amateur detectives.

She opened her mouth and stunned the shit outta me when a throaty moan left her lips. “Oh, fuck, Court. Yeah. Right *there*.”

My eyes went wider—if that was even freaking possible—as I stared down at her. Was she...

“Uh... shit,” Bishop said quickly.

“Sorry,” Rook added. “We’ll just... yeah.”

I listened to the sound of them retreating and their bedroom door slamming shut. I had no doubt they were each reaching for a pair of noise-canceling earbuds.

Letting out a long breath, I glanced down at the woman in my arms. My fucking dream girl.

That I’d treated like a blowup doll.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, unable to stop myself from kissing her cheek. I tasted the salt of her tears and felt like an even bigger asshole. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“To be fair, I thought it would be okay,” she offered lamely.

I gave a frustrated huff. I wanted to kiss and strangle her at the same time. “Sweetheart.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “I was afraid you’d stop, and I didn’t want you to. I wanted this.”

I arched a brow. “You wanted your first time to hurt as much as humanly possible?”

“Okay, maybe not *that*,” she amended, “but I wanted to be with you, and for the first time in over a decade, it felt like we were *us* again.”

Sighing, I gave a slight shake of my head. “But you said you were...” I couldn’t finish the sentence without snarling. The idea of her with the three guys she’d claimed had been enough to send me into a dimension of pissed

off that seemed solely reserved for anything Becca-related.

Her lashes dropped. “I lied.”

“Why the hell—”

“Because I didn’t want to seem like some little kid,” she snapped. “I mean, you’re *you*... Freaking sex god of Pacific Cross.”

I shot her a disbelieving look. “Seriously?”

“Do you know how many times I heard about the girls you’d slept with around school? Almost every girl on campus worships at the altar of your dick. Well, yours and Linc’s. There were even bets to see who could sleep with you two together.”

“I really don’t want to talk about my best friend while I’m in the middle of fucking you. In fact, new rule—we don’t talk about anyone else when my cock is inside you.” Grimacing, I looked down between our bodies to where my cock was still inside her. When she clenched around me, I let out an inhuman sound. “Don’t do that.”

“I don’t even know what I did,” she protested.

I closed my eyes, counting to five. “Okay, let me get off you and—”

“What? Hell, no!” Her eyes went wide.

My heart gave a painful squeeze. “I promise I’ll be as gentle as possible. I won’t hurt you anymore.”

“I don’t give a crap about that,” she replied. “I want this. I want *you*, Court. I’ve always wanted you. I can handle this.”

“Sex isn’t something you should have to *handle*,” I told her. “It should be something you want.”

“Something I’ve dreamed of? Imagined in detail?” She licked her lips, her eyes going slightly hooded. “Something I’ve gotten off to from just the thought of it?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

Her eyes met mine, fierce and confident. “I’ve dreamed of you being inside me since I was old enough to know what sex was, Court Woods.”

My hips gave a small, involuntary thrust that made her gasp. “Fuck. Becca, I’m sorry—”

“No,” she cut me off, her fingers digging into my shoulders again. “Can you... can you do that again?”

Watching her carefully for any signs of discomfort, I gently withdrew an inch or so and then rocked back into her. The resulting moan she gave was throaty and made my dick even harder.

“We can stop,” I reminded her, even as my instincts were screaming at me to pound her into the mattress. There was some deep, primal part of me that was fucking thrilled I was her first. That I’d claimed what no one else could. No one else ever would.

Becca was finally mine. It was the way it was always supposed to be.

“Please don’t stop,” she murmured, lifting her hips. Her eyes went a little unfocused. “Oh, wow. That felt... nice.”

My lips curved. “I think we can do better than *nice*.”

She blinked, her gaze locking on mine. The amount of trust shining in her eyes was staggering. It made me feel invincible and unworthy all at once.

I leaned into her, capturing her lips with mine once again. They were soft and supple, this kiss dizzying in its power as she opened for me. Whether she realized it or not, her thighs parted more, allowing me more space to move. I pushed into her, bottoming out and swearing I saw stars.

She was perfect. *This* was perfect.

I reached between us, my fingers finding her sweet little clit, swollen and begging for my attention. I gently rubbed the side of it, and she tore her lips from mine with a ragged cry.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, her eyes screwing tight as her face contorted in pleasure.

But I wanted more. Needed to see the look in her eyes as I made her come again. Watching her shatter was my newest addiction. One I would feed as many times a day as she’d let me.

Going slow was a whole new form of torture. Every time I dragged my cock out of her cunt, her walls clamped down on me, tightening enough to make the edges of my vision blur. All I could do was grit my teeth and roll my hips into her, keeping my pace as gentle as possible.

“Court,” she finally whispered, her delicate hand coming up to touch my jaw.

I managed to grunt a response.

“I’m not going to break.” Her hazel eyes were glazed, her plump lips open as she sucked in a deep breath that made her perfect tits brush my chest. “I’ve waited eighteen years to be yours.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I murmured.

Her lips curled into a smile that made my pulse pound. “And I want you to fuck me like I’m yours.” She paused, eyeing me. “I am yours, right?” She wrapped her legs around my waist, arching into my touch.

My control snapped like a dry rubber band. I pulled out of her before thrusting back in, my fingers pinching her hot little clit. She jerked in my arms, writhing with the moan of a woman loving being fucked.

I lifted up a little, changing the angle, hitting her deeper. I smirked as her lashes fluttered, her throat exposed as she tossed her head back. The strands of dark brown and teal blue fanned out across the white sheets made her look angelic.

“You’re mine,” I reminded her with a growl, picking up my pace and setting a relentless rhythm as I let my inner caveman take over. “You’ve always been mine, sweetheart, and you always will be. Yesterday, today, and every single goddamn tomorrow for the rest of your life.”

She bobbed her head. “I’m yours. Harder, Court. *Please.*” She gave a pathetic little whimper that sent a shot of adrenaline down my spine and into my cock.

“Whatever you want, baby,” I vowed, pistoning my hips in and out of her. Changing my balance, I grabbed her leg and pulled it up, then sank in deeper yet. Her wet heat gripped me like a vise, fighting to keep me locked inside her.

She swore under her breath in frantic little pants, the wild look in her eyes letting me know she was close.

“Come on, baby. Come for me,” I demanded before kissing her again. I rubbed firm, tight circles over the swollen nub of her clit and felt the moment she exploded around me. I swallowed her cries in my kiss, pumping into her until I felt my own orgasm gather at the base of my spine and spurt out of my cock, painting her inner walls with my release.

When the last of my cum dripped from my cock, I dropped onto her, letting part of my weight hold her down as we both gasped for air. I nuzzled the side of her face and kissed the fluttering pulse point of her throat.

Her hands stroked down my back to my ass and squeezed. My hips gave a half-hearted jerk, and I felt a shudder ripple through her pussy. I kissed her shoulder next, then trailed kisses up the column of her neck until I found her mouth again.

“I’m never letting you go,” I whispered against her lips, hoping she knew how dead-ass serious I was.

She gave me a soft look. “Good. That’s all I ever wanted.”

In a minute I’d need to get up. Clean up the mess we’d made and tuck her into bed. But right now, I wasn’t moving. Even as my cock started to soften

in her, I refused to pull out. Refused to move an inch.

In this moment, I had everything I wanted. Everything I *needed*.

I'd finally tasted the girl next door. The girl I'd been obsessed with for as long as I could remember. Now she was mine.

And I didn't fucking share.

CHAPTER 27



BEX

S hafts of light streaming around the edges of the drawn curtains woke me. I opened my eyes slowly, blinking the room into focus as my brain came back online.

I was surrounded by hard, hot muscles.

I remembered Court grabbing a washcloth from the bathroom and gently, almost reverently, cleaning between my legs before tossing it aside and climbing back into bed with me. But what had happened next had shocked the hell out of me.

Court Woods was a cuddler.

He'd tugged me into his arms, my head winding up pillowed against the divot between his chest and shoulder. After he'd stroked my hair for less than a minute, I'd been out like a light.

And waking up now? I'd turned onto my side while I was sleeping, and he was spooning me from behind. He'd managed to stretch one arm under my pillow while the other arm was wrapped around me, his hand cupping my breast like he was protecting it from the world. He'd wedged a leg between mine, the heavy press of his morning erection nudging my ass.

I wondered if I could angle my hips a little so he'd slide back into me. My thighs and everything between them ached like I'd run a marathon, but I wanted more. I loved the feel of him inside me, owning my body.

The hand around my breast flexed, his fingers lazily rolling my pebbled nipple. "Morning." His voice was rough and sleepy.

The sense of rightness was like an anchor for my soul. I snuggled my back against his chest, a smile already tugging at my mouth. "Morning."

He let out a gruff sort of sigh and pressed an absentminded kiss to my

shoulder. “How’re you feeling?”

“Good,” I replied.

“How good?” His voice had a teasing thread that I’d missed for a long time.

I pushed my hips into his cock. “Could be better.”

“Right fucking answer, baby girl,” he practically growled, the hand on my breast giving a harder, more possessive squeeze. He plucked at my nipple and then slid the hand down my stomach until his fingers brushed my slit. I almost protested when they bypassed where I wanted them and kept going until he grabbed my leg. He picked it up and dragged it back over his thigh, spreading me open. Only then did his fingers find my center.

“Fuck,” he groaned, and sucked at the skin where my neck sloped to my shoulder. “Already so wet for me.”

I lost the ability to formulate a response as he slid two fingers into me with ease. In the quiet of the morning, all I heard were our breaths—his soft and steady, mine raw and ragged—and the sound of his fingers sinking into my soaking pussy.

“More,” I whispered, not above begging as I tried to roll onto my back.

Court didn’t budge, the length of his frame pressing against me and keeping me on my side as his fingers stroked in and out of me with unhurried thrusts. Occasionally he’d brush them over my clit, but never enough to get me off.

“Court,” I whined, desperate for more.

He made a soft humming sound, still pressing idle kisses across my jaw.

I reached down and grabbed his arm to try and make him move faster, harder. Something. I couldn’t even get my fingers to touch when I wrapped them around his wrist. And then he just stopped.

“Becca,” he warned.

Huffing, I couldn’t help myself. “Can’t you just—”

Suddenly he rolled us, him on top and me gaping up at him, wondering how this had happened. Damn him and his secret ninja sex moves.

Straddling my waist, he quickly grabbed my hands, transferring them into one of his and pinning them above my head. My back arched, boobs pushed up on display for him. Dipping his head, he took full advantage, sucking one into his mouth.

I tried to buck him off, but he was too heavy. My feet just slid against the soft sheets, unable to find purchase. When I kept squirming, he used his teeth,

biting my nipple until I squeaked and stilled.

Satisfied, he sat back and met my gaze. “Do you mind? I’m trying to enjoy my morning.”

“So am I,” I snarled, shaking my hair out of my eyes.

Making a soft *tsking* sound, he shook his head. “Come on, honey, I know for a goddamn fact how smart you are. I already told you—your body is *mine* now. I get to play with it however I want, whenever I want.”

I blinked. “Uh, I don’t remember *that* part of the agreement.”

“It was in the fine print,” he assured me, but his tone was amusingly dismissive.

“So I... what? Just lay back and take it?” I glared at him.

“Sometimes,” he replied with a shrug. “Right now, I want to enjoy driving my girl crazy, until she’s begging for release.”

Okay, no denying that a big part of me warmed when he said *my girl*.

“Tell you what,” he added, a wicked gleam in his dark eyes, “I’ll make you a deal. You tell me exactly what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

My pulse thundered as I contemplated his offer. I knew what I wanted, but did I have the lady balls to voice it? I could feel my face going red just thinking the words.

Judging by the growing grin on his face, he was loving my shyness.

I sucked in a deep breath. Fine. He wanted me to tell him exactly what I wanted, then game freaking on.

“I want you to turn me over and fuck me from behind while you finger my ass,” I told him, proud of myself when my voice didn’t wobble. I’d read a scene where a girl had a guy doing that, and she’d loved it. I’d never even attempted ass play, but whenever I read about anal, I knew it was something I wanted to try.

Of course the book girl was also being throat-fucked by another guy, but unless Court was down for inviting Rook or Bishop in to help complete *that* fantasy, I didn’t see it happening.

His jaw dropped open a bit. “You... What?”

Now *he* was the speechless one. Oh, I liked that. No wonder he liked making me blush so much.

“Was I not specific enough?” I asked innocently, batting my eyelashes.

His gaze sharpened as he let my wrists go. “Turn over.”

He didn’t give me much room to work with, but I managed to roll onto my stomach. He backed up enough to help pull my knees up so my ass was in

the air and on display.

The groan he let out made me feel like a sex goddess as he kissed one cheek and then the other. “I love this ass. Like a fucking ripe peach to match the way you taste. My fucking peaches,” he murmured. “One of these days, I’m going to fuck you here.”

“Yes,” I whispered, loving that plan. It seemed so primal, so base, to be taken that way, and I craved it with Court. I wanted him to take me every way he could. I *trusted* him to take care of me.

I heard the sharp crack of his hand hitting my ass half a second before it burned. I moaned into my pillow as he repeated the action, careful not to hit the same spot. He peppered a series of slaps across my ass, then dipped his fingers back inside of me.

“Like that?” he rasped, moving into position behind me. His fingers were replaced by the blunt tip of his crown, pressing against my entrance.

“Yes,” I sighed, feeling like I could melt into the mattress. I gasped as he pushed inside of me, this angle making him sink deeper. The sense of fullness nearly overwhelmed me.

I was about to beg him to move when I felt his fingers probe at my tight ring of muscle. He spit against the rosette of my ass, and the contact of the hot liquid made me jerk. It was dirty and amazing. Using my own arousal and his saliva as a lubricant, he slowly worked a finger into my ass. A whole different set of nerve endings lit up.

“Fuck me, your ass is so goddamn tight,” he muttered, rolling his hips into me as his finger thrust in and out of my back hole, slowly stretching me open. “Let me in, Becca.”

I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut against the onslaught of sensations. It was almost too much. My toes curled, the arches of my feet cramping. “Oh, God, yes. Like that.”

He added a second finger to my ass, and I wasn’t sure I could handle a third. It felt so good. So freaking right.

“Court, please.” I didn’t even know what I was asking for.

“I’ve got you, baby girl,” he said, his free hand going to my hip and holding me as he increased his tempo. His hips pistoned against me, his balls slapping my pussy with each thrust, hitting my g-spot and making my core spasm

Breathing became a struggle as my entire being devolved into pleasure. It wasn’t quite enough, though. I wiggled a hand between myself and the

mattress until I was able to rub my clit.

Court gave a groan. “Fuck, yes, baby. Touch yourself. Come for me, sweetheart.” He managed to add a third finger, his cock hitting me just right as I frantically rubbed the bundle of nerves between my legs.

The orgasm barreled into me like a freight train, decimating me. My legs gave out, and only Court’s strong hold on my hip kept me from collapsing. My hips jerked erratically as I came hard enough to see little sparkles of light dance across my vision.

“Shit, yes,” Court hissed, his grip on my hip turning bruising as his cock surged inside me with his release. When he finished, he let me fall onto the bed, awkwardly splaying out with my head to one side. I puffed out a breath to dislodge strands of hair from my eyes.

“Holy shit, baby,” he panted, dropping onto his back beside me, his chest heaving. He turned and looked at me, awe in his eyes. “Where the fuck did that come from?”

I lowered my gaze, suddenly bashful once more. “Uh, just something I read in a book.”

“Remind me to buy you a gift card to the bookstore,” he told me. “Fuck it. I’ll just give you my credit card. Get whatever you want.”

“You didn’t think it was... weird?” I’d always hidden the covers I bought on my e-reader by keeping the books organized by list, and the majority of the books on my shelves had discreet covers.

“Fuck no,” he retorted, turning to look at me. He reached over and tucked some hair over my shoulder as he rolled to his side and kissed me. “If you’d asked me to dress up in a chicken costume and spank you with a drumstick from KFC, *that* might’ve been weird.”

I cackled at the image.

“But I still would’ve done it,” he finished. “Fuck, Becca, I’d do anything for you. I...”

My heart skipped a beat. “You what?”

He looked away before muttering something that sounded a lot like, “Fuck it.” He focused his intense gaze on me, his hand cupping the back of my head. “I love you, Becca.”

I gasped audibly. “You what?”

He shook his head, his lips set in a stubborn line. “Don’t tell me it’s too soon or I’ll change my mind—I’ve been in love with you for months, Becca. Maybe my whole goddamn life. I spent too much time being a little bitch and

trying to stay away from you because I thought it was what was best for you.”

“And now?” I watched him closely.

“I’m done fighting this. Us. Call it destiny or fate or dumb fucking luck, but you were always meant to be with me,” he replied, his fingers tangling in my hair.

“Court...” I didn’t know what to say to that. What to do. My gut told me to throw myself into his arms and declare I loved him, too, because I did.

But admitting that would give him even more power over me, and my brain wasn’t ready to make the leap my heart was. I’d been hurt by this man too many times to blindly jump and expect him to catch me.

“Don’t say it,” he murmured, like he sensed my hesitation. “I haven’t earned it yet.”

He leaned in and kissed me. “But I will.”

CHAPTER 28



BEX

I leaned my head against the edge of the claw-foot bathtub, hot water soaking away the aches from the night before. Okay, and from the morning too. Grinning to myself, I sank deeper into the water, letting my chin brush the surface as the bathroom door opened.

Court eyed me in the tub, where I was submerged under several thick inches of bubbles. When he'd offered to run me a bath, I hadn't known it would have bubbles. Or that Court had no idea what a proper water-to-bubbles ratio was. Still, he'd left me in bed and turned on the water before coming to get me and depositing me in the bath with strict instructions to relax.

A girl could get used to this.

Except for the scowl on his gorgeous face, everything was awesome.

"What's wrong?" I asked, sitting up. The bubbles clung to my skin, blocking my breasts from view.

"Nothing," he muttered, placing a stack of folded clothes on the counter. He turned back to me, forcing a smile that didn't smooth away the frown lines on his brow.

"Court," I warned, lifting an arm to lean on the side of the tub. "Please don't lie to me."

He sighed. "Your phone keeps ringing."

I frowned. "You want me to put it on silent?"

"It's Eric," he spat, like the man's name alone was poison in his mouth.

"Oh." I sat up straighter. In my little blissed-out bubble of the last twelve hours, I'd forgotten that I was kinda, sorta in hiding from a guy who was kinda, sorta my boyfriend. Well, in *his* mind. "I guess... I mean, should I talk

to him?”

“Fuck no,” he retorted. “I never want you speaking to that prick again. And, if things go my way, he and the rest of his sick-fuck friends will be dead in a week.”

I winced, because I knew he wasn't kidding. For some guys—hell, most guys—a death threat would just be annoying male posturing. For Court? It wasn't an idle threat.

Huh. I'd never really considered the fact that the guy I'd fallen for had killed people.

I let that thought tumble over and over in my head.

Oddly enough, I couldn't bring myself to care. Maybe because I knew he only killed people who deserved it. I didn't think that would hold up as an excuse with the police, but as long as he wasn't caught...

Yeah, I could live with that.

Court leaned against the counter, crossing his legs at the ankles. He still hadn't put on a shirt, which was totally fine in my book. I wasn't sure I'd ever get tired of looking at that tan skin stretched over hard muscles. I had the urge to lick every divot I saw, mapping his skin with my mouth to learn all its secrets.

He had put on a pair of pants; however, they were gray sweatpants—AKA God's gift to womankind—and they barely stayed up on his narrow hips. When he leaned back on the counter, the material clung to the curve of his long cock. It was a thing I wanted to see again and again.

“My eyes are up here, gorgeous,” he teased.

I didn't lift my gaze, watching in fascination as his dick went from soft to half-hard before my eyes. “I'm well aware of where your eyes are.”

Chuckling, he pushed off the counter and sauntered to me with some major big-dick energy. He paused beside me, and I had to tilt my head all the way back to see him until he sank onto the edge of the bathtub. Without invitation, he dipped his hand under the bubbles and cupped my right breast, giving it a firm squeeze.

I moaned, my lashes fluttering as I felt the correlating pulse of need in my clit.

“I need to ask you a question,” he said, slowly pulling away.

It took a second to focus my attention back on him. I already missed his touch. But something in his tone leached the arousal from my system. “Okay.”

His expression was carefully schooled into blankness. “How would you feel if we left Paris tonight?”

“What?” I frowned, not sure I’d heard him correctly.

Sighing, he slid off the edge of the tub and sat on the floor so we were at eye level. “I talked to Rook and Bishop,” he started, his tone low and serious, “and they agreed they could handle things until Royal could get here. He could take my place, and we could leave. Get you out of here before the auction.”

“You’re really that worried?” I watched him closely.

Concern wrinkled his brow before he got it in check. “I really think I don’t want you anywhere near this shit when it goes down. We can leave, go back home to California—”

“I can’t go back right now,” I interrupted him, but made sure to keep my tone gentle. I lifted a hand, sloshing water and bubbles as I reached for his fingers. “Why are you saying this now? What’s changed since yesterday?”

He shot me an incredulous look. “Everything has changed, Becca.”

“Because we had sex?” I couldn’t help but glance down at my body.

His cheeks flushed just a smidge. “That was more than sex, baby. You’re mine.”

“Right,” I said slowly, still not getting it.

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not about to let you put yourself in danger.”

“Whoa.” I pulled my hand back and leaned away from him. “I’m sorry—did you say you aren’t going to *let me*?”

He shook his head, almost like he was annoyed. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t think I do,” I replied. “Court, last night was amazing, and I love where this could be going, but I’m not going to stay home and just wait in bed for you every day.”

“I didn’t ask you to. I’m not sending you away—I’m going with you,” he pointed out. “We’ll be together.”

“And you’re cool with leaving your brothers here?” I spluttered.

His jaw tightened. “It’s not ideal, but you’re more important.”

“Court, my mom is here. My grandparents are here. Hell, my cousin is dating Eric’s brother,” I said, my panic rising as it sank in just how fully entrenched in this world I was. Even if I wanted to run, I couldn’t leave my family at risk while Eric was loose.

He frowned. “We can—”

“Take them with us?” My laugh was slightly hysterical.

“Well, no.” He grimaced, his frustration becoming clear. “Becca, *you* are my priority.”

“And I lov—” I cut myself off. “I *appreciate* that, but we can’t run away from our problems, Court.”

“Fine. Then you leave, and I’ll stay. I’ll handle Eric and the auction and my dad,” he reasoned, like that was an answer. “You can stay with Ryan and Maddie for the time being.”

“No. *Hell* no,” I retorted. “I’m not leaving my family or you.”

“Becca—”

“I said no,” I snapped, standing up and grabbing the towel waiting for me. I used my foot to lift the stopper, and the water started to drain.

Court watched me rise and offered me a hand to step out of the massive tub. I held on to him only long enough to not slip and fall and break my neck. I tried pulling away, but he didn’t let go.

Standing up, he drew me against his chest. “I don’t want to fight, sweetheart. I just want you safe.”

I melted a little, looking at our reflection in the mirror. “I know you do, but I can’t leave. And if I can help, I want to. Please don’t make me choose between you and helping them.”

He sighed, the sound reluctant. “I won’t. But I don’t like it.”

I turned and looped my arms around his neck. “I know this is all new, but we’ll figure it out. I promise I won’t take any unnecessary risks, okay? And I’ll stay back and let you and the guys do your thing. I just need to be here in case my family needs me.”

Nodding, he gave me a soft kiss. “Fine. I’ll try not to be an overbearing ass.”

“Look at that,” I mused with a laugh. “He *can* be taught.”

Court rolled his eyes and swatted my ass. “Get dressed. I have food waiting for you in the living room.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I chirped with a mock salute.

His gaze heated. “Smart ass.”

“You can spank the insubordination out of me later,” I teased with a wink.

His look went from amused to hungry in half a second. “I fucking plan to.” The slight growl in his words made my belly swoop. He kissed me hard, his tongue sliding into my mouth and dominating mine until I was breathless

and achy for more.

“Court—”

A banging on the bedroom door had us both turning.

“You two need to get out here,” Rook called, his voice all business.

I exchanged looks with Court and quickly finished drying off before tugging on my bra and a shirt. I searched for my panties under the leggings he’d brought. “Where’s my underwear?”

“Gone,” he replied with a shrug. “You don’t need them.”

“What? Yes, I do,” I insisted, but I was already rolling the leggings up. Luckily I’d pulled my hair into a messy bun for my bath, so other than a few damp pieces clinging to my neck, it was dry.

“You really don’t,” he replied, following me out of the bathroom and through the bedroom. I yanked open the door to see Rook waiting with a worried look.

“What?” Court asked for both of us, his hands landing on my hips. I leaned against his chest without thinking, absorbing his heat and strength into myself.

A sad smile played at the corners of Rook’s mouth before he looked at Court. “I’m happy for you guys.”

“But not everyone will be,” Bishop called from his seat on the couch. He turned, holding up my phone. It was ringing, Eric’s name showing as the caller. “Fifth time he’s called. I think he’s having separation anxiety.”

I frowned. I’d texted him yesterday with the story that we’d worked out—me being back in California to straighten out my graduation status—and I’d pretty much ignored my phone after that. Why would Eric be blowing up my phone?

“Maybe something’s wrong with Cami?” I wondered, glancing back at Court.

“Your mom or grandparents would’ve called,” he pointed out, shaking his head.

“Okay, maybe something’s wrong with Alex, and Eric can’t get ahold of Cami?” I tried. My brow furrowed as I tried to work out the urgency.

“Dude, it’s almost two in the morning in California,” Bishop wondered aloud. “Why is he calling now?”

“He’s *been* calling, like, every hour. Now he’s upped it to every minute.” Rook’s lips twisted to the side.

“You said he only called five times.” I gaped at Bishop.

He shrugged. "He's only called five times *this* hour."

That made zero sense unless someone was dead. "But—"

Court snarled a little. "He's fucking obsessed with you, princess."

"I've barely known him a week," I argued, utterly mystified.

"Not sure that matters to guys like him," Rook murmured, rubbing the back of his neck.

I bit my lower lip. "I should answer it."

"The fuck you should," Court spat.

"I kinda agree with Bex," Bishop offered.

Court turned his annoyance to his brother. "You would."

"What the hell does *that* mean?" Bishop demanded, his normal easygoing nature dissipating.

"Enough," Rook snapped, shutting them both down. He looked at me, his expression softening. "I think you should talk to him. The last thing we need is him spooking and calling off the auction. This is the closest we've been in months."

Court made a sound behind me, but Rook shook his head. "It's just a phone call, bro. She's not going to his house. Bex can handle a phone call."

"I can," I confirmed, turning to look at Court.

He stared down at me, clearly unhappy, but he eventually nodded just as my phone stopped ringing. After a beat, it started again. I pulled away from Court and took the phone from Bishop, then swiped my thumb across the screen to answer.

"Hey!" I forced a bright, cheery tone. "What's—"

"Where the fuck have you been?" Eric's voice was a dangerous snarl that took me aback.

I'd *never* heard him sound so furious. Something in my expression must've given away my shock because Court was right in front of me a second later, his face concerned while his eyes flashed fire.

"Uh, I've been busy," I said slowly. "Is everything okay?"

Eric made a huffing sound. "I was worried when I didn't hear from you."

"I was with my friends," I hedged, backing up to sit on the arm of the sofa. Court followed me, mirroring each step and standing between my legs. He casually linked our fingers, and the show of support helped steady my nerves.

"When will you be back in Paris?" he demanded.

"I'll be back for my grandmother's birthday," I replied, keeping my tone

even and calm.

Eric sucked in a sharp breath. “No, that won’t do. I need to see you before then. Where are you in California? I’ll get on my company plane within the hour. I can be there in twelve hours.”

My jaw dropped. “You... you want to come to California?” I shot Court a wild look.

His brows shot up and he shook his head vehemently.

“Eric, that’s really sweet—” I struggled to find the right words.

“I miss you.” He made it sound so simple, and if he was anyone other than a human trafficking psycho, it might’ve been sweet. “I’ll be there by... tomorrow morning your time. We can grab breakfast.”

“No!” I shouted. “You can’t.”

“Why not?” His voice had taken on an icy tone that sent shivers up and down my spine.

I pushed out a broken laugh. “Well, because I’m coming home in a few hours.” I couldn’t look at Court as I said it, but I could feel the frustrated rage coming off him in waves.

“You are?” Eric didn’t sound convinced.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” I improvised, sounding disappointed. “It didn’t take long to wrap things up here. I just needed to sign a few forms in person and meet with the dean. I already have a flight booked for first thing in the morning. I’ll be back in Paris by the evening.”

“What time? I’ll get you from the airport.” He made it sound like a foregone conclusion instead of an offer.

“Oh, no,” I insisted. “Our driver will pick me up.”

“No, I insis—”

“How about we plan on a late dinner?” I suggested, railroading through his protest. “Say eight o’clock? Think you can grab us a table at Aubergine again?” At least the restaurant was close to the hotel, which meant the guys would be nearby.

Court squeezed my fingers to the point of pain, but I refused to look at him. I knew he wouldn’t be on board, and I’d deal with the fallout of his wrath after I hung up.

“Of course,” Eric replied, sounding more in control. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“Great,” I said, trying to tug away from Court, but he wasn’t letting go.

“Oh, and Bex?” Eric began, his tone softer.

“Hmm?”

He paused. “Don’t ignore my calls again, love.” There was a frosty note of warning in his tone that made my blood run cold. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” I mumbled, still a little in shock as I hung up the phone. I lifted my eyes, dragging them up Court’s body until I met his very pissed-off gaze.

“What. The. *Fuck?*” he demanded.

CHAPTER 29



BEX

Court was pissed, and I couldn't blame him. I'd unilaterally made a decision that affected us all, but if anyone should understand that, it should be him. How many choices had he made for the both of us?

I winced inwardly because, shit, I didn't want our relationship to be some kind of tit-for-tat game where we were constantly getting back at each other. We had to be better than that.

"I'm sorry," I told him, meaning it.

His nostrils flared, still pissed, but willing to hear me out. I noticed Rook backing away and joining Bishop on the sofa.

"I should have talked to all of you before making that decision with Eric," I added. I reached for Court, not sure if he would take a step back. But he stayed still, letting my hands slide up the hard planes of his chest and loop around behind his neck. His hands went to my hips and pulled my body flush to his.

"I don't want you anywhere near him," Court hissed. "He's fucking unhinged, Becca."

"I know," I agreed with a nod. "But what else was I supposed to do? He was going to fly out to California. It would've blown everything up."

His lashes fluttered shut, his jaw tight. "I get that but... fuck." He looked over my shoulder at his brothers. "What are our options?"

"I know you hate it, but she made the right call," Bishop said, uncharacteristically serious. Concern creased his forehead, but the set of his mouth was all business. "The only other option was getting Bex's ass on a plane within the next hour, which is doable, but then it puts her a continent and an ocean away from us."

“I could go with her,” Court argued. I stayed quiet, letting them work this out between themselves, because Court needed that.

Rook grimaced. “I mean, you could. But our best chance at getting Eric is here in Paris at the auction. I heard from my guy this morning. He’s part of an international task force that’s been working this same organization from another angle. He thinks he can get his team to play nice with us.”

“Play nice?” I echoed.

Bishop tossed me a grin. “Phoenix isn’t exactly a by-the-book legal enterprise, Bex. We bend, and sometimes outright break, laws to get what we need to do done. Ultimately we’ve operated under the idea that what we do is more important than bureaucratic bullshit, and even though there are plans in place to make it legal in some ways, we’ll never stop doing what we need to in order to protect the people who need it.”

“That being said, it doesn’t mean we can’t work with international organizations,” Rook pointed out. “They have funding and resources that we don’t always have access to, and most governments get what we’re doing. They can’t outright condone us, but they also aren’t looking to stop us either.”

“Huh.” I looked up at Court. “That’s why you’re becoming a lawyer.”

He nodded. “Specializing in international law will help us on a global level. When we decided to set up Phoenix, it wasn’t on a whim. We did our research, and we all have roles to play. It’s just a crazy time right now, because the main people we need to eliminate first are related to us.”

“Beckett and Gary falling were the first dominoes,” Rook said. “The General will be the next, and after him, we can go for the one we want the most—Westford. He’s the head of the snake.”

Linc’s dad. I’d met him only a handful of times growing up, but he’d always seemed so *normal*. He was the dad who actually wore jeans and a t-shirt. He’d played baseball with the guys when they were little. When all of our families had gone on vacations together, he’d snuck me cookies.

Finding out Kent Westford was at the epicenter of this whole nightmare had been almost as shocking as learning my dad also played a part.

“And that’s it?” I asked.

Court let out a humorless laugh. “Hardly. Someone will take his place, the same way someone will take over Black Box Ops when our dad is gone. There’s always going to be another asshole looking to take over the fucking world. It’ll never end, baby. But that doesn’t mean we don’t fight it with

everything we've got."

The note of fire in his voice stirred something in my chest. They were so passionate about what they were doing. So driven. It made me want to do the same thing, to be better. I wanted to help.

And maybe I could. I could be the link to Eric that set everything in motion.

Court looked at his older brother. "He's coming today?"

Rook nodded. "He'll be here—" A knock at the door cut him off. Grinning, Rook pushed off the couch and went to answer it, checking through the peephole to make sure who it was before yanking it open. "Hey, man."

The guy on the other side of the door was huge, like every other guy in the room, with a full beard, tanned skin, and a full sleeve of black and gray tattoos on his left arm. He looked utterly relaxed in khaki cargo pants and a tight black shirt that showed off an impressive amount of muscle. But it was the furry companion at his feet that made me smile.

"Trick," Rook greeted, extending an arm. They did that patented guy half-hug, half-back slap thing, then Rook turned to the gorgeous dog sitting patiently at his friend's side. He crouched down. "Hey, Wanda."

Wanda looked up at Trick with soulful brown eyes, waiting for Trick to give her a nod before getting up and butting her head against Rook's chest. Her thick brown-and-black tail wagged furiously.

Bishop stood up, extending a hand. "Good to see you again, man."

"You too." Trick glanced at us, smiling. "Hey, Court."

Court nodded. "Trick. Glad you're here."

Trick's gaze landed on me and lit up. "I don't think we've met."

"I'm Bex," I said, leaning over to extend my hand as far as I could while Court looped a possessive arm around my waist and pulled me back to his side.

"My girlfriend," Court added, eyeing where Trick and I had clasped hands to shake like normal humans.

I gaped up at him. We were throwing around labels now?

Trick didn't seem phased. "Dude, congrats." He looked at me. "Good luck, sweetie. If he fucks up, let me know. I'll kick his ass for ya."

Court scoffed. "Yeah right. Last time I checked, I kicked *your* ass."

"I'd also downed half a bottle of tequila," Trick retorted. "Sober me would end you. Tell him, Rook."

Rook stood up. He eyed his friend and then his brother before shrugging.

“Honestly, you’re pretty well matched. Trick’s faster, but Court plays dirty.”

Trick looked a little bummed by that. He looked down at the dog nudging his hand as she sat patiently. “You know I’d kick his sorry ass, don’t you, girl?” He scratched behind her ears.

“So this is the infamous Wanda?” Bishop started to reach over to pet her.

Wanda spun faster than my eyes could track. Her ears flattened to her head, her lips pulling back in a snarl as she let out a growl.

Bishop froze, eyes wide. “Uh...”

Trick settled a hand on her head. “Down, girl.”

Instantly the dog relaxed, her tongue lolling out. She gave a small thump of her tail as she looked at Bishop almost like she was apologizing.

“I’m good,” Bishop muttered, stepping backward and sitting back down.

Trick chuckled, the sound low and warm. “She’s a working dog, bro. You can’t just approach her like a damn Labrador the first time you meet her.” He looked at Court and grinned. “She could kick your ass.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Court replied with a smile.

“She’s beautiful,” I remarked. “She’s a German shepherd?”

“Belgian Malinois,” Trick corrected, rubbing her black muzzle. She leaned against his side.

“She’s yours?” I asked.

“Technically she belongs to the Navy,” he answered with a rueful smile. “But yeah, she’s mine.”

“Trick found Wanda when we were on a mission in Europe,” Rook jumped in. “She was this half-starved little thing that he had a soft spot for. He spent three weeks sneaking her rations and shit.”

“Yeah, that was the best decision I ever made,” Trick said. “She saved all our asses.”

“She did?” I glanced at the dog, who looked utterly content beside Trick.

“Wanda.” Trick spoke her name, and she stood with a slow swish of her tail. He pointed at me. “Greet.”

The dog turned from him and wound her way through the furniture until she was in front of me. She sniffed my hand, then nudged it with her cold, wet nose.

I smiled and looked at Trick. “Can I...”

He gave me a nod, and I pet the top of her head. Her fur was soft as velvet, and when I rubbed her ear, she gave a loud groan and pressed her head into my hand. I couldn’t help but smile.

“We were finishing up our mission and getting ready to roll out,” Trick told me. “I was saying goodbye to her, and she fucking attacked me.”

I froze mid-ear rub. “She did what now?”

“Bit the shit out of my arm.” Trick grinned and laughed. “Rook and Ford were pulling her off me when all of a sudden, she lets go and hauls ass to our teammate, Cooper. Coop’s trying to load our gear into the Humvee so we can leave, but Wanda knocks his ass down next.

“It wasn’t until Cooper was lying in the dirt that he saw the explosive device someone had strapped under the truck,” Rook finished. “She fucking knew it would kill us the second we started the damn engine.”

“I brought her back with me, and we all pushed to have her trained as an official bomb dog in an ATF-sponsored program they were doing alongside the Navy,” Trick went on. “She tested off the fucking charts, but unless I was around, she didn’t seem to give a shit about working.”

“Trainers finally agreed to let Trick become her handler. She’s been with him ever since. That was three years ago. Wanda’s family,” Rook said.

I rubbed the top of her head, loving how she leaned against my legs. “Why’d you name her Wanda?”

Trick grinned, looking boyish. “Because the Avengers are the shit, and Scarlet Witch is a fucking badass. Duh.”

I laughed, shaking my head as I kept petting her.

“Guess we should talk this shit out,” Rook finally started.

Trick nodded and snapped his fingers. “Wanda, place.”

The dog got up and trotted to the door, then lay down against it, her head resting on her paws. She huffed out a big breath and closed her eyes, but I had a feeling one wrong move, and she’d be ready to rip my throat out.

“I only have an hour,” Trick said. “So we need to get this going. I’ll debrief my team.”

“They’re good with us joining the party?” Bishop looked skeptical.

“They’re accepting that you’ll crash the party,” he amended, sitting in the chair across from the sofa. Resting his forearms on his knees, he leaned forward. “We’re all on the same side, but you know the drill—shit goes sideways, and they’ll deny ever agreeing to a partnership. You’ll be on your own.”

“We won’t fail,” Rook told him, all business as he sat on the couch. He grabbed a file from the coffee table and passed it to Trick.

Trick opened it and flipped through the papers. “How sure are you on the

auction date? Our source still hasn't confirmed it."

Rook's gaze flicked to me. "We're sure. Bex actually knows someone attending."

Trick looked up, surprised. "You do?"

I nodded. "I was sorta dating a guy who's organizing it." I cringed.

He blinked at me. "I have questions."

Court squeezed my hip. "Let's sit down," he murmured to me. He guided me into the other armchair across from Bishop and Rook, then stayed standing at one side, like my own personal bodyguard.

"Bex got tangled up with Eric Lambert-Durand," Rook explained.

"As in Lambert-Singh?" Trick's gaze latched on to me. This close I could see that his eyes were a gorgeous shade of dark blue that lightened to a pale gray around the pupil.

"Uh, yes?" I wasn't sure who Singh was.

"Lambert-Singh is the name of Eric's shipping company," Bishop told me. "Lambert was his mother's maiden name. She inherited the company from her father, Colton Lambert. His partner was Mikhail Singh, but Singh sold off his shares to Lambert when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's while Eric was an infant."

I nodded, trying to keep track. I was going to need a flow chart. Or one of those murder mystery boards with the red string connecting people and places together.

"How the hell did you meet him?" Trick asked.

"Blind date," I replied with a sigh. "His brother, Alex, is my cousin's boyfriend. Cami, my cousin, set us up."

"Well that's some shit luck," he muttered with a shake of his head.

"You have no idea," Court added, his tone dark.

Bishop grimaced. "Yeah, Eric's recently turned into a full-blown Bex stalker."

"And why exactly did he volunteer the auction info?" Trick looked at me.

I shifted in my seat, my stomach doing little flips from anxiety. "I, uh, might've let him think I know more than I actually do."

"She mentioned knowing Dad," Rook clarified. "She also name-dropped Westford and let it slip that her dad also loops her in on this shit."

Trick studied me for a beat, then snapped his fingers. "You're Malcolm Whittier's kid. Rebecca."

I nodded, my heart sinking. "You know my dad?"

Trick started to give me a look like *duh* but then seemed to catch sight of Court behind me and schooled his expression into something unreadable before nodding. “Yeah.” He glanced at Rook, almost like he was silently asking a question.

Rook gave the smallest shake of his head, and the lines around Trick’s mouth tightened for a beat. I wanted to ask what I was missing, but Trick swallowed his reaction and started asking me more questions. “You’re still in contact with Eric?”

I nodded, unable to brush aside the uneasy feeling. As if sensing my distress, Court sat on the plush arm of the chair, his hand coming around to cup the back of my neck. I leaned into his touch, soaking it up.

“Eric has made it abundantly clear that he’s interested in Bex,” Rook added, concern in his eyes. “Unfortunately, Bex is tied to this shit until we can neutralize it.”

“Knowing *when* the auction is going to be helps a fuckton,” Trick said. “Any idea of a location?”

I shook my head. “No. But I’m seeing Eric again tomorrow.”

Court’s hand tightened on my neck.

Trick looked at Court in surprise. “You’re cool with that?”

“Not even a little,” Court bit off. He relaxed his hold. “But Becca can make her own choices, and I’m going to support her.”

“I can try to press Eric for more details,” I offered, wanting to be useful.

Court swore under his breath. “Becca—”

“Only if it comes up naturally,” Trick cut him off. “We have a couple ideas of the location, but nothing solid. Worst-case scenario, we’ll split our resources.”

“That sounds dangerous,” I said softly.

“It’s not ideal,” he replied, inclining his head. “But we’ll do what we have to. Is it just the three of you?”

Rook straightened. “Knight’s out of commission for a bit, but Royal can be here if we need extra manpower.”

“Ryan, Linc, and Ash said the same thing,” Court added.

I turned to him. “They’re coming to Paris?”

His gaze dropped to me, softening. “If we need them. Yeah.”

“Honestly, it might help to have them close.” Trick rubbed the back of his neck. “We’re being careful, but our team isn’t big.”

“How many?” Rook demanded.

“Six,” Trick admitted. “Seven if you count Wanda. We can call in Paris police to assist after the fact, but not leading up.”

“Leaks?” Bishop’s stare was hard.

Trick nodded. “Up to and in the Ministry of the Interior. In fact, there are a few upper officials that would be huge if we can get to them at the auction.”

“That’s why you kept it small,” Rook mused, rubbing his jaw.

Trick’s expression went arctic. “You and I both know your team is only as good as the men you can trust.”

Rook’s entire body went rigid, his eyes flashing in a way that made me want to hide under a chair. “Yeah. We both learned that fucking lesson, brother.”

“Then you know why we kept it at six men. Made sure we were all vetted and tested,” Trick added.

Wanda lifted her head, looking at Trick.

That broke the tension holding Trick’s body tight. His shoulders relaxed as he looked fondly at the dog. “Say the word V-E-T and she gets nervous. Not a fan of needles. It’s okay, girl.” He glanced at the rest of us. “I should get going. We have a team meeting tonight.”

He stood, as did the rest of us. Wanda yawned and pushed herself into a sitting position.

“Thanks for stopping by,” Rook said, shaking Trick’s hand again.

“Anytime, man.” Trick nodded at Court and Bishop before giving me a kind smile. “I guess I’ll see you around, Bex. Stay safe, okay?”

“Will do,” I replied with a smile that felt forced. Standing in the middle of these four guys—three of them trained by the military to do things I’d never be able to comprehend and one who owned my damn heart—I was struck by how out of place I was in their world.

As we watched Trick leave with Wanda, I wondered how I could ever fit into this world. How I could make a difference the way they were.

CHAPTER 30



COURT

After the night I'd spent with Becca, it was hard returning my attention back to the reason I was in Paris, but there was shit that needed to be done. After a lengthy phone call with the guys and my brothers to bring everyone up to speed, we split up.

Rook and Bishop each had their own leads to follow, and while I could've been doing the same thing, I decided instead to focus on my girl.

Fuck. The grin that thinking of her gave me was undeniable.

Pushing back from the laptop in front of me, I turned to see Becca still curled up in a corner of the sofa, her Kindle on her lap. Her brows were pulled low and she was chewing on her thumbnail. At some point she'd dragged the fluffy blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped it around herself. She'd snagged one of my old football hoodies earlier, and the overall look was fucking adorable.

She gave a tiny little gasp, her hazel eyes going wide. Her dark hair was still in a messy bun, the streaks of teal shooting through it not as vibrant as they'd been a few months earlier.

"Good book?" I asked.

She didn't look up, utterly entranced by whatever she was reading.

"Becca," I tried again.

After a beat she gave a half-hearted hum of acknowledgement.

I stood up. "Are you about done?"

"Mmm," was the only response.

I scratched my stomach, watching her with amusement. "Do you need anything?"

"Okay," she agreed, still not looking up.

That wasn't an answer to my question, so I tried something else. "I think I'm going to go jerk off in the shower."

"Sure."

"Then I might hit up a sex club and let someone peg me," I added.

She flicked her fingers in my direction. "Whatever you want."

Chuckling, I shook my head and ambled over to stand in front of her. "Becca?"

"Yeah?"

I reached down and gently tugged on a corner of the device.

Her head snapped up, eyes flashing with warning. "Don't touch the Kindle. Don't *ever* touch the Kindle."

I froze, my thumb and middle finger still holding the corner. "Uh."

Her eyes narrowed, her tiny nose twitching. "There are two things in a girl's life you don't touch without permission—her body and her book."

My brows lifted. "Noted. But what if I'm trying to get my girlfriend's attention when she's reading?"

She gave me a smirk. "Then you need to match or beat the energy of her book."

"What're you reading?"

The barest hint of a blush creeping across her soft cheeks gave me all the info I needed. I gave another yank, pulling the Kindle away.

"Court!" She tried to scramble off the couch but got tangled in the blanket. She fell back with an outraged squeak.

I looked down at the screen, only able to catch a glimpse before she lunged and grabbed the reader back. But I definitely saw the words *dripping*, *pussy*, and *cocks*.

Hold up.

"Baby, did that book say *cocks*? As in two?" I shot her an incredulous look as she cradled the Kindle to her chest like a kitten.

"Yes, cocks," she retorted, lifting her chin even as crimson spread to her ears. "But there are *three* cocks, if you must know."

"Okay, yeah," I said. "Now I *must* know."

She sighed. "It's reverse harem omegaverse."

I blinked. "I know what those words mean separately, but I'm not sure about throwing them all together."

She turned off the screen and set her Kindle aside before glaring at me, hands on her hips. "Reverse harem."

“Okay,” I said slowly.

“One girl. Multiple guys.”

“And you’re into that?” I’m not sure if this conversation was turning me on or concerning me.

“In fantasy? Sure. In real life, it sounds like a freaking nightmare,” she replied, making a face. “I mean, we’ve been together for less than twenty-four hours, and I already know that you’re more than enough for me to handle. I’d go nuts if I had to juggle the needs, wants, and moods of three guys.”

“Right. And what’s the other thing? Omegas and verse? Is that, like, poetry?”

Her gaze darted away. “Uh, no. One word, actually. Omegaverse. It’s a type of... fantasy.”

“Unless you have a secret hobbit fetish I missed,” I started, a grin spreading across my face as she kept her gaze averted, “I’m guessing it’s not the kind of fantasy Tolkien wrote.”

She cleared her throat loudly. “Was there something you needed? Or did you just want to give me shit for my choice in books?”

I stepped into her space, following her as she walked backward until her ass hit the closed door of our bedroom. Then I caged her with my arms and leaned in to bury my face against her neck. A delicious shiver rippled through her.

“Rook and Bishop are gone for a few hours,” I murmured, lightly kissing under her jaw.

Her breath caught. “Uh huh.” Her small hands came up to clutch the hem of my shirt.

I drew back to look her in the eye. “So I thought I’d let you pick.”

Her gaze dropped to my lips. “Pick what?” she asked in a breathy tone that made my cock harden.

“Where I fuck you,” I answered, kissing one cheek. “*How* I fuck you.” I kissed the other cheek, then I pressed my mouth to hers. Her lips parted instantly, a surge of triumph hitting my veins like a bolt of electricity.

I kept my weight off her, my hands pressed to the door on either side of her head, as I devoured her mouth. My tongue stroked hers into submission before I turned the kiss softer, sweeter. I dragged the kiss out, sensing her impatience grow.

With an annoyed little huff, she wrapped her arms around my neck and

tried to pull my body against hers. When I didn't budge, she arched her back, brushing those full tits against my chest.

"Court..." She whimpered my name as I kissed her jaw and as much of her neck as the damn oversized hoodie gave me access to.

"Yeah?" I mumbled against her throat.

"Can— I want—" She kept cutting herself off, and I wasn't sure if she was too shy to admit what she wanted, or if she was just as affected by my body as I was hers.

"Tell me." I tried to cajole the answer from her, needing to hear her pretty mouth say dirty things.

"Me on top," she blurted out, cheeks now stained bright red. "But first— First, I want—"

I cupped her face with my hand, keeping her eyes focused on mine. "Whatever you want, baby."

She sucked in a breath, and I could see her rallying the courage to tell me. "I want to taste you first. I mean, can I?"

I thumbed her bottom lip, my dick ready to punch through my sweats. "Princess, you never need permission to suck my cock. Let's just make that a rule, deal?"

Eyes bright, she smiled and nodded. "I think I like that deal, as long as turnabout's fair play."

I snorted a laugh, and my hand left her face to slip between us and cup her pussy. "Fuck, yes. I can't wait to wake you up with my tongue between your legs."

She rocked her hips, pressing her hot center against my fingers. I teased her through the thin fabric of her leggings until her breath came in choppy, needy pants. Unable to hide my grin, I finally took her hand and walked backward to the couch. When my calves hit the fabric, I sank down, leaving her standing between my open knees.

Uncertainty flitted across her face, but it was quickly squashed by hunger as her gaze drifted from my face, down my chest, and landed at my groin. When her pink tongue darted out to lick her lips, I groaned and reached into my sweats to fist my cock before I came in my pants like a damn kid.

"Have you done this before?" I rasped, needing to know how much she could take of what I was desperate to give. The idea of fisting my hand in her hair and fucking her throat was too strong to deny, but I wouldn't make the same mistake I had last night. I would go at her speed.

For now.

I planned on fucking this woman for the rest of our lives. Of making her mine in every primal way a man could mark his girl.

Becca gave me a shy look and shook her head slightly. She still looked uncertain, but determined. Like sucking my dick was her own personal Everest to conquer.

My chest swelled with the knowledge that I was getting another of her firsts. Clearing my throat, I forced my hands to my sides, then I said the words I'd been dying to say for fucking years. "On your knees, Becca."

She fell to her knees before me like it was where she was always meant to be. Those pretty hazel eyes lifted to my groin, and she reached for the waistband of my sweats before pausing, her gaze flicking up to my eyes as she silently seemed to ask for permission to touch me.

I gave her a nod and wondered—not for the first time—if she was more submissive than she let on. Sure, she had an independent streak a mile wide, and while a lot of her hesitation in the bedroom could be due to inexperience, there was something in my gut telling me it was more.

I'd been to plenty of sex clubs in my life. I wasn't a stranger to BDSM, but I'd never been invested in that lifestyle, mostly going when Linc had dragged me along with him. That was more his scene, but I had to admit, there was a part of me that wanted to dominate Becca. That needed to own her orgasms and cries, that wanted to show her a whole world of pleasure that she'd never known.

Watching as she tugged my pants down, I helped her only by lifting my hips. She wordlessly stripped off the sweats. I grinned as she swallowed hard, now eye level with my erect cock.

Looking up at me again with big eyes, she placed her hands on my thighs for balance before leaning in and licking a stripe up the underside of my cock.

"Fuck," I hissed, my hips giving an involuntary thrust.

The corner of her mouth hooked up in an impish grin before she repeated the action. The tip of her tongue caught the bead of precum leaking from my slit. She gave a soft little hum, like she enjoyed the flavor.

Little minx.

I touched her jaw. "You can do more." It was a request, a plea, and an order all rolled into one statement, but it did exactly what I needed.

She sucked my tip into her mouth, the wet heat almost as good as being

buried inside her cunt.

I couldn't stop myself from putting a hand on her head and gently guiding her down to take me deeper. I kept my hold loose so she could back off for air when she needed, but each time she bobbed her head up and down, she took more of me. When my cock nudged the back of her throat, the edges of my vision turned hazy.

And then she swallowed around my length, shocking the shit out of me.

I sucked in a sharp breath, the air hissing between my clenched teeth. "Shit, yes. Just like that, baby."

She kept going, sucking and licking. When she cupped my balls and pressed a finger curiously against my taint, I grabbed her hair and yanked her off my cock.

She blinked at me, her gaze a little unfocused as her nails dug into my thighs, the bite of pain exactly what I needed to get my release under control.

"You're way too fucking good at that," I told her, my chest heaving.

Looking entirely too pleased with herself, she bit her lower lip. I tugged her on top of my body and kissed her. The breathy little moan she gave made me feel like the king of the fucking universe.

My hands were frantic as I pulled her clothes off. She yanked at my shirt until I took it off too, leaving us both naked.

My brothers would shit kittens if they knew what we were about to do on this couch. The place where they sat and had coffee and discussed upcoming plans.

I grinned as Becca straddled me, her legs on either side of my hips. My cock slipped easily between her soaked folds, coating my length in her arousal.

The urge to taste her again was too much to resist. Hooking my hands under her thighs, I lifted her slight weight easily until her knees were perched on my shoulders, her pussy right at my mouth.

With a squeak of alarm, Becca pressed her hands on the wall above us for balance. "Court—" Her argument was swallowed in a moan as I used my thumbs to spread her wide and suckled her clit into my mouth.

I ate her out like a man starved, each one of her cries making me impossibly harder. She rocked her hips, riding my face with abandon as I fucked her with my tongue and repositioned my hand so my fingers could torture her swollen clit.

She shattered, her thighs shaking on either side of me. It was easy to hold

her up, but if she'd smothered me with her cunt, I would've died a happy man.

My dick, however, was another story.

She was still twitching from her climax as I dragged her back down the length of my body and positioned my cock at her entrance. With one thrust, I was balls deep inside her.

"Oh, God," she gasped. Her hands found my shoulders, her nails cutting into my skin as she held on, rippling around my cock.

"Ride me, baby," I ordered, my hands on her hips.

She started slowly, lifting her hips and sinking back down. It took a few seconds for her to find her rhythm, but then her eyes hooded as she rode me, grinding herself against me each time.

"Look," I told her, jerking my chin down at where my cock disappeared into her body.

Her eyes snapped open, and she looked, smiling a little as she watched the way she took me.

"That's it," I encouraged. "Fuck me, Becca. Use me to get yourself off."

Her head tipped back as her movements became more frantic. Instead of bouncing on my dick, she rolled her hips, grinding her needy clit against my groin to get herself off. I kept my hands light on her hips, letting her do all the work.

"That's my girl," I said, my voice rough. "Just like that."

A startled cry fell from her lips, and she convulsed around me, her inner walls milking my cock hard enough that my vision blurred from the effort to hold back my own release. She jerked and bucked on my cock, her movements now wholly uncoordinated.

She collapsed, her head dropping to my shoulder, and that was my cue.

My hands tightened on her skin as I fucked into her from below, unleashing everything I'd wanted to since I'd felt her tongue on my cock. I chased my own release like a man possessed, barely aware of her cunt fluttering around me yet again as I railed her.

Lightning shot down my spine, my balls drawing up as I pressed myself into her once more. My cock jerked, my release painting her insides. I was vaguely aware of her gasping through another orgasm above me.

"Holy shit," she breathed, sounding like she'd run a marathon.

My heart thudded in my chest, my pulse pounding as I turned my head and found her lips. I coaxed them open with a slow kiss, savoring the taste of

her on my tongue as she melted against me.

I smoothed a hand up and down her spine, feeling her muscles going slack as we caught our breath.

“Court?” she whispered, breaking the stillness.

“Yeah?”

She lifted her head. “We’re going to get through this, right?”

The uncertainty in her voice cracked something in my chest. “Yeah, baby. We’re going to get through this. I promise.”

I’d never meant anything more in my entire life. No matter what happened tomorrow or next week or in the next decade, Becca was mine. Mine to protect, mine to adore, mine to love.

And I’d do whatever it took to keep her.

CHAPTER 31



BEX

My hands trembled as the car turned down my grandparents' street. I'd sent them and my mother a quick text that I'd be home tonight, and I'd rehearsed the cover story in my head and out loud with Court several times.

Thinking of Court had me pressing my fingers to my lips. I could swear they still tingled from when he'd kissed me before I'd left him at the airport.

Just in case Eric was extra-suspicious, Rook had come up with the plan to deliver me quietly to the airport an hour before my "flight" was scheduled to arrive. Obviously I wasn't on said flight, but Ash had worked his magic and made it look like I was. I'd ordered a private car from the service my grandparents always used to take me home.

My stomach had started knotting the second I'd left Court's side and disappeared into the travelers in the airport, wheeling a suitcase filled with the stuff I'd taken to the hotel only a few nights before. Well, all of my stuff plus Court's hoodie, which I'd stolen.

So much had changed in such a short amount of time, and sitting alone in the car gave me nothing to do but remember and think.

Remember all the ways Court had fucked me through the night and morning.

Remember the desperate way he'd kissed me, his eyes promising that if I said the word, he'd take me and run.

Remember the way his eyes seemed to glow when he told me he loved me.

And think about what the hell I'd gotten myself into.

I'd texted Eric when I'd gotten into the car, but he'd been oddly silent. I

wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

I was exhausted; I'd barely slept the night before, thanks to Court. Okay, thanks to me, too. Now that I knew what it was like to be with him, I couldn't imagine going back. I'd spent two nights in his arms, and I'd need at least two *lifetimes* with him before I'd get enough.

It was taking everything in me not to call Court now. I needed to hear his voice, but the burner phone that Bishop had given me to contact them was stowed safely in the lining of my suitcase. I thought it was overkill, but the guys all seemed to think it was necessary.

As the car turned up the half-circle drive, I peered at my grandparents' estate with trepidation. I loved their house. It had always felt like home to me, but at that moment, all I wanted was Court and our room at the hotel.

The driver put the car in park, and I waited for him to come around and open my door. I slid off the bench seat and stood up as he moved to the trunk and pulled out my bags.

"Thank you," I murmured.

"Anything else, miss?" the driver, an older gentleman with kind eyes and white hair, asked.

I shook my head. "No, thank you."

"Goodnight, miss."

"Goodnight." I started up the stairs, pulling out my keys as I went. Exhaustion settled into my bones. I didn't have long to get myself together before Eric would be picking me up for dinner. Hopefully I'd have enough time to call Court and check in.

Huh. I was a girl with a boyfriend to check in with.

For some reason, that put a soft grin on my face as I pushed open the front door.

I heard voices, and my smile grew as I heard my grandfather's deep baritone laugh. I wheeled my suitcase into the foyer coat closet to grab later. Right now, I wanted to see the two people who always made me feel cherished and loved.

"Mémé? Papa?" I called, heading for the parlor room that they tended to use when entertaining guests. I rounded the corner... and froze in the stained-glass archway to the room.

Eric was sitting on the settee across from Mémé while Papa was at the wet bar, pouring himself a bourbon.

"Can I get you one, Eric?" he offered, holding up a crystal decanter.

“No, thank you, sir,” Eric refused, the epitome of politeness. He turned and spotted me, his eyes lighting up as he stood. “Welcome home, Bex.”

Mémé turned to me, her eyes bright. “Darling, why didn’t you tell us that you were dating such a fine young man?”

“Indeed,” Papa added with a smile that reminded me of Mom. “Did you get everything sorted back at your school?”

I managed a nod, my throat dry. Panic made my stomach clench and my palms sweat.

Mémé made a soft sound of annoyance. “Absolutely absurd that you had to traipse halfway around the world in this day and age. I’ve half a mind to call your headmaster and remind him of just who provided the grant for the new science lab last year.”

“Not a bad idea, my love,” Papa told her with a serious nod.

“No,” I blurted out. “It was my mistake. I, uh, was so preoccupied with leaving school and Mom’s heart attack that I missed the form. It was my fault.”

Mémé frowned but sat back in her seat. “Very well. Eric tells us that the two of you have big plans.”

“It’s just dinner,” I mumbled.

Eric flashed me a winning grin. “I might have another surprise up my sleeve, love.”

My heart palpitated as Mémé all but giggled. Papa came to stand beside her chair and rested a hand on her shoulder. The look that flashed between them was the kind of thing I’d always wanted for myself.

“Ah, to be young and in love,” Mémé said in a wistful tone.

Panic washed through me like fire. “We’ve barely known each other a week.”

Papa chuckled. “Oh, *ma fille*. You know your grandmother.” He looked down, utter adoration on his face. “She just wants you to be as happy as we’ve been.”

Mémé beamed at him before looking at me. “You two go on. Don’t let us keep you.”

“It was truly a pleasure to meet you both,” Eric told them, turning to shake Papa’s hand and kiss the back of Mémé’s.

“No, darling, the pleasure was all ours,” Mémé replied, beaming at him. “I’m so glad you stopped in to introduce yourself. Our granddaughters are entirely too secretive about their romances.”

Papa gave a nod of agreement. “But we’ll see you at Ines’s birthday celebration in a few nights.”

“Yes, sir. I’m delighted to be invited to such a momentous event, even if I’m not convinced the age is true.” Eric winked at Mémé, and I felt sick.

Mémé waved a dismissive hand, unable to hide her delight. “Oh, shush. You do wonders for an old woman’s heart.” She looked at me and winked. “This one’s a keeper, Rebecca. Charm, looks, *and* brains? Don’t let him go.”

“It’s me who won’t be letting your granddaughter go,” Eric whispered conspiratorially. “Now that I’ve found her, I’d be a fool to lose her. But I’m sure I don’t have to tell you just how spectacular she is.”

“No, you don’t.” Papa gave me a warm smile that did little to thaw my insides. His expression turned into one of concern. “Are you all right, sweet girl? You look a little pale.”

Probably because I felt like I was going to have a stroke. I wanted Eric as far away from my family as possible.

“Darling?” Eric crossed the room to me, his hands coming up to frame my face. It was all I could do not to flinch and jerk away. “Are you all right?” The question seemed genuine enough—maybe I was imagining the hard glint in his eyes.

“Just tired,” I finally answered, giving him a weak smile as I pressed a hand to my stomach. “And famished. I didn’t eat on the plane. I was afraid to spoil our dinner.”

Looking satisfied, Eric leaned in and kissed my forehead. “Then we should get you some food. Can’t have you wasting away on me now, can I?”

I gave a small shake of my head, my smile fading as Eric studied me, his gaze scrutinizing before he seemed to shake himself out of whatever thoughts he was having. He took my hand and pulled me from the room.

“I’ve already reserved a table at Aubergine as you requested,” he told me, ushering me through the house and toward the front door. “We have so much to discuss.”

“We do?” I was unable to keep the surprise from my voice.

Eric spun, looming over me as he squeezed my fingers. “We do, my love. Missing you these last few days brought some things into perspective for me.”

“I was only gone a couple of days,” I pointed out, barely able to resist the urge to back away.

His gray eyes were bright, almost manic, as he looked at me. He let out a

heavy breath. “Let’s discuss this while we eat. I can’t have my girl withering away.”

I wasn’t *his* girl.

I was Court’s girl. Always had been.

Always would be.

Even if, for the rest of the night, I had to pretend I’d fallen for a monster.

Eric pressed a possessive hand to my back and guided me out into the night.

CHAPTER 32



BEX

Aubergine was just as packed as the first night we'd gone there, but unlike that time, we were shown to a private booth in the very back corner of the restaurant. The lighting was dimmer back here, and when Eric indicated for me to slide into the booth, my stomach gave an uncomfortable flip.

Taking a deep breath, I slid across the bench and waited for him to join me. He boxed me in against the wall.

He took the menus from the hostess but didn't bother handing me one. Once the hostess turned and left, he shifted to look at me, once again grabbing my fingers. "I've missed you."

"I was gone barely three days," I pointed out.

His brow furrowed. "Bex, I think you misunderstand my intentions here, so let me be perfectly plain. I see a future with you."

"Oh. Uh, okay." I wasn't sure what to say, because I knew I had no future with him. I was playing a game of cat and mouse, and I wasn't sure if I was the cat or the mouse.

Right now, I felt like the mouse.

His thumb stroked the back of my hand. "I know this must seem sudden, but I'm not a man who entertains casual relationships, and this is the first time in my life that I've found a woman who is just like me. Who won't judge me. A woman who can help me."

My throat and mouth went dry.

"I never expected to find someone like you," he went on. "Someone who can understand my business while helping me build connections. Do you see it? The power we could have?"

Shit. I might've oversold my connections to General Woods and Kent Westford. "I think you're overestimating my reach. I grew up knowing these people, but that doesn't mean we're friends."

"You and I both know friendship is a fairy tale sold to people who can't afford to face the realities of life. Everything is a transaction, and the currency is information. Connections." He gave me a wolfish smile that made my insides shiver.

"Eric, I'm not entirely sure what you're getting at," I admitted.

"Bex, I need to know if you feel the way that I do. That we could truly be something." His expression was so earnest that I almost forgot what a psychopath he was.

I rolled my bottom lip between my teeth, considering how to respond. Unless I wanted to blow everything for the guys, I couldn't shut him down outright. No, I had to play the damn game.

Besides, there was also the very uncomfortable reminder that his previous girlfriends hadn't fared so well.

"Of course I want that," I agreed.

A smile lit his face. "I was hoping you'd say that. I'd like you to attend the auction with me. Not just as my date, but as my partner."

"P-partner?" I echoed.

He nodded. "Yes. With the people who will be in attendance, I think you and I presenting a united front will be just the push I need to get Westford to see me as someone to rely on."

"Rely on." It seemed all I was capable of was parroting his words back, but my brain was struggling to connect the dots.

"My company does well, but I want to expand. I've struggled to get an audience with Westford, and your connection to him is exactly the angle I've been looking for," Eric explained, like the answer was so obvious. "Considering all the ports I have access to, it will be extremely lucrative for him and me to combine our reach."

I couldn't find words.

Grinning, he leaned in and kissed the tip of my nose. "You and I will be unstoppable, don't you agree?"

I nodded slowly. "Absolutely." I could do this. I could fake being supportive for a few more days. "Have they finally decided on a location for the auction then?"

His shoulders straightened. "They have, and I'm happy to say they've

taken my suggestions into account.”

“That’s great!” I gave a weak laugh. “Where will it be?”

He gave me an odd look. “Only members receive that information an hour prior to the event’s start.”

“Right. Of course,” I mumbled.

“Don’t worry, my love, you will be at my side when it happens. That’s why it’s so imperative I have you nearby,” he finished as the waiter approached.

“Good evening. My name is Jacques, and I’ll be serving you this evening,” he greeted with an ultra-white smile. With artfully arranged blond hair and sparkling brown eyes, he looked like a frat somewhere was missing a brother. “Would you like to hear the chef’s specials of the evening?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Eric shut me down. “No. We’ll both have the beef Wellington. Bring a bottle of Cristal and a bottle of flat water. That will be all.” He flashed the waiter a hard look until he turned and left.

“Um,” I started, uncertain, “I can order for myself.”

“It’s more efficient this way,” Eric dismissed. “Besides, I enjoy taking care of you, and I plan to do so for the rest of our lives.”

Tiny alarm bells went off in the back of my head.

“Eric, I can take care of myself,” I said, trying to be careful with my tone and words. It felt like I was walking on eggshells laid over a minefield.

“But you won’t have to,” he replied with an indifferent shrug. “It’s convenient that you’ve already finished school. Such a clever girl.”

“I’m going back to California to go to college,” I told him.

“There’s no need. If you truly insist on continuing your education, I have connections at the Sorbonne, but with the amount of travel we’ll be doing—”

“What?” I couldn’t hold in the note of incredulity.

He shot me a confused look. “Darling, one of the many requirements of my job is that I travel and routinely inspect ports, warehouses, and more sensitive locations for various shipments. I prefer a hands-on approach to business, and since you’ll be at my side, attending a regular university will be impossible.”

I leaned as far away from him as I could. “Eric—”

He gave a rueful chuckle and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m mucking this up, aren’t I, darling? Maybe I should’ve started off with a more specific question.” When he reached into his pocket, I wasn’t sure what to expect.

It sure as hell wasn’t a ring box.

“Eric.” I choked on his name as he pried the lid up, revealing a sparkling princess-cut diamond that had to be at least five carats, surrounded by a ring of sapphires.

“I know this is sudden for most people, but I’ve learned that if there’s something I want, then I have to take it.” He looked me in the eyes. “Rebecca Whittier, will you marry me?”

No.

I wanted to say it. Hell, I wanted to *scream* it. To close the lid and hurl the box away from the table.

“It’s too soon,” was all I could manage to squeak out.

He laughed, the sound warm and inviting. “I know we’ve known each other for less than two weeks, but I’ve already shared more details of my life with you than anyone else. You *understand*, Bex. We fit.”

Love wasn’t puzzle pieces fitting neatly into perfect shapes. It was messy and chaotic, passionate and consuming.

“I won’t lose you,” he finished, his tone taking on a harder edge that caught my attention.

My gaze snapped up to meet his, and I swallowed hard at what I saw. He looked possessed. Like a child who’d just been given a toy he’d always wanted and would fight to keep.

I was the toy. I was a thing for him to own. To be his.

The irony wasn’t lost on me that, forty-eight hours earlier, I’d let myself become someone else’s possession. I’d told Court I was his—that every piece of me belonged to him.

The difference was, I knew Court would treat me like someone to be cherished and protected. Eric? Yeah, he looked like he’d put me in a glass case on a shelf and occasionally bring me out to play with when the mood struck.

I wanted to say no. I *needed* to say no... but then I thought of the auction. Of the girls and women who were likely suffering, people I could help if I just played along for a few more days. That’s all we needed—a few more days, then it would be over.

“Bex.” His hand tightened around mine, squeezing my fingers together until the joints popped.

I couldn’t hide my wince. “You’re hurting my hand.”

“We’re made for each other,” he went on, ignoring the fact that he was grinding my bones together. “Surely you see that.”

I looked up, took a deep breath... and spotted a red light blinking in a corner of the ceiling.

There were security cameras in here. Cameras that the guys had hacked. There was a good chance that Court was watching us right now. The hand Eric was strangling was under the table between us, but I knew Court would see any sign of distress and come running. He'd blow up the entire operation for me.

Then it would all be for nothing, and I couldn't be the reason innocent people were hurt.

"You caught me off guard," I whispered, keeping my tone light and soft. "I wasn't expecting a proposal tonight."

Eric frowned. "I know it *is* a bit sudden."

A bit? I wanted to laugh in his face. The guy was freaking delusional. And dangerous.

"You're right," I said. "We haven't known each other long, but I can already tell how special you are. This is like a fairy tale. I never expected to find my own Prince Charming."

He grinned, relaxing the crushing grip on my hand. "And I never expected to find my princess, but here we are. And I want us to spend the rest of our lives together."

"Me, too," I demurred after a beat, lowering my lashes and hoping he'd see the expression as bashful and not I'm-going-to-throw-up-if-I-look-at-you-much-longer. I drew in a breath, centering myself, before I lifted my eyes. "Of course I'll marry you."

"Oh, my love," he breathed, letting me go so he could take the ring from the box and slide it onto my finger. He leaned in and pressed his mouth to mine before I had a chance to come up with an excuse.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit.

Please don't let Court be watching right this second. He'd lose his shit. He'd storm in here and probably kill Eric.

"I'm going to make you so happy," Eric vowed, pressing another kiss to the corner of my mouth.

I forced a smile onto my face as he drew back, and the waiter appeared with our drinks. As soon as my champagne was poured, I grabbed the glass.

"A toast," Eric declared, lifting his flute. "To our future. May we get everything that we deserve."

My smile turned more genuine as I agreed whole-heartedly with his toast

and clinked our glasses.

I absolutely hoped Eric got everything he deserved.

Caught by the police, a lengthy prison sentence, and a life stuck in a box sounded exactly like what my temporary *fiancé* so richly deserved, and I was more than happy to help him get it.

CHAPTER 33



BEX

“This isn’t the way to my house,” I said as Eric turned another corner. I’d managed to make it through dinner without any missteps.

“I know.” He held my hand over the console and raised my fingers to his lips. “I planned a celebration for us tonight. I reserved a special room for us at Westford Towers.”

I swung my head to gape at him. Westford Towers was one of the most exclusive, expensive hotel chains the Westford family owned. Judging by the heat in his gaze and the way his lips lingered on my skin, it didn’t take a genius to guess the type of celebration he had planned.

“Eric, I can’t,” I said, shaking my head.

“Why not?” His tone took on that cool edge that gave me the impression he wasn’t happy.

“I...” Shit, how did I get out of this? “I’m tired, and it’s been such a long day.”

He let out an incredulous snort. “How often do you get engaged, Bex? We need to celebrate. I promise you won’t be too tired for what I have planned.”

I tried pulling my hand away, but he wouldn’t let go. “Eric.”

“Bex,” he snapped, stopping at a red light and scowling at me. “I think I’ve been pretty fucking understanding.”

I jerked back like he’d hit me, stunned by the rage in his eyes.

“You just up and left,” he snarled, the transition from calm to furious giving me whiplash. “You didn’t tell me where you were. I had no idea if you were hurt or sick. I almost missed my meeting in Brussels!”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, trying to get him to calm down. “I didn’t think

it mattered—”

He slammed a hand on the steering wheel. “You didn’t think *I* mattered?” He practically roared the question.

“I didn’t say that—”

He grabbed my wrist, hard. “You won’t do that again, Rebecca. I won’t stand for it.”

Fear licked up my chest as I watched him unravel in front of me. “Eric, please.”

He sneered, stomping on the gas when the light turned green. The car surged forward, the back tires chirping in protest as they struggled to find purchase on the asphalt.

My heart pounded in my chest. “You’re scaring me.”

“You scared *me*, so I suppose we’re even,” he hissed. “You’re my fiancée. You’ll be *my wife*. I won’t have you running around like some common whore.”

Whoa. *What?* Where the hell had that come from?

“Eric, stop,” I ordered, trying to sound like I wasn’t on the verge of a panic attack as he weaved in and out of traffic like a madman.

“I think it’s time we got a few things straight, darling,” he growled. “You will *not* disappear again, or you won’t like the consequences.”

I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to respond or not, but when he squeezed my wrist harder, I gasped out, “I won’t. I promise.”

He gave a curt nod and slammed on the breaks as another light turned red. The car skidded to a stop. “I gave you a stunning diamond—do you know how much it’s worth? And you don’t want to show your appreciation?”

Was he actually insinuating that I owed him sex as a thanks for a ring I never asked for? No wonder women ran from him.

Unfortunately, running away wasn’t an option for me as he hit the gas the second the light turned green. I pressed myself against my seatback, praying we wouldn’t crash.

“You don’t understand,” I tried again. “It’s not that I don’t want to—”

He let out a scoff. “Don’t fucking lie to me.”

“I’ve never done this!” I shouted, screwing my eyes shut as he narrowly missed a woman stepping into a crosswalk. “I’ve never... I’m a virgin.”

Miraculously, his foot came off the gas.

“What?” he asked, sounding curious.

I pried one eye open and saw him staring at me. “I’ve never... I’ve never

had sex.”

He pulled the car over to the shoulder. “You’ve *never*...”

I shook my head, letting the fear knotting in my chest seep out in the form of tears. My eyes welled up. “I never had time for a boyfriend in school,” I whispered, letting the truth mingle with the lie. “And my grandmother always said how special it was to wait.”

“You’re pure,” he breathed, his eyes round with wonder. Like I’d announced I was an angel or a unicorn. “Of course you are.”

“I don’t want to lose my virginity in a cold hotel room, on a mattress that’s been shared by so many other people,” I added, dropping my gaze. “I want it to be special. Magical.”

Not a lie. It was what I’d wanted. And my first time had definitely been special and memorable. Maybe not as magical as romance novels made it sound, but I wouldn’t change it for anything because of *who* I’d been with, not where we’d been.

“Of course,” Eric agreed, touching my chin and lifting my face. “My sweet, beautiful girl. Of *course* you’re innocent. Like you knew waiting for me was exactly what we’d both need.”

I nodded and expelled a breath. “Eric, I want our first time to be perfect. It’s the start of the rest of our lives. And while there’s a part of me that wants to wait until we’re married—” insert gagging noises *here* “—I have a feeling I won’t be able to wait.” I let out a breathy chuckle.

Eric’s eyes practically glowed with animalistic pleasure. “I understand completely, my love.”

“What about after the auction?” I suggested with a bright smile. “We’ll have so many reasons to celebrate that night... Could we go back to *your* place? Not a hotel?”

He leaned in, pressing a kiss to my lips. “Absolutely, dove.”

I swallowed down a wave of bile at the feel of his dry lips on mine. “You’re not angry with me? I know I was wrong, running away from you, but I was just so... overwhelmed. I was scared of how deeply I felt for you.” I batted my lashes, playing up the innocent virgin act.

And because Eric was a narcissistic chauvinist, he ate it up.

He wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled our foreheads together as we shared the same air.

Don’t throw up, I mentally ordered myself. My skin felt like a thousand ants were crawling over it wherever he touched me.

“I understand completely,” he said, his tone now reverent, with no trace of the irrational rage from moments earlier. “I love you.”

He *loved* me? He barely *knew* me. And seconds ago, I was pretty sure he’d wanted to kill me. Eric was dangerously unstable. It was like playing tag with a rabid wolf.

I cleared my throat. “I know you do. I feel the same way.”

My heart wouldn’t let me say *I love you* back to him. The words got caught in my throat.

“I’ll take you home,” he murmured.

I nodded. “Thank you. Mémé’s party is in two days. I have to find a dress. I was going to ask Cami to go shopping with me tomorrow.”

“I’ll speak with Alex. Perhaps we can all go out to lunch? I’d love to see the dress you select.”

“Sure,” I replied, even though I hated the idea. But lunch with his brother and my cousin would give us a buffer.

He gave me another kiss that I barely returned before he withdrew and focused his attention on driving back to my house.

On the way home, I sat back and listened to him talk. He told me a bunch of details about himself and growing up that didn’t seem relevant to the auction, but I mentally filed them away just in case. Whenever he asked about me, I gently turned the conversation back to his favorite topic—himself.

How had I missed how self-absorbed he was?

By the time he pulled into my grandparents’ driveway, I was exhausted and just wanted to sleep. I hadn’t had a chance to call Court before we’d left, so who knew what he was thinking by now? Probably the worst.

Eric parked the car and slid an arm around me, angling me toward him. “I’m so happy that you’re mine.”

Everything inside me rebelled at his statement. I *wasn’t* his. Never would be.

But I grinned. “I am. I’ll let you know where Cami and I decide to go shopping so you and Alex can meet us nearby.”

“Perfect.” He leaned in to kiss me, and I let it happen even as I felt nothing. How had I once been excited to have this guy’s lips on mine?

It made me want Court all the more. I missed the way he kissed me—like he couldn’t get enough. I felt safe with him. It just felt right.

Eric pinched my chin. “You’re distracted,” he accused.

“I’m sorry,” I replied instantly. “I’m so tired, and it’s been a lot of excitement for one day.”

He studied me carefully before letting me go with a thin smile. “Of course. You should go inside and rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I echoed as I got out of the car. I smothered the urge to run to the front door, instead taking my time and pausing to blow a kiss at Eric before going in.

Once inside, I slumped against the door. The ticking of the clock in the hall was nearly drowned out by the sound of the blood rushing through my ears.

I’d done it. I’d survived.

I looked down and sighed.

I’d also gotten engaged.

The diamond sparkled in the overhead lights as the clock chimed, striking eleven o’clock. My grandparents were long asleep. If Mom was home, she probably was, too, which meant I was alone.

I hated it.

I opened the hall closet and noticed my suitcase was gone. One of the staff likely took it upstairs. I shrugged out of my coat and hung it up before locking up and heading for the large staircase.

Trudging up, I reviewed everything that had happened tonight.

Mémé’s birthday celebration was in two nights. The auction was slated to happen two nights after that.

So, in five nights’ time, I’d be back in Court’s arms.

Five more sleeps, my brain whispered, reminding me of when I was little and that was how I’d measured time. Exhaustion pulled at my bones. I needed a shower and to talk to Court before going to bed. And I needed to text Cami to find out if she was free to shop for dresses.

My bedroom was at the end of the hall, and I pushed it open with a yawn. After closing the door behind me, I kicked off my heels with a groan and hit the light switch, bathing the room in a soft yellow glow that illuminated the person on my bed.

I gasped as Court stood up, my eyes drinking him in even as I wondered if I was dreaming.

“Are you okay?” His voice was low, tight with concern.

“You’re really here?” I whispered, still stunned.

He crossed the room. “Becca, are you all right? Did he do anything?”

My hands landed on his chest, feeling the hard muscles under his Henley. The leather scent of his jacket mingled with the warmth of his cologne. “Why are you here?”

He gave me an *are you serious* look before his hands gripped my shoulders. “Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

“Yes?”

A corner of his mouth curved. “Baby, you honestly think I could go back to not sleeping next to you after the last two nights?” He shook his head. “Fuck, no. It’s you and me. If that means I have to sneak into your house every goddamn night until this is over, I will.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “I really love that answer.”

“Good.” He chuckled.

“Have you been waiting the whole time?”

“No, I got here about ten minutes ago. I followed you to the restaurant, and then I had to run an errand for Trick.” He frowned. “Rook and Bishop kept an eye on you from the security feeds, and Bishop followed you home.”

I’d known they wouldn’t leave me unprotected, but hearing him confirm it made my heart give a happy *thump*.

And the fact that Rook and Bishop were the ones watching my proposal explained why Court hadn’t busted into Aubergine and killed Eric on the spot.

He leaned forward. “Now can you please answer my question before I lose my shit? Are you okay?”

“I’m perfect now,” I breathed, meaning it. This was what my heart needed. To see Court. To be with Court.

“He didn’t do anything?” he pressed.

I shook my head, still a little dazed that he was actually freaking here.

He sighed, visibly relaxing as his hands slid down my arms to take my hands. And then he froze. “Becca?”

Oh, yeah. Shit.

I followed his gaze down to where his thumb hovered over the engagement ring.

“What the *fuck*?” His horrified gaze jerked back to my face.

I winced. “Okay, so maybe *something* happened tonight.”

CHAPTER 34



BEX

“E xplain,” Court demanded, his voice a dangerous growl that really shouldn’t turn me on as much as it did. His dark eyes glittered with fury.

“Eric asked me to marry him,” I replied with a shrug, trying to downplay it. “I said yes.”

“What the—”

I pressed a hand over his mouth. “Court, I didn’t really say yes. I only agreed so he wouldn’t think anything was wrong. I couldn’t exactly say, ‘the only reason I’m here is because I’m spying on you for my friends.’”

His jaw clenched, and I worried he might break some teeth. He looked up at the ceiling, and I wondered if he was silently counting to ten. Finally he turned his gaze back to me. “Take that thing off.”

My brows lifted, but I tugged the ring off my finger and set it on top of the dresser near the door.

Court exhaled slowly. “I fucking hate this.”

“I know,” I murmured, stepping into him and wrapping my arms around his waist. My head fit perfectly beneath his chin, and I could feel his heart beating against my cheek.

His arms came around me as he nuzzled the top of my head. “But you’re okay?”

I nodded. “I’m okay.” Then I wrinkled my nose. “I could definitely use a shower, though. Hanging out with Eric makes me feel gross.”

Probably best not to mention I wanted to scrub away his touch and possibly create some sort of bleach-based lip balm.

“Okay. Let’s get you in the shower then,” Court agreed and kissed the top

of my head. “Then you can tell me what’s going on before we get some sleep.”

“I can’t believe you’re really staying,” I admitted. We’d gone from zero to a million in the blink of an eye. Sometimes it was still hard to believe.

He gave me an odd look before casting his gaze across the room to where a black duffel sat beside my desk. Hope fluttered in my chest as he took my face in his hands. “I’m not going anywhere, baby. If I can’t be with you during the day, I’m damn sure going to be with you all night long.”

Heat unfurled low in my belly at his words, and I wordlessly pulled away to walk toward my attached bathroom. As I went, I started stripping off my clothes, starting with my shirt.

I heard his sharp intake of breath as I dropped the top on the floor and reached behind myself to undo my bra. I shimmied out of my skirt and kicked it aside before looking back over my bare shoulder at him.

“Coming?” I asked, my voice sultry and low.

“Fuck yes,” he breathed, snapping out of his daze and stalking after me, shedding his jacket as he went.

My bare feet hit the cool tiles, and Court was immediately behind me, kicking the door shut and crowding me against the edge of the counter. I looked at our reflection in the mirror and smiled as he slipped his arms around my waist.

One hand reached up to play with my bare breast and rolled a nipple through dexterous fingers as his other hand slipped into my panties. He groaned when he touched my center, toying with my clit as his mouth kissed a path from my shoulder to my jaw.

I leaned against him, widening my stance to give him room to work.

He worked a finger into my core with shallow thrusts, warming my body up. “Fuck, you’re so tight,” he murmured. He changed the angle of his hand and added a second finger, hitting me deeper.

My knees started to tremble, and I reached out for the counter to steady myself.

He pinched my nipple, the tiny bite of pain making me gasp.

His chest rumbled as he chuckled. “I love that sound.” His fingers dipped in and out of me languidly, the pressure building between my legs but not reaching what I needed to come.

“Court,” I whined, trying to rock my hips and give myself the friction I so desperately wanted.

He nipped my earlobe. “Relax, baby girl. Let me take care of you.”

I turned my head, needing to feel his lips on mine. As soon as our mouths touched, I parted my lips to let his tongue sweep in. I moaned into his mouth as his thumb rubbed tight circles around my clit.

My legs trembled, my knees giving out as my climax crested, washing over me like a wave in the ocean. My hands braced against the counter, holding up my weight as I bit my lip to keep from crying out.

The last thing I needed was my mom or grandparents coming to check on me.

Court worked me through my orgasm, gently stroking between my legs and occasionally brushing his thumb over my sensitive clit. Each time he did, a shudder rippled down my spine.

He gave me a single kiss between my shoulder blades and then turned me in his arms. He shoved my underwear down to my ankles and helped me sit on the counter. I flinched as the cold stone met my bare ass.

“You’re too dressed,” I told him with a pout. His dark-wash jeans and black shirt were molded to him like a second skin. He even still wore a pair of black boots. “But I am feeling the whole tall, dark, and sexy vibe you’ve got going on,” I added, licking my lips.

He flashed me a wink before turning to the shower and starting the water for me.

The house was old, but the plumbing was new, and it wasn’t long before the bathroom filled with steam. After testing the water with his hand, Court turned back to me. His gaze heated as it raked down my naked body, and I couldn’t help but give him a sassy little smirk and push my boobs out a bit.

“Shower,” he ordered, and I wasn’t gonna lie—the bite to his tone sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

I slipped off the edge of the counter and intentionally brushed against him as I stepped into the shower. The heat wrapped around my body like a hug as the spray beat down on my head. I went to pull the glass door shut, but Court caught it. He stepped inside, somehow having managed to strip off his clothes in record time.

I blinked water out of my eyes as he filled the space, pressing my back into the tiles as he kissed me hard. His thick cock pushed against my stomach as he devoured me. His hands were everywhere—holding my face, then playing with my breasts before sliding down to grab my ass.

Court groaned. “Fuck, I love your ass, Becca.” His fingers delved

between my cheeks and prodded at my back entrance. “I can’t wait to fuck you here.” Using the water sluicing down my body, he eased a finger through the tight ring of muscle.

I grabbed his arms as my eyes fluttered shut, the sensations overwhelmingly forbidden and decadent at the same time. My head dropped back against the tiles as he stretched me open with a second finger.

His lips found the curve where my neck met my shoulder, his teeth nipping before he sucked on the spot. After a beat, he tore his mouth away with a snarl. “Fuck.”

“What?” I gasped, my eyes snapping open.

His lips pressed into a tight, annoyed line. “I can’t mark you.”

Yeah, explaining hickeys to Eric might get a little complicated.

“Then mark me where he can’t see.” I reached between us, wrapping my hand around his length and giving it a firm stroke. “Where he’ll never touch me.” I kissed the underside of his jaw, smiling to myself when a shudder rippled through his massive frame. “I’m yours, Court. Remind me what that feels like.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Forgot already?”

I shot him what I hoped was a coy smirk.

His eyes flashed with a dangerous heat a moment before he grabbed my legs and lifted me like I weighed nothing more than a feather. He butterflyed my legs open, his cock notching at my entrance as he pinned me to the wall with his weight.

“Yes,” I hissed, desperately needing him between my legs and buried inside me.

“Mine,” he snapped, his hips driving forward and impaling me on his cock.

I dropped my head to his shoulder and bit him to avoid screaming in pleasure and waking up the house.

He grunted as he pulled out and thrust back in. “That’s my girl. Mark me, Becca. Show the fucking world who I belong to.” His groin collided with mine, somehow grinding against my clit with each pump.

Lightning coiled low in my belly, the shower hammering us with water from above. My chest ached as my release built, the pressure inside me close to detonating as he pounded into me, his long cock hitting at just the right angle, just the perfect spot, to have starbursts dancing across my vision.

“Oh, God,” I whimpered, my pussy contracting around him. “I can’t... I

need to—”

“Come for me,” he demanded, snapping his hips.

It was like a chain reaction. With his dick hitting inside me and his groin rubbing against my clit, I detonated like a damn bomb. I bit into his shoulder again as my orgasm ripped through me, decimating every coherent thought and even my ability to breathe.

Court rode me through my climax, never letting up until I was breathless and boneless. He pulled out of me, still hard.

“On your knees, baby,” he ordered.

My knees had pretty much turned to jelly, so it was an easy command to obey. I sank down in front of him as he turned us, blocking the stream of the shower with his back as he loomed over me. His hand touched my jaw. “Open.”

Like it was on a hinge that he had total control of, my mouth opened, and I watched as he gripped his cock and gave it several rough tugs. He worked himself from root to tip, the corded muscles of his forearm, abs, and chest flexing as his head tipped back in pleasure. As he breathed, the phoenix on his ribs rippled like a living thing.

The first spurt of cum on my cheek made me flinch. I closed my eyes, letting him paint my face and chest with his release. Unable to stop myself, I darted my tongue out to taste him on my lips, savoring the salty essence of Court.

Blunt fingers smeared his cum over my skin before it was scooped up and pushed into my mouth. I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze as I sucked his fingers clean. He repeated the process on my chest, gathering his release and feeding it to me. His hot gaze watched me, a mix of awed and ravenous.

When he was satisfied, he pulled me up, supporting most of my weight as he kissed me slowly. I melted against him, sated and happy.

All the stress seemed to wash away, and neither of us spoke while Court maneuvered me in the shower and washed and conditioned my hair before squirting strawberry-scented body wash onto my loofah and cleaning my body. I leaned against his chest, feeling him hardening at my back, but he seemed to ignore it as he focused on cleaning me.

After he was done, he shut off the water and wrapped me in a fluffy towel before securing one haphazardly around his waist and blocking my second favorite part of his anatomy from view.

He snorted a laugh. “Which part gets first place?”

I blinked and realized I'd spoken that last thought aloud. Hopefully he'd chalk up my pink cheeks to the heat in the bathroom. "Uh, your smiles."

"My smile?" His lips pulled up into a confused sort of grin that reminded me of the boy next door.

I shook my head. "Your *smiles*, plural."

"I have more than one smile?"

"You have five smiles," I replied. "One when you're really happy. One when something makes you laugh. One when you see something cute, and one when you think no one's looking."

He stared at me and then swallowed. "That's only four."

"My favorite is the one I don't see that much," I admitted.

His head tilted, a soft smile forming on his lips as he studied me. It made his eyes sparkle in a way that caught my breath.

"That one," I whispered, touching his lips. "That's my favorite smile. It's the one you get when you look at me. I've missed it."

Understanding lit his eyes, and he pulled me against him, wrapping me up in a hug that I never, ever wanted to end.

CHAPTER 35



BEX

The early morning sun slanted through my curtains. I blinked into consciousness, feeling utterly relaxed and content as I snuggled deeper under my sheets.

“Hey,” I murmured, spotting Court’s naked back across from me. He’d pulled on a loose pair of black gym shorts and seemed to be busy looking at the books on my shelves.

Oh, shit.

“Uh...” I pushed myself up on one arm, wrapping the sheets around my chest.

Court turned, and I wanted to fall through the bed when I spotted the book he was casually perusing.

“Court—”

He turned and gave me a look that would’ve disintegrated my underwear, if I’d had any on. The morning light framed him, casting a golden glow around his body. My mouth went dry as I looked over every inch of exposed, tanned skin.

“Becca, Becca,” he murmured, closing the book and giving me a knowing look. “I gotta say, princess, I’m shocked you’d bring these books into your grandparents’ home.”

Screw it. I loved my books, and I’d own that shit.

“That’s not even the kinkiest one,” I told him.

His dark eyes lit up. “Really?” He dragged the word out with a grin.

I nodded.

He put the book back on the shelf before coming over and sitting beside me. He pushed my hair back and leaned in to kiss my shoulder. “So you have

a thing for... what the hell was I even reading?"

I lifted my chin. "Merri Bright. She's freaking phenomenal. She writes omegaverse, but you were looking at her angel series."

His brows shot up. "Those were angels? Jesus, no wonder the earth is so screwed. All the angels are too busy having massive orgies to bother helping us mere mortals."

"Not how it works," I retorted lightly with a little scowl. "But what's wrong with an orgy?"

He gave me a look. "Baby, I'm gonna guess you've never actually seen an orgy."

"And you have?" I winced at the way his eyes glittered. "Never mind. Don't answer that. I heard the rumors."

"Which?" He looked genuinely curious and innocent until I noticed the glint in his eyes.

"Ugh." I grabbed a pillow from his side of the bed—because apparently we had *sides*—and hit him in the face. "You know exactly which rumors. And I'm not judging at all. I bet it was... nice," I finished lamely, my face heating.

"Nice?" Court echoed.

I let out a huffy breath. "Fine. I bet it was fucking amazing for whatever girl you and Linc had sandwiched between you."

He gave a noncommittal sound.

"All I'm saying is that I'll have to live out my menage and reverse harem fantasies through books, unless you're cool with sharing," I finished, unable to resist teasing him.

"Becca, I really need you to hear this," he said, his voice gravelly and serious. "There's no fucking way I'll spend my life sharing you. I'm too goddamn possessive, and we both know it. You're it for me."

"And you're it for me," I insisted, reaching for his hand. "It's a *fantasy*, Court. One that I am totally fine playing out in my dreams. I don't need anyone but you."

He leaned in, his forehead touching mine as our breaths mingled. He gave me a grin. "What other fantasies does your deviant mind have?"

I hesitated, feeling weird and vulnerable. "Are you making fun of me? I mean, I know I'm not experienced like you—"

He instantly sobered. "No. Becca, I'm not making fun of you. I'd never..." He exhaled hard. "Baby, I fucking love that I was your first, and I

sure as shit plan on being your last.” His hand came up to trace the slope of my shoulder, his fingertips grazing down my arm. “I just want to make sure you’re getting what you need, and I don’t want to push you.”

“I don’t *know* what I need,” I admitted, still a little embarrassed. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to try things.”

He gave a soft hum. “Such as?”

I bit my lip, pretty sure I was going to burst into flames and be incinerated on the spot.

Court tilted his head. “Okay, so we’ve already covered your threesome curiosity. Or foursome. Fivesome?”

I laughed a little. “It’s off the table. But for the record, I’m not sure of any woman who isn’t fictional being able to handle more than two dicks at a time, so my fantasy has always been limited to three people, including me.”

His eyes glittered with mirth. “So you wouldn’t object to toys?”

My breath caught.

“You know, in case I wanted to get a dildo to fill up your tight, little pussy while I’m fucking your throat?” His fingers ghosted across my neck.

I swallowed hard and shook my head. “Y-you want to do that?”

His gaze heated. “Sweetheart, the things I want to do to you are illegal in a lot of places.” He pulled me toward him. The blankets and sheets tangled between us as I awkwardly straddled him. A hand grabbed my bare butt. “I can’t wait to fuck this ass. As soon as we have the time, I’m going to start with a plug you’ll wear all goddamn day. We’ll work up to my cock fitting inside you.”

Rubber bands seemed to wrap around my chest, constricting my air. “Seriously?”

The corner of his mouth pulled up. “Hell yes.”

“What else?” I breathed, my gaze flicking to his lips.

He leaned in, kissing my jaw. “I think we’ve already established I have a thing for your ass, and I can’t wait to see it red and hot from me spanking it.”

I nodded with an appreciative moan, my hands coming up to loop around his shoulders. “Definitely interested in that.”

He smiled against my skin. “So spanking is good. How do you feel about being tied up?”

“Is this the part where you tell me you have a St. Andrew’s cross in your basement?” *Please say yes.*

He chuckled, the warm sound rolling between us. “No basement, but I do

know of a few clubs with a private room I could reserve.”

“Private room?” I squeaked.

He drew back. “Or public, if that’s your thing.”

The idea of people watching as Court tied me up and did unspeakable things sounded so sinfully perfect.

“Huh,” he mused, giving a small nod. “My girl has a little bit of an exhibitionist in her.”

“Is that... wrong?” I asked, once again hit by a wave of uncertainty.

He shook his head. “There is no right and wrong, Becca. Our relationship and how we interact in bed and out is ultimately up to us. If you want me to fuck you missionary style in the dark for the rest of our lives, I will. If you want me to strap you to a cross in the middle of a club so people can watch as I torture your sweet little body, then I’m game for that, too.”

I squirmed on his lap, feeling exposed and sexy. “Yes, please.”

“To which?” He arched a brow.

“The second one,” I whispered, almost afraid to admit how much I wanted that. It felt like I was supposed to be embarrassed for wanting something so primal, so vulgar. Societal norms dictated that sex stay behind closed doors.

His hand came around to the back of my head, fisting my hair and tugging my neck back. I gasped around the bite of pain that licked up my scalp.

“Too much?” he asked, his voice like liquid chocolate.

“No,” I gasped, the pain burning a path down my neck and spine before pooling between my thighs.

Court pulled my head back more, my chest arching. He swooped in and took a pebbled nipple between his lips, sucking it hard before biting it.

“Oh, fuck,” I whimpered. I tried to grab his head, to make him turn his attention to my other needy peak, but he tugged my hair tighter. Tears blurred my vision for a second.

“No touching,” he murmured. “Hands behind your back.”

I was quick to obey, folding my arms behind my back and holding on to my wrists.

“Such a good girl,” he rasped.

I blushed and fought a grin as heat unfurled in my chest. Who knew I got off on praise?

He kissed and licked a path between my breasts before nibbling on the

other nipple. My breath caught as I clenched my teeth to keep from crying out.

“So fucking responsive,” he said with an appreciative groan. “I can’t wait until we’re somewhere that you don’t have to be quiet.”

I panted, my head bobbing as I agreed. It was so hard to swallow the cries that desperately wanted to come out.

“Can you be quiet, baby?” He looked up at me, waited for me to nod. “Lie back and put your hands up. Hold on to the headboard.”

I toppled backward off his lap, my arms shooting up and my fingers wrapping around the elaborate wooden spindles of my headboard. Clenching my teeth, I watched as Court peeled the sheets away from my body and tossed them aside.

He pushed my thighs open and stared hungrily between my legs until I started to squirm. Suddenly shy of him eye-fucking my pussy, I tried to close my legs.

“Don’t move,” he snapped, pushing my legs even wider as he lay between them. His broad shoulders wedged my thighs open, parting the lips of my sex.

“Court.” I was going to combust if he didn’t do something soon.

He leaned in, his nose right above my clit as he inhaled deeply. “God, this smell is everything.” His finger traced my slit. “You’re fucking soaked for me, baby. I wish you could see yourself the way I do, your pretty pink pussy all shiny.”

The whimper I let out was almost inhuman. He kept dragging a finger around my pussy but refused to touch me where I needed him to. I opened my mouth to tell him to hurry the hell up before I died of whatever the female version of blue balls—*blue ovaries?*—was.

“Uh-uh,” he told me. “You need to be quiet, remember?”

I pressed my lips together until they hurt, burying the need to demand he do something or beg him to fuck me into the mattress.

“You said spanking was okay, right?” He asked the question almost absently, a finger tracing a pattern on the inside of my left thigh as his face nuzzled my right.

Was I supposed to answer that? Roll over so he could slap my ass?

I was still trying to figure it out when his hand slapped my pussy.

A strangled sound vibrated in my throat as I worked to swallow it down while my hips jerked.

“Hmm,” he mused, and that was all the warning I got before his hand came down again, this time on my clit.

The air whooshed from my lungs as my pussy clenched and my thighs trembled. My head spun as I tried to make sense of what I was feeling.

Pain? Not really.

Heat? Oh, yeah.

Court hummed as he rubbed his fingers against my clit, making my body jolt as the heat turned into a throb.

I squeezed my eyes shut, surrendering my body to his control, but I almost lost my vow of silence when his tongue pushed into me. My entire body trembled as his fingers worked my clit while his tongue rimmed my entrance and dipped back inside.

“So fucking delicious,” he murmured before going back again.

The feel of his tongue and his fingers, my legs splayed impossibly wide as I gasped for air... it was too much. He gave my clit a firm pinch, rolling the sensitive nub between his thumb and finger, and I shattered.

Eyes closed, I hurtled through the abyss of my mind, my breaths coming in ruined, ragged pants through my nose as my back arched off the bed. Swallowing my pleasure was like trying to contain lightning in a bottle as my lungs screamed for oxygen.

I was still twitching, barely catching my breath, when Court straightened to kneel between my legs. I scarcely had time to realize what was happening when he thrust in, his wide cock tunneling inside me. The instant sensation of fullness stole my breath once more.

Court leaned over me, one hand braced on the bed as the other wrapped around my wrists, pinning me under him as he ruthlessly used my body.

It was freaking incredible.

I lost myself to the feel of him moving in me, his cock hitting every spot just right. He grabbed my thigh, pulling my knee closer to my chest. I gasped as he went even deeper.

A tsunami of pleasure was building in my center and rippling out through my limbs. My skin felt hot, too tight. Like I was going to burst apart at any second.

La petite mort.

Death by orgasm.

Every muscle in my body pulled taut, hovering at the edge of shattering. I clenched around his cock, and he swore softly under his breath. I opened my

mouth, unable to stop the cry that welled deep in my soul.

Court's mouth sealed over mine, kissing me and swallowing the noises I made as I flew apart. He jerked inside me, and his warm release coated my walls.

When he was finished, he collapsed on me, letting his weight press me into the bed. I lowered my arms, wrapping them around him as his head rested on my chest. Our sweaty bodies stuck together.

I'd just opened my mouth to say something when my phone chimed next to my bed. I wanted to ignore it, but when it started ringing a moment later, I knew who it was. And if the way his body tightened was any indication, Court knew it, too.

"I have to answer him," I whispered, regret lacing my tone.

"I know." He sounded pissed and resigned. He pushed himself up and looked at me, watching as I grabbed my phone and answered Eric's call.

"Hey," I greeted, forcing as much enthusiasm into my tone as I could. I reached for Court, threading my fingers through his soft hair. He leaned into my touch, kissing the inside of my wrist.

"Good morning, my love," Eric returned, a smile in his voice. "I tried texting you, but you didn't answer."

Because you gave me less than a minute, you damn psycho.

"I was in the shower," I replied.

He gave an appreciative hum. "I can only imagine how gorgeous you look naked and wet."

I gritted my teeth. "Was there something you needed?"

"Only to let you know that I've spoken with Alex and Camille," he informed me. "I'll pick you up in thirty minutes. They'll meet us later so we can shop for your dress and then have lunch. I have an errand to run this morning, and I want you to come with me so we can spend more time together."

"Oh," was all I could manage. I'd been planning to call my cousin myself this morning to ask her about dress shopping, but apparently Eric was now the secretary of my social life.

"Bex? Is everything all right?" Suspicion gave his voice a hard edge.

"Yeah," I quickly assured him. "I'm just... not a morning person." I winced a bit at the lame lie.

"We'll stop for coffee," he cooed with a chuckle. "Anything for my girl."

Court, clearly hearing what he'd said, narrowed his eyes with a small

hiss.

“Sounds good. I’ll see you soon.” Even as I spoke, all I could do was watch the guy who had my heart. I didn’t really hear Eric’s reply, and I quickly ended the call.

“You’re not his anything,” Court spat, looking furious.

“No, I’m not,” I agreed, running my fingers through his dark hair.

His hand found the inside of my thigh and went higher until his fingers brushed my slit. I blushed, feeling his release trickling out of me, mixed with my own arousal. My eyes widened as he used his fingers to push our combined juices back into my pussy.

“Mine,” he growled.

“Yours,” I assured him, my heart full even as I resigned myself that I had to convince another man I was his for the next few days.

CHAPTER 36



BEX

“Bex!” Cami’s face lit up when she saw me walking into the boutique alongside Eric.

I went to hug her, but Eric’s hand tightened on mine, keeping me at his side.

Since he’d picked me up, we’d run a few errands for him. Well, he’d run errands. I’d gotten the simple pleasure of sitting in his car and waiting for him to return.

Slowing my pace, I matched his stride while walking to my cousin. I spotted Alex sitting in a chair near the dressing rooms, playing on his phone.

When I was close, Cami pulled me in for a hug, and Eric reluctantly let me go.

“Hi, Eric,” Cami chirped, flashing him a warm smile.

He gave her a polite nod. “Pleasure to see you again, Camille.”

Cami turned her attention to me. “Girl, I’ve already started pulling dresses for you. There’s this stunning black Monique Visset gown with a low-cut back—”

“Are we attending a funeral?” Eric cut in with a sardonic chuckle. “Bex, you look amazing in yellow. Why not try that?”

Somehow it didn’t seem like a suggestion, but I pushed a smile onto my lips and nodded with as much enthusiasm as I could fake. “Great idea, honey.”

Eric practically preened at the term of endearment before pulling his own phone from his pocket and going to join his brother. Alex barely looked up as Eric sat, but I did notice him scoot away slightly.

“Yellow.” Cami made a face. “Seriously?”

I touched her arm. "It's fine."

"You'll look like a freaking canary," she whined, rolling her eyes. "Besides—whoa. Hold the hell up!" She snatched my left hand, holding up the ring and staring at me with big eyes. "Holy shit, Bex! You got engaged?"

Now Eric and Alex were both watching us, Eric looking smug and Alex looking... uncertain.

"Yup," I told her. "Eric proposed last night when I got back to Paris."

Cami looked utterly stunned. "But you've barely known him for two weeks."

"What can I say? When you know, you know," I replied, shooting Eric a warm smile.

Cami's brow furrowed. "Okay, I know you wanted to get over Court, but getting engaged? That's a huge step." She shook her head and lowered her voice. "Talk to me, girl. What's really going on?"

I grabbed her hand and squeezed a bit harder than necessary. "I need you to just support me right now, okay? Can you do that?"

She studied me carefully, and I worried that she'd press the issue. But Cami was nothing if not on my side. "Okay, babe. Then I guess I call dibs on maid of honor?"

My shoulders dropped in relief. "Deal. Just don't tell Jayme I gave you first dibs."

Linking her arm with mine, Cami towed me toward the dressing rooms, where a woman waited for us dressed in a teal cocktail dress with a chunky belt and large earrings. Her brown hair was pulled back in a severe bun, but she had a wide smile.

"Bex, this is Janice," Cami introduced. "Janice has helped style me for more after-parties and benefits than I can count."

Janice's gaze scanned me from head to toe as she tapped a pale pink nail on her chin. "Nice proportions. 32 C?"

I blinked in surprise as she guessed my bra size. "Uh, yeah."

She slowly circled me. "Hmm, might need a bit of a lift for your rear end, but you've got lovely legs."

"Thanks?" I shot Cami a look, and she shrugged in return and flashed me a thumbs up. Clearing my throat, I looked at Janice. "I'm interested in something yellow."

Her lip curled. "Yellow?"

"It's my favorite color," Eric spoke up, giving Janice a hard stare.

“Besides, she looks ravishing in any color, unless you’re implying this store doesn’t have the proper attire for my fiancée?”

Alex’s head shot up. “Fiancée?”

Eric ignored him, instead looking at me. “Don’t you agree, my love?”

“Of course,” I replied quickly.

Janice huffed softly. “I have a few options. I’ll bring them to your room.” She whirled away with a flourish.

Cami gave me a slightly uneasy look, but I studiously ignored her. Instead I went into one of the dressing rooms and started to strip off my clothes. After folding them, I looked at myself clad only in lilac lace panties and a matching bra.

I fingered the lacy edge of one cup, remembering the way Court’s eyes had flashed with appreciation as he’d pushed my hands away to do the clasp behind my back for me. The way he’d dragged his nose up the back of my leg as he tugged my underwear up.

Something caught my eye, and I turned in the full-length mirror to see a small purple bruise on my hip. It looked innocent enough, like I’d bumped into something. But I knew exactly where I’d gotten that bruise. Even now I could feel the possessive way Court had gripped my hips as he’d thrust into me last night.

My clit gave a needy throb, and I wished more than anything that he was here with me right now.

I jumped as the curtain was drawn back and Janice stepped inside, her lips pressed together over the mountain of yellow and gold fabric draped over her arm. She began hanging the dresses, muttering about yellow being a spring and summer color and this being a winter event.

But when she turned to me, she gave me a weak smile. “Let’s see if we can find you a proper dress, shall we?”

I nodded, even as I knew my opinion wouldn’t matter. And sure enough, Eric shot down almost every dress I tried on.

The first one showed too much cleavage.

The second made me look like a nun, all covered up.

The third was too marigold.

The fourth had feathers, and apparently he was allergic.

I could sense Janice getting ready to explode when I tried on the fifth dress, a pale champagne that sparkled and fell to the floor. I’d definitely need heels to keep from tripping over the hem, but it was stunning.

I exited the dressing room once again, and Eric looked up from his phone. “Oh, my God! Bex!” Cami cried, standing to one side in a crimson dress with a slit up to her hip and an intricately laced corset. The straps fell off her shoulders, leaving her décolletage bare. She looked like a movie star.

“This is stunning,” Cami gushed, coming to stand in front of me. She turned to Eric. “Doesn’t she look amazing?”

“Beautiful,” he agreed, getting up and walking to me. “Do you like the dress?”

I had to admit it was freaking gorgeous, and probably something I would’ve picked for myself. “I love it.”

“It looks made for you,” the woman who had been assisting Cami mentioned. When the door opened, the chime signaling a new customer had come in, she headed for the entrance.

Eric leaned in and kissed the tip of my nose. “Perfect. You and Cami can check out, and we’ll go to lunch.”

Cami shook her head. “I have one more dress to try on.”

“Why?” Eric looked confused as he waved a hand at her. “Red is clearly your color, don’t you agree, Bex?”

“Uh, yeah. The dress is totally you, Cam,” I assured her, noting that Alex was watching the exchange but didn’t speak up. In fact, judging by the tight set of his jaw and his dark eyes, he seemed pretty pissed about something.

“Forgive me for saying,” Eric added, “but might I recommend a heel that will accentuate your legs? With the color and the high slit, it will highlight all the work you’ve done as a dancer.”

Cami and I exchanged baffled looks. When had Eric turned into the fashion expert?

Finally, Cami let out a soft laugh. “I mean, you’re right.”

Janice nodded. “I have just the pair in mind for the dress.”

“Alex?” Cami looked at him, clearly reading her boyfriend’s mood.

Alex’s expression was still pinched. “I’m certain I’ll love whatever you select.”

“You mean you’ll love peeling it off me later.” Cami grinned and looked at me, but the look Eric exchanged with his brother made goose bumps erupt across my arms.

Alex pushed angrily to his feet. “Excuse me. I need to make a phone call.” He spun on his heels and stalked through the boutique to the front door, then shoved the glass open and stepped outside.

Cami's face fell. "I should check on him," she murmured, hurrying back into the dressing room with Janice at her heels to help her out of the gown.

I turned to Eric, trying to play it off as amusing, even though something in my gut was warning me there was a problem. "Should I be concerned with how much attention you're giving to Cami's dress?"

Eric flashed me an indulgent smile as his hands came up to frame my face. "My love, are you jealous?"

"No," I replied, genuinely meaning it. To be jealous, I'd have to care about Eric, and that wasn't happening.

He chuckled. "My sweet love *is* jealous." He swooped in for a quick kiss that turned my insides to ash. "There's absolutely no need to be. I just thought her dress was appropriate for the... occasion."

"For my grandmother's birthday celebration?" My brows rose.

He gave a noncommittal hum as Cami came out of the dressing room. She flashed me a tight smile before chasing after Alex.

Janice exited after her and passed the red dress to an associate before looking at me. "Will you need shoes to match?"

"Yes," Eric answered for me. "A low heel. Nothing too high. Can't have my future wife looking like a whore." He flashed me a wink, but my stomach soured.

So, *I* couldn't wear heels, but Camille could?

That didn't make sense.

"Eric..." I started, but I wasn't sure where to go from there.

He held my gaze, his eyes sparkling with a glint that made me shudder. "It's going to be a spectacular night, my love. The start of the rest of our lives together."

CHAPTER 37



BEX

Eric dropped me off at home later that afternoon, citing a business meeting he couldn't get out of. I didn't fight him; I'd take any and all chances to get away from him.

Lunch had been strange. Alex barely paid attention to anyone, including Cami, which only worried my cousin more. Eric had kept the conversation going, asking my cousin about her upcoming dance performances and talking about our wedding.

I did manage to get everyone to agree to keep our engagement under wraps until after Mémé's event, telling them all that I didn't want to detract from my grandmother's party. Plus, I told Eric that we deserved our own moment to announce our news, and he seemed to love that idea.

As I trudged up the front stairs, pausing to blow Eric a kiss, I realized how utterly drained I was. I hated lying, and I'd spent the day lying to one of my favorite people in the world.

I pushed open the door and saw the house manager, Yvette, in the front hall. Yvette had been part of my life for years. She was only a few years younger than my grandparents and had worked for them almost as long as they'd been married. Yvette wasn't just an employee; she was family.

Which was why she had no problem speaking her mind when she saw me.

"Rebecca, cher, you look exhausted," she chastised, her brow furrowing as she came over and pressed a hand to my forehead. "Are you coming down with something?"

"No," I assured her. "Just didn't sleep all that well."

"Ah, well, perhaps it would be best to tell your late-night suitor to take an

evening off?" She gave me a pointed stare.

Of course she'd noticed Court, because as good as my guy was at breaking and entering, Yvette knew this house like the back of her hand. Nothing escaped her attention.

"Please don't say anything," I whispered.

Her expression turned annoyed. "You know I won't lie for you. If you're old enough to entertain a nighttime visitor, then you're old enough to be honest with your grandparents and your mother. Besides, your grandmother hasn't stopped raving about your gentleman caller, so I doubt she'd be upset."

"It's not him," I confessed. "Eric isn't the one who... It's complicated, Yvette."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Rebecca, what are you doing, cher?"

"I know what it looks like," I admitted, adjusting the gown in my arms, "but it's not that."

"And how do you plan to explain *that*?" Yvette's gaze dropped to the ring on my finger.

"It's—"

"—complicated," she finished for me with a frown. "The little Rebecca I knew would never lie or cheat. What has gotten into you?"

"Eric is... He's not the guy for me" I confessed. "But I need him to think he is."

Her blue eyes widened. "Cher—"

I grabbed her hand and squeezed. "I promise I'll tell you everything. I'll tell Mom and Mémé and Papa too, but for right now, I can't. Please, Yvette. I'm not asking you to lie for me. I'm just asking that you not bring up the guy in my room. Or the ring."

Yvette sighed. "All right, cher." She cupped my cheek with her hand. "I've known you since you were a babe, and I suppose I can trust your judgment."

Relief sank into my bones, and my knees almost gave out. "Thank you, Yvette."

She didn't look happy, but she nodded. "Is that your dress for tomorrow evening?"

"Yes."

She held out her arms. "I'll see that it's ready for you tomorrow."

"Thank you," I murmured, passing her the dress.

She gave me a final stiff nod, and I whirled and ran up the stairs before she could take it back. I didn't breathe again until I was in my bedroom.

I looked around my room, my heart sinking when I didn't see Court or his bag. Tugging off the ring, I tossed it onto my dresser and spotted a folded piece of paper.

B-

Had to take care of some things. Be back later.

-C

The simple message wasn't exactly what I needed, but it would suffice until Court was back tonight.

Still feeling edgy, I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Maddie's number. She answered the video chat on the second ring.

"Hey, babe!" she greeted, her smile bright. Judging from the background, she was at home and in her bedroom, propped up against the headboard. "By the way, welcome to the club."

I frowned. "The club?"

"Yeah. The *I'm fake engaged* club," she replied. "Although, I'm kinda annoyed you didn't tell me the not-big news yourself. You can make it up to me by letting me *not* be your maid of honor."

"Ha ha," I deadpanned. "And Cami already took that spot."

"Eh. Just as well. But enjoy your new almost-wifed-up status."

"You're hysterical," I drawled.

"Hey, all I'm saying is, it worked out pretty well for me." She waggled her eyebrows.

"Ew, no." I shuddered at the idea of really being engaged to Eric. "Even if I didn't find him morally reprehensible, I'm not on the market."

Her blue eyes widened. "Uh, what now?"

I didn't bother hiding my grin. "Court and I are together."

She let out a shriek. "Bex!"

Off camera, something slammed like a door being thrown open.

Maddie ducked her head, shooting someone I couldn't see a small smile. "Sorry, Ry."

"Jesus," he swore. "Don't scream like that, baby. You scared the shit outta me."

"Did you know Bex and Court are now a thing?" she demanded, glaring at her husband.

"Seriously? About time he nudded the fuck up and got the girl," Ryan

remarked. “And for the record, no, the dipshit didn’t mention it, but it does explain why he was more pissed off than usual during our debriefing.”

Maddie’s expression shifted, her eyes taking on a decidedly puppy-dog, begging quality.

Ryan sighed heavily. “Don’t make that face.”

“But, Ryan,” she whined.

“You’re not coming to Paris with us,” he snapped. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Wait, they’re definitely coming to Paris?” I asked.

Maddie nodded at me. “Yeah. Ry’s packing now. So are Linc and Ash. I want to come, but *someone* thinks it’s too dangerous.”

“Because it is,” Ryan gritted out.

“Fine.” Maddie let out a sad breath and turned her attention back to me. “I guess I’ll just sit in this house all by myself. Go to school by myself. And if something goes wrong, I can call—oh, wait. There’s no one I *can* call, because you’ll all be on the other side of the planet!”

“Goddammit,” Ryan hissed.

Maddie winked at me, keeping her voice soft and wobbly. “So, if I fall down the stairs or get into a car wreck or accidentally eat a freaking peanut —”

“Fuck. Fine. Pack a bag, but you’re staying in the goddamn hotel, Maddie,” Ryan snapped.

“Of course,” she agreed instantly, but somehow, I doubted my best friend could or would be contained to a hotel room.

My heart lifted. “You’re coming to Paris?”

She nodded with a grin and seemed to wait for Ryan to move before whispering, “Seriously, bringing up the peanut incident is my golden ticket.”

“Mads, you almost *died*,” I reminded her. Maddie had a severe peanut allergy, and at her eighteenth birthday party, she’d eaten a peanut-contaminated cupcake.

One bite was all it had taken to have her throat close up. I still remembered the way she’d passed out. Linc stabbing her leg with the EpiPen. All of us hauling ass to get her to the hospital.

“Eh.” She shrugged like it was no big deal, and maybe to her, it wasn’t. After all, the girl had switched lives with her dead twin, been locked in an institution by her psycho dad, and then almost burned to death in a house fire set by her father-in-law.

I bit my bottom lip. “Court didn’t mention the guys were all coming. He

said maybe, but—”

“They literally decided an hour ago,” Maddie told me. “Apparently Rook’s friend got some intel about several big-name douche nozzles showing up in Paris, and he asked the guys to come over.”

I nodded, relieved that Court wasn’t keeping stuff from me.

“So, you and Court?” Maddie smiled. “When did this happen?”

“Four days ago,” I admitted.

Her jaw dropped open. “Rebecca Whittier! You finally decided to get the guy of your dreams, and it’s taken you four freaking days to call me? As your bestie, I’m not sure if I should be pissed that it took you so long to tell me or jump up and down because you two finally got together.”

“Definitely the latter,” I said with a small laugh.

“I want all the details,” she demanded, sitting up straighter.

I gave her the rundown of everything that had happened. From the disastrous dinner with Eric and his friends to Court interrupting the date. I told her about moving in with Court, and the stupid fight we’d had when I’d seen the text messages.

“He’s *such* an idiot,” she seethed, shaking her head.

“He is,” I agreed. “But he’s *my* idiot now, I guess.”

“Yet another club we can both be in,” she giggled. “The *I’m with an alphahole who thinks he knows best* club.”

I inhaled sharply and nodded. “Definitely.”

“So things are good with you guys?” she asked.

A dreamy smile touched my lips. “Yeah. We’re really good. We talked out everything. I’m not saying there’s a magic wand to fix a decade of bad shit between us, but....”

“Just a magic dick?” she offered with a wry grin.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “You know that’s my least favorite thing in a book—when a girl is magically fixed by a guy’s dick. Like, really?”

“Okay, fair,” she conceded. “A magic dick can’t fix real-world problems. But... sometimes it makes them easier to handle.”

I tried to fight a smile and lost. “Valid.”

“Ryan gave me a synopsis of what’s been going on with you in Paris,” she said, “but seriously, Bex, are you okay with all of this?”

“I have to be,” I answered. “If I can help stop Eric, help stop some of these guys, then I want to. I *need* to.”

“I get it, trust me,” Maddie responded, her tone soft. “Even now, I’ve been talking to Ryan about college. I always thought I wanted to be an architect, but the more I learn, the more I want to help Phoenix. Maybe I’ll go into social work.”

“You can still help Phoenix, and others, with an architecture degree,” I pointed out. “You can help design buildings and homes for people that need them.”

She tilted her head. “Yeah, maybe.”

My bedroom door opened, and I looked up as Court slipped inside. My heart gave a little kickstart. He looked all sorts of sexy in ripped jeans, a white t-shirt, and his leather jacket.

But then I saw the look in his dark eyes, and I froze. That look told me I wasn’t going to like what came next.

“Mads, I’ve gotta go,” I said. “Court just got back.”

“Yeah, I should pack before Ryan changes his mind,” she said. “But I’ll see you soon, B.”

“See you soon,” I echoed and hung up. I slid off my bed and waited for Court to come to me.

He sat on the edge of my bed and tugged me between his spread legs, burying his face against my chest. My hands instantly delved into his soft hair, the strands still cold from the freezing temperatures outside.

“What’s wrong?” I finally asked, bracing myself for the worst.

“I need to talk to you,” he said, his tone somber as he looked up at me, those whiskey-colored eyes uncertain.

“Okay.”

“Becca, we’ve been keeping an eye out for guys coming into town. Men and women that we know are affiliated with the clubs and parties that Westford organizes,” he started.

I nodded, following along. “Right. Maddie mentioned Trick saying as much. That’s why she and the guys are coming to Paris.”

He looked surprised. “Maddie’s coming, too?” He gave a slightly bemused smile. “Never mind. I can see her being very convincing.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Now tell me the news I’m not gonna like.”

His gaze met mine, and his hands tightened on the backs of my thighs. “One of the men we saw come into town last night—a man who met with some other people of interest today—it’s your dad, sweetheart.”

My eyes drifted shut as the news leveled a part of my heart.

“I’m sorry,” Court added, standing up and pulling me fully against his chest.

My head fit perfectly under his chin, and I burrowed against him as the news rolled over me like a tidal wave.

“I guess he didn’t tell you he was in town?”

I pulled back. “You think I wouldn’t have told you? You know I’ve been ducking his calls. And it’s not like he’d leave a voicemail and say *Hey honey, I’m in town to commit a bunch of felonies—let me know if you’re free for brunch?*”

He cupped my face, his long fingers cradling me. “I’m not accusing you. I just didn’t think the guy was enough of a douche to come to Paris and not at least try to see you.”

I let out a bitter laugh and twisted away from him. “Yeah, well, clearly I mean a lot to him.”

“I’m sorry, baby girl,” he murmured.

I wrapped my arms around myself and turned back with a shrug. “You’d think I’d be used to people I love not giving a shit about me, but it still hurts every damn time.” Tears burned my eyes and spilled over before I could blink them back.

Court grimaced. “He’s an asshole, Becca. That’s not on you.”

“He’s my dad,” I croaked.

“And?” His eyes blazed as he closed the distance between us and grabbed my shoulders. “Baby, we’re *not* our fathers. You’re not, Ryan’s not, Linc’s not... I’m sure as shit not, and neither are my brothers. Just because we got thrown into the shitty end of the genetics pool doesn’t mean it defines us.”

I looked up at him, my heart still broken even as his words hit home.

He pressed a hand flat against my chest. “You have a good heart, Becca. You always have. That won’t change because your dad is a fuckup. Nothing can change the woman you are. The...” He sucked in a deep breath. “The woman that I love.”

It was like storm clouds drifting apart for a ray of sunlight after a hurricane. His words hit my soul, sinking in with a warmth that helped something click into place. A piece that I’d been missing since I was a little girl.

Twice now he’d admitted to loving me. “I feel like I keep waiting for you to take it back,” I confessed, speaking my biggest fear into existence.

“Becca, I’ve loved you since I first laid eyes on you,” he told me, his tone

fierce. “I loved you before I even knew what it meant to love someone. Don’t you get it? I’ve been a fucking disaster since I tried giving you up, because how can a person live without their heart?”

“Court.” I was at a loss, emotions overwhelming me to the point of crippling me.

“It’s okay,” he assured me with a tight smile. “I still haven’t earned it.”

I pressed a hand over his lips. “Love isn’t something you earn. It just *is*, Court. And I love you, too. I always have, and I always will.”

He released a shuddering breath, his shoulders falling like I’d removed a massive weight from them as he dropped his forehead to mine. “I won’t let you down again, Becca. I swear.”

“I know,” I answered, and I did.

I knew it in my heart, in my soul, in every fiber of my being.

Were we perfect? Absolutely not.

But we were perfect for each other.

CHAPTER 38



BEX

“Happy birthday, Mémé.” I leaned in, kissing the soft, pale skin of her face as I wrapped her in a hug.

“Thank you, bébé,” she returned, her smile radiant as she looked around the ballroom. I followed her gaze, taking the time to see what she was seeing.

The ballroom of the Montpelier Paris was draped in swaths of gauzy white fabric with twinkling lights, giving it a celestial look. The large central dance floor was surrounded by round tables with crisp white linens and candlelit centerpieces, and an eight-piece orchestra was playing on a dais, their music flowing easily through the packed space.

I hadn’t been to this hotel in years, but it was owned by one of Mémé’s oldest friends. Considered a luxury boutique hotel, it was set in the heart of the 6th arrondissement and was always booked solid a year in advance. Cami had once mentioned it was her dream to get married in this very ballroom.

Mémé’s party was the It event of the winter season. I’d spotted several ambassadors, heads of state, and a few royal family members from neighboring European countries in the crowd. As part of the family, I was let in before all the other guests, but I knew for a fact that there was an endless parade of limos waiting to drop off guests at the formal red carpet.

“Mrs. Moreau.” Mémé’s personal assistant, Gianna, appeared behind her with a warm smile for me. Gianna had been handling Mémé’s affairs for over two decades now. With her hair in an angled silver bob and her critical blue-eyed gaze that missed no detail, she was a woman who knew how to get things done. “It’s time for pictures with the board.”

In lieu of traditional birthday presents, my grandmother had opted to tie her birthday gala to her favorite charity, a local Parisian organization that helped at-risk youth find alternatives to the city's growing crime statistics.

Mémé gave a nod. "Of course. Excuse us, will you, bébé? Perhaps you can find your young gentleman." She waggled her eyebrows at me, and I gritted my teeth around a smile.

I'd pushed off Eric arriving early with me as part of the family by telling him Mémé needed my help getting ready, but he'd already texted me five times to let me know his position in the limo queue.

Taking a minute to just breathe and enjoy the moment, I watched Mémé and Gianna wander off to join Papa.

"Look who I found," Cami squealed from behind me.

Turning, I saw my cousin flanked by Alex and Eric.

There went my peaceful minute.

Eric's smile was brittle as he pulled me into his arms. "You look spectacular," he announced, then lowered his voice to add, "Though, I am a bit annoyed at the wait time to see you, my love." His hands squeezed my hips as if in warning. "And I thought we discussed a *low* heel."

I gritted my teeth. "I know," I simpered for his sake, "but I kept tripping over the dress in the low heel. I needed something more."

He looked pissed but gave me a tight nod.

I squared my shoulders and prepared to win my Oscar nomination. "I'm so sorry for the delay getting you inside," I whined, letting my expression crumple. "It's all my fault. I got so caught up trying to help Mémé..."

Seemingly pleased that I was upset, he kissed my forehead. "All is forgiven, pet."

Pet.

Why did that particular term of endearment rankle so damn much?

Looking past him, I caught Cami giving Alex a bright smile... that he resolutely ignored. He snagged a glass of champagne from the tray of a nearby waiter and downed it like a shot.

I shot Cami a quizzical look, but she shrugged it off, her blue eyes sad. "Cam—"

Eric grabbed my hand. "I see the chief justice. We should say hello." His gray eyes glinted with enthusiasm as he pointed out a tall, slender man, who had to be pushing eighty, leaning heavily on a cane.

I let Eric lead me toward the chief justice, who gave Eric a knowing smile

and dismissed the two men in suits he'd been talking to.

"Eric, my boy, look at you," he said with a grin, his gaze moving past Eric and raking down my body in a way that sent goose bumps skittering across my flesh. "And who is this lovely creature?"

"Rebecca Whittier," Eric responded, his hand resting against my hip like I was a prize poodle he was showing off. "She's Mrs. Moreau's granddaughter."

"Ah. The one from the States."

"Bex, this is Chief Justice DuChamps. He's a... close friend," Eric finished with a conspiratorial smirk.

Chief Justice DuChamps returned the look. "Quite right." His shrewd gaze landed on me once more. "Whittier."

Eric's grin increased. "Yes, she's Malcolm's daughter."

The chief justice chuckled. "I had lunch with your father earlier today."

"Did you?" I tried to keep the surprise from making my voice squeak. "I've been so busy with my grandmother's event that I haven't had time to see him yet."

Eric squeezed my hip. "I think you'll see him sooner than you think."

DuChamps straightened. "It's confirmed then?"

Eric nodded. "Seems like an ideal time, doesn't it? Half the police are either here or controlling traffic in the vicinity. Having so many heads of state in one place was just what we needed. Many are sending buyers on their behalf."

As they spoke to each other like I'd ceased to exist, warning bells went off in the back of my mind.

DuChamps clapped Eric on the shoulder. "I won't be one of them. I prefer to inspect my merchandise myself to make sure it's exactly as ordered." He lifted a bushy dark brow.

Eric straightened. "I can assure you that it is, and I've already arranged transport back to your island in the Pacific for it."

DuChamps looked at me. "This one's going places, young lady. You picked a fine horse to *ride*." The insinuation felt oily and wrong as he grinned and wandered away.

My brain whirled as I tried to fit the pieces together. "Eric—"

He turned to me, his gray eyes sparkling. "I should've told you, pet, but things just came together today. There was a complication I didn't want the chief justice to know about, but you handled yourself brilliantly." His lips

crashed down on mine, his kiss bruising.

“C-complication?” I stammered as he pulled back.

His face twisted into a scowl. “Apparently there’s been a task force assembled to stop our event. Something the bloody Americans cooked up. Stupid wankers don’t even know that one of their own team is one of *us*.” He let out a caustic laugh.

Trick. Someone on his team was working with the bad guys, even though he said they’d been hand-selected to avoid corruption.

Holy shit, how deep did this go?

Like dominoes falling, the pieces clicked together.

“You’re having the auction tonight,” I whispered.

His face twisted as he grabbed my elbow and pushed me back several steps until we were tucked into a small alcove. “Shut up. Discretion is key in this business. Never, *ever* say words that can be construed as anything other than a business deal.”

I shuddered, recalling the easy way he and the chief justice had discussed *merchandise*. Nothing they’d spoken of was illegal. They hadn’t said they were trading humans, just that a shipment had been arranged. Legally they could’ve been talking about a couch that Eric’s company was having delivered.

After a beat, Eric’s expression softened. “Brilliant, isn’t it? With as many foreign dignitaries and diplomats as your grandparents have invited, the Paris police have thrown most of their resources into protecting people here. No one will ever know what’s taking place less than a mile away.”

My heart slammed against my ribs, threatening to gallop free. I wondered if Eric could see the shock and horror that must be written on my face.

I needed to call Court. To tell him and the others what was going on. They needed to warn *Trick* that his team was compromised. My phone was tucked into a small clutch, and all I wanted to do was yank it out and call Court.

Eric whirled me in a fast circle, grinning like an absolute maniac. “Bex, this is going to change everything for us. After tonight, they’ll see how valuable I am. We’ll rule the European sector and be invincible.” He pressed his body against mine, a prominent ridge poking into my belly.

In an instant, my blood seemed to turn to ice, but I had to fake excitement. Couldn’t let him know that I wasn’t Team Take Over the World.

Instead, I looped my arms around his neck and smiled up at him. “Sounds

like you've got it all figured out, honey."

He nodded, swaying us as he dipped his head to whisper the rest of his diabolical plan in my ear. "Offering to host the event at my warehouse by the pier was precisely what I needed. It allows me to showcase just how fully integrated an experience I can provide the buyers, from location to delivery."

I toyed with the ends of his hair while swallowing a wave of bile. "That sounds incredible. I can't believe you pulled it together so quickly."

He glowed at the compliment. "I hope you don't mind cutting the evening short. I'm sure you'll be able to make an excuse with your grandmother—"

"You want me to leave?" I jerked in his hold.

His eyes narrowed. "Of course I do. We're partners, Bex. You and I... With my abilities and your connections, we'll be unstoppable. I need you at my side tonight."

I swallowed hard. "Okay, Eric. Of course. Let me go tell my grandmother I need to leave. I'm sure I'll come up with a reasonable excuse. Do we need to leave now?"

"We'll all leave in a few minutes," he replied.

"All?" I echoed.

He smiled. "One of the buyers requested something... specific. Delivering on it will help prove my point."

Before I could ask what the hell *that* meant, he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. Then his gaze darkened, and he nearly crushed my fingers. "Where is your ring?"

I hissed a breath, instinctively trying to pull away. "Ow! Let go—you're hurting me."

"Where the *fuck* is your ring, Rebecca?" he snarled.

"I left it at home because we both agreed to wait until after this event to announce the engagement," I retorted.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I suppose I did agree to that, didn't I?"

I watched him the way I would a dog with rabies, wary and ready for him to attack. "Let me go," I repeated, my voice low.

His nostrils flared slightly as he tossed my hand away before digging his phone from his pocket. Whatever he saw brought a terrifying smile to his face, and I was rapidly realizing how completely unhinged he was.

"Meet me in the underground parking level in ten minutes, pet," he murmured, tucking the phone away. "We'll leave then."

I nodded and had taken one step away when he grabbed me yet again, this

time grinding the small bones in my wrist until I was sure they were dust.

“Don’t make me come and find you, pet,” he warned before leaning in to kiss me hard before releasing me with a small shove.

I stumbled away from him and hurried from the alcove. I had no idea where my grandparents were, and honestly, I didn’t care. Right now, I needed to make a phone call.

I was almost to the bathroom door when it opened and my mom stepped out. She beamed when she saw me, until she took me in.

Concern lined her face. “Sweetie, what’s wrong?” She took me by the shoulders, looking into my eyes. Our irises were the same shade of hazel, but deep lines had appeared around hers during the past few months.

“I just... really need the bathroom,” I lied, knowing it sounded lame.

“Becca, honey.” She frowned at me. “If something’s wrong—”

“It isn’t,” I insisted. “Just got done dancing, and I’m a little flustered.”

“Does this mean I finally get to meet the infamous Eric?” she asked with a soft laugh. “I’d love for you to introduce us.”

“I will,” I told her. “I just need to fix my makeup and use the bathroom.”

“All right,” she replied with a sigh, letting me pass.

I ducked into the ornate bathroom, thankful it was a private one. Granted, it was the size of a small apartment, with a separate toilet and bidet, a massive mirror framed in gold, and a chaise lounge in addition to the pedestal sink.

My hands trembled as I locked the door and pulled out my phone, almost dropping it. It took three tries to hit Court’s contact. He answered before the second ring, probably wondering why I was calling him from *my* phone and not the emergency one. This stupid little clutch had room for only one phone, and I, shockingly, hadn’t expected to cut out of the party and go to the auction.

If Eric was watching my phone or checked it... Shit, I’d deal with that later.

“What’s wrong?” His warm voice almost sent me to my knees. The concern in his tone ramped up my own anxiety, and I yearned to be curled up in my bed wrapped in his arms.

“It’s tonight. The auction is happening tonight,” I gasped, gulping down air.

“What the fuck?” he swore, then covered the mouthpiece to shout something I couldn’t make out. “Baby, where are you?”

“At the Montpelier, but I have to leave for the auction with Eric in a few minutes.” I dropped onto the chaise lounge.

“The fuck you are,” he growled. “Are you alone?”

“I locked myself in the bathroom,” I admitted.

“Good. I’m coming for you. Stay put.” I could hear him moving now, his breaths coming in sharp pants as he hurried.

“Court, I *can’t*,” I whispered. “He’ll come for me. If I don’t go, it’ll mess everything up.”

“Becca, listen to me,” he snarled, “do *not* fucking leave the bathroom. If he comes after you, make a fucking scene, baby. Scream, fight, slap him. Whatever you do—do *not* go with him. We have no idea where the auction is —”

“It’s at a warehouse he owns near the pier. He’s planning on using his ships to transport people,” I shot back, tears clogging my throat as I realized how completely out of my depth I was. “Court, he said someone on Trick’s team is working with him.”

“Motherfucker,” Court ground out. “Becca—”

“Do you know where the warehouse is?”

“What?”

I shut my eyes. “Do you know where the warehouse is?”

He was silent for a beat before admitting, “Yeah. It’s one of the places we had flagged, actually. The location makes sense, but, baby, we’re easily twenty minutes away. Maybe more with traffic, and if Trick’s team is compromised... We can reach out to Paris PD.”

“Considering Eric’s people have Chief Justice DuChamps in their back pocket, I wouldn’t be surprised if the police are compromised, too.” Hopelessness settled around my heart like a lead blanket.

“Fuck.”

“I know,” I murmured. “If I don’t go, if I stay here, what happens?”

Court was silent.

“What happens, Court?” I demanded.

“They’ll cut their losses,” he rasped. “They’ll kill everyone. And Eric will come after you. Westford, my dad... Fuck, Becca, they’ll all come for you. But I can protect you, baby girl.”

“And my family?” A tear tumbled down my cheek.

“Becca.” His tone was anguished.

“They’ll kill my family, won’t they? To get to me?”

His silence was all the answer I needed.

“I’m going to play this thing out,” I started, my voice sounding a hell of a lot stronger than I felt. “I’m going with Eric, and you’re going to come riding in with the cavalry. This is one of the only times I’m down with you saving me like a damsel in distress.”

“No,” he bit out. “Fucking *no*. I’m not risking you.”

“Court, do you trust me?”

His hesitation wasn’t because he didn’t trust me; it was because he *did* trust me. Just like I knew he’d always have my back. It just sucked that this was the stress test I was about to put us through.

“You know I do,” he finally said, frustration lacing his words. I could picture him stabbing his fingers through his dark hair.

“Then you’re going to trust that I can handle myself. You’re gonna tell me you love me and trust me to do this, because you believe in me.”

“Becca.”

I barely swallowed a sob. “Tell me you love me, Court.”

“You’re my entire fucking reason for existing, Becca Whittier,” he vowed. “I trust you. I love you.”

I choked on my tears. “I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

“Becca—”

I hung up before he could talk me out of it.

Every single cell in my body wanted to hide in this bathroom and wait to be rescued. I wanted to bury my head in the sand and forget this nightmare. But if Eric suspected I was betraying him, he’d lose it. He’d kill all those people they had lined up to sell, he’d come for my family... He had to be stopped.

I stood up and looked at my phone. Before I could overthink it, I made the judgment call to delete my call logs and texts with Court. Maybe I was being paranoid, or I’d seen too many spy movies, but I had to see this through to the end.

After washing my hands and using a damp paper towel to blot away the eyeliner smudges under my eyes, I straightened my spine. Staring at my reflection I whispered, “You can do this.”

God, I hoped I could do this.

I turned and unlocked the bathroom door, sending up prayers for a miracle to whoever might be listening.

CHAPTER 39



COURT

I picked up my coffee mug from the end table beside me and hurled it at the wall. It shattered in a spray of ceramic shards and lukewarm coffee. “Fuck!”

Rook looked up, his expression tense as he talked to Trick on the phone, relaying the latest shitshow. Bishop shot me a grim look from where he was reloading a magazine clip.

A familiar hand clapped down on my shoulder, and I turned to see my best friend behind me.

“We’ll get her out, bro,” Linc vowed, his tone solemn. His blue eyes, usually full of mischief and laughter, were cold and lethal. He’d arrived with my oldest brother and the rest of my friends only twenty-two minutes earlier. They were jet-lagged and exhausted.

And ready to kick some ass.

Behind him, Ryan and Royal were loading the last of our weapons. Ash was sitting at the computer, monitoring the roads and finding us the best route to the pier. And on the far side of the room, Maddie hovered in an open doorway, her face pale.

“I want to come,” she insisted.

Ryan whirled. “Mads, no. We talked about this.”

“But Bex is in trouble,” she pressed. “She might need me.”

Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose, likely praying for strength to deal with his wife. “Madison, I will literally tie you to the bed to keep your ass here.”

“Ry—”

“Maddie,” Ash cut in, his tone gentle, “you’d be a liability. They’d have

to split their focus between keeping you and Bex safe.”

I barely suppressed a snort, because he was wrong. My focus was entirely on my girl, and as much as I loved Maddie, if it came down to her or Becca... There was no choice to be made.

That being said, Becca would be heartbroken if something happened to her best friend.

“I don’t care who’s coming or not, but I’m going,” I announced, heading for the door.

“Court—” Royal began.

“I swear to Christ I will lay you out if you even think about stopping me,” I threatened, wondering if this was how the Hulk felt before he turned into a green beast that could level cities. Furious energy roiled in my veins, adrenaline and fear a toxic cocktail that threatened to undo me.

Royal, calm and collected as ever, just shot me a *who the fuck are you kidding* look. He held up a hand, keys dangling from it. “I was going to offer to drive.”

I exhaled a hard breath, my brain spinning with how much shit could go wrong in the next thirty minutes. Panic clawed up my throat, and I wondered if it was possible for a twenty-two-year-old to drop dead of a heart attack.

“We’re all going,” Ryan said, then looked at Maddie. “Except you.”

Her jaw set in a mulish line as she huffed, pissed that she was being sidelined.

“I’m staying, too,” Ash reminded her, his gaze never leaving the monitor.

“But you’re at least doing something,” she muttered, running a hand through her blonde hair. She turned to me, aqua eyes flashing. “Get my bestie back, Court.”

I nodded. “I will.” I’d never meant anything more in my life.

Except when I’d told Becca that I loved her, but that wasn’t a promise. It wasn’t even a vow. The word hadn’t been invented yet to explain the soul-deep covenant that bound us together. She was mine, and I was hers. That was now the sum of my entire world.

I’d just been the idiot who’d been too scared to risk his heart before. Too blinded by my own ideas of how to keep her safe and coddled.

But she wasn’t a fragile little girl anymore. She was a vibrant, incredible woman who hadn’t let the world beat her down. Who, even at this very minute, was putting herself at risk to help others. If that was who Becca was, I would embrace it. I’d stand in the shadows, forever the guardian who fought

the monsters so she could thrive in the light.

“Got ’em,” Ash called, leaning in and tapping a few buttons to enhance a screen.

I pushed my way through the room and leaned over his shoulder to see a nondescript black limo gliding through the Parisian streets toward the city outskirts.

“That’s the car Lambert-Durand arrived in,” Ash added, his green eyes narrowed as he concentrated. “It left the parking garage five minutes ago and is registered to Lambert-Singh Shipping.”

“She’s in there?” I demanded, my chest giving a painful squeeze.

Ash grimaced. “I mean, I can’t see inside the car, but I’d be willing to bet on it.” He spun in his seat and looked at a separate laptop with a bunch of gibberish on the screen that I didn’t understand. “I tapped into her phone. The trace puts her inside the car or running alongside it.”

Or shoved into a trunk. Or...

Air hissed through my teeth as I bowed my head, fighting to stay in control and not surrender to the overwhelming panic building in my chest.

“Just got off the phone with Trick,” Rook announced, his shoulders bunched with tension. “They have an idea who the mole is now, but they have to contain and isolate him before they can meet us at the warehouse.”

I pressed my lips into a tight line, irritation licking up my spine. “We need to go now.”

“Agreed,” Rook replied with a tight nod.

“Be careful,” Maddie whispered, fear in her eyes.

Ryan crossed the room and kissed her, holding her face in the palm of one hand. “We’ll be back soon *with* Bex. Stay with Ash, okay?”

She nodded, a tremulous smile on her lips. “Go get our girl.”

No.

I was going to get *my* girl.

CHAPTER 40



BEX

“We’re here,” Eric announced, smiling at me in the dark interior of the limo.

The engine cut off, the driver getting out and coming around to open Eric’s door. He got out into a dimly lit parking lot before reaching back and extending a hand to me. As much as I wanted not to touch him, I grabbed his hand and let him pull me out of the car.

Cold air whipped across my cheeks and stung my eyes. I caught the faint scent of water and trash that marked the Seine and blinked through icy tears to look at the brick building looming ahead.

A quick glance around showed we were in an industrial area that, as Eric had promised, ended at the riverfront with a private pier. Different size boats were docked alongside what looked like a massive cargo ship. Metal crates in various colors were stacked four-high on the deck.

The warehouse was a three-story rectangle with thin slivers of windows that seemed blacked out. A few low-wattage lights cast an eerie yellow glow, illuminating the dark, reflective lines of several parked cars. Ahead, a large metal door was pulled open to allow entry to a couple dressed like they’d been at the party. The woman’s red dress shimmered in the lights as she disappeared inside and the door closed.

In the distance, I could make out faint outlines of other buildings, but there was no sign of life. This was an area of Paris I’d never been to. It had a slightly haunted feel, like you could tell no one ever came out here.

“Eric!” a voice called, and I turned to see Colby heading toward us, his hands shoved in the pockets of his peacoat.

“Colby,” Eric greeted, his tone warm even as his grip on my arm tightened.

Colby rubbed his hands together in front of his face. “Ready for the festivities?” His gaze raked down me, an appreciate leer in his smile.

“Of course,” Eric replied with a breezy chuckle. “I assume the others are inside?”

“Brent is,” Colby answered. “Geoffry was passed out with a bottle of tequila when I left his estate this afternoon. I doubt the fool will wake up.”

“And Henry?”

My skin prickled as Colby’s gaze turned vicious with a side of homicidal.

“Detained for the evening.” Colby’s voice was more chilling than the bitter wind coming off the water. “I’ll see to him later. If you’ll excuse me, I must join my father. He’s looking for a new toy to add to his collection.”

“Of course,” Eric said with an indulgent smile, and we watched as Colby sauntered away toward a group of men several yards away.

My insides twisted with fear and worry. “Eric—”

“Shall we, my love?” Eric held out the crook of his arm for me, and I went to take it. My clutch brushed his arm, and he glared at it. “Leave that in the car.”

A nervous laugh escaped me. “What? Why?”

“No phones inside,” he replied, his tone curt. He jerked his chin back toward the interior of the car.

I hesitated, and he ripped it from my hand and hurled it back into the car, then slammed the door. He crowded me against the side of the car, caging me in with a snarl.

Instinctively I looked at the driver, but he was staring straight ahead, studiously ignoring me. Great, he clearly wasn’t going to help me out. “Eric —”

He pounded a fist on top of the car, right next to my head. “You will *not* disobey me. When we walk into that warehouse, you are my pet. My prize. You will behave the way a woman is supposed to behave. You will be quiet and do exactly as I tell you. You represent *me*, dove. Don’t forget that.”

Holy shitballs. Did he really think that was how women were supposed to behave? Like we were dogs that could be made to heel?

Eff that noise. This bitch would totally bite back.

Just maybe not at *this* moment.

Seething, I pushed my rage down deep and reminded myself I needed to

hold on. Court was coming for me, and I wouldn't want to be Eric when he got here.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, lowering my lashes and trying to look as penitent as a Catholic schoolgirl who'd been busted smoking by the nuns.

He rolled his shoulders. "That's better. Truly, I think you like provoking me, pet." He stroked my head, toying with the curled ends of my hair.

I shook my head. "No."

His smile was predatory. "Now, let's try this again." He held out an elbow and gave me an indulgent smile when I slipped my arm into his.

My heels clicked against the asphalt as I let him lead me to the warehouse, my gaze roving over the structure and drinking in every detail. Aside from the windows, there was an emergency fire escape with rusted bars leading from the roof. Other than the single door at the front, there was a small door near the back right corner. Probably another emergency exit.

When we reached the door, it opened again, revealing two men in suits with guns. When they saw Eric, they gave him a nod and let us inside.

Inside wasn't much better than outside. It was better lit, but the concrete floors and cinder block walls were cold and stark. There were walls partitioning the space, but they didn't reach all the way to the exposed, industrial ceiling. A metal catwalk lined the outer walls with guards positioned in several locations, and I spotted more men with guns walking around the main floor. The entryway split to the right and left ten feet ahead.

No one seemed to be in the entrance area now, but I could hear loud conversations coming from the other sides of the partitions.

Eric pointed left. "Look in here." He pulled me forward, and when we rounded the left corner, I was stunned by what I saw.

A large stage, complete with a podium and spotlights, took up the far wall. In front of it were rows of seats. To the right, a bar had been set up. A few people were sitting, and several men were gathered at the bar. To the left a staircase led up to a more private area with mirrored walls as its front, and I suspected it was one-way glass.

"That's my office, where we monitor everything," Eric told me, following my gaze. He pointed to the front of the seating area, where a section had been cordoned off with honest-to-crap red velvet ropes and gold stanchions. "Our VIP section."

Next he showed me a series of tables and laptops at the back. "We also stream the event for those who can't attend in person." Half a dozen men

wordlessly manned them, never glancing up at us.

“Wow.” It was all I could manage to squeak out without asking him exactly how many times he’d been dropped as an infant. Seriously, how did a person get this fucked in the head?

I mentally counted the rows of seats. It was at least ten deep and seven across. Were they really expecting seventy people to attend?

My grip on Eric tightened as the room seemed to tilt. I gasped for air, feeling like the world was collapsing around me.

“Come with me.” Eric didn’t give me a choice, pulling me with him like an errant child. We crossed back through the foyer, where more people were entering, and paused at the opening of the next space. The entryway was covered by a black velvet curtain that partitioned off this room from the other.

A ball of ice formed in my gut as I caught my breath. I could hear muted conversations, and somehow, I just knew that I wouldn’t like whatever was on the other side.

With a flourish, Eric grabbed the edge of the curtain and pulled it aside for me, revealing the large space all at once.

“Holy shit,” I whispered before I could stop myself.

Eric chuckled. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

Honestly, yes. It *was* impressive.

Impressive that people could be this freaking cruel to other people.

Women and children were assembled in lines, chains wrapped around their wrists and ankles, all attached to each other and locked into eye bolts welded into the concrete floor. There were maybe a couple dozen, all shapes and sizes and races. Some as young as maybe ten and others old enough to be my grandmother. But the vast majority were near my age. More than a few had vacant, glassy eyes and looked like they’d been drugged. They shivered on the unforgiving floor, barefoot and dressed to show off maximum skin, most clad in skimpy bikinis, but several were just flat-out naked.

And all around them? Men and women, dressed to walk a red carpet, wandering down the line, surveying them. A few even had notebooks and were writing as they walked by.

Armed guards were stationed throughout the room, watching everything with blank expressions, but four of them stood in a row near the back wall in front of another black curtain.

Words caught in my throat, but I managed to get them out. “What’s back

there?” I pointed at the curtain that partitioned off a separate area.

Eric turned and gave me his full attention, taking my hands. “That’s where we’ve put our special-request orders.”

Static buzzed in my brain. Special requests? Like, for food?

“Pet, you understand that some of the buyers have... particular tastes. It’s a business.”

I was a statue, incapable of processing thoughts or sounds or oxygen in my lungs.

“Bex?” Eric’s expression hardened as a man came up behind him puffing on a cigar. He blew a cloud of noxious fumes into the face of a scrawny teenager nearby.

“Eric,” he greeted, his warm tone rich and throaty. Dressed in a well-fitted charcoal gray suit, he looked like he’d just stepped out of a board meeting. His slicked-back hair glinted in the lights.

Eric shot me one last look, the meaning pretty damn obvious—*behave*.

“Ambassador Nielsen,” Eric returned, shaking his hand. “Have you been here long?”

“Long enough to know that you delivered exactly what I asked for,” he replied, tapping the ash from the end of the cigar onto the floor. His beady brown eyes gave me a quick once-over before I was dismissed. “She’s spectacular.”

Eric smiled, all teeth and smug satisfaction. “It took a bit of extra effort to secure her. Thank you for your patience. Will you be leaving now?”

“No,” the ambassador replied, waving off the idea. “I plan to stay. Who knows? I might find a gift for my brother. Bastard’s marrying an absolute bitch of a woman. A political match, you know. He’ll need someone else when his frigid ice queen can’t be bothered to spread her legs.”

“Let me know if I can assist you in any way,” Eric said.

“You know I will.” He wandered off, pausing to watch as a man pulled back a teenager’s gums to check her teeth like she was a fucking horse.

No, no, no. This was too much.

I wasn’t prepared for *this*. There was no way to fake my way through being okay with any single part of this. Maybe there was a fire alarm I could pull?

“It had to be this way,” Eric was saying, still pulling me past the row of prisoners. He hesitated at the black curtain, looking uncertain. “You trust me, right?”

My gaze snapped to his. “I... Of course.”

“You’re absolute perfection, love,” he breathed, pulling back the black curtain and revealing...

I frowned. Were those... dog cages?

Five of them, all wired metal and boxy shapes, but—*oh, sweet holy mother of baby Yoda*—there were women inside them. Three were asleep. The fourth was sobbing, curled into a ball. But the fifth... The fifth looked at me with big hazel eyes, a bruise forming around one of them. Her blonde hair was a wreck, and her red dress had been torn. Scratches crisscrossed her arms, and a chain with a padlock had been wrapped around her slender throat.

She whimpered, the sound ripping me apart as her thin fingers wrapped around the bars of her cage. “B-Bex.”

I gaped, stunned.

Horrified.

“Cami?”

CHAPTER 41



BEX

Without thinking it through, I lunged forward and fell to my knees in front of Cami. My hands touched hers for a brief second before grabbing frantically for the padlock. I yanked on it uselessly and turned to Eric. “Open the door.”

He was frowning, looking genuinely confused. “Bex, I told you, this is business.”

“No,” I snapped, “*this* is my *cousin*. Get her out of here.”

“She’s already been paid for. I can’t.” He spoke slowly, like I was a little kid he had to explain this to.

I shot to my feet, hands balled at my sides. “This isn’t a game, Eric. Let her out.”

“No, pet, this *isn’t* a game,” he replied, folding his arms and glaring at me. “It’s business. She belongs to Ambassador Nielsen. He put in a request for a thin, blonde woman. Either a gymnast or a dancer. Camille fits his preferences almost perfectly. Ideally, she’d still be intact, but her notoriety adds a certain flair to the acquisition.”

Behind me, Cami let out a soft sob. She threaded her arms through the bars and grabbed the hem of my dress. “Bex, help.”

“Eric, no. She’s not a freaking piece of art—she’s practically my sister,” I snapped.

His dark brows lowered. “Bex, you’re making a scene.”

“You haven’t *seen* a scene yet,” I spat.

He moved so fast that I didn’t have time to react. His hand wrapped around my throat, squeezing, as he bent me backward over Cami’s cage. My

hips slammed painfully into the bars, my spine arching as I cried out.

“I thought you understood how this business operates,” he hissed in my ear.

My gaze flicked around the room wildly. The only people paying attention were the guards covering the cages, and none of them were going to help me. Unless I could take down Eric and a bunch of armed guards—not to mention guys like Senator Nielsen—all by myself, I was screwed. At least until Court showed up.

Eric gave me a hard shake, my teeth clicking together. “You will *not* embarrass me. Get yourself together, or I’ll throw you in the cage beside her like another common bitch.”

I let my body go limp, all the fight draining from me.

“Bex!” Cami cried below me, sounding hysterical. She tried slapping at Eric’s pants, but it was hopelessly ineffective.

“I’m sorry,” I rasped, keeping my eyes on Eric.

He stared down at me, his expression a mask of icy rage. “You disappoint me, Bex.”

“I know. I... It won’t happen again.” I swallowed around a cry. “You caught me by surprise—she was supposed to be the maid of honor at our *wedding*.”

He squeezed my throat, cutting off my air just because he could. When I started to panic and was on the verge of thrashing, he let me go.

Lightheaded, I crashed down on all fours, gasping.

A fist tangled in my hair, wrenching my head back. “I mean it, Bex. Tonight is too important for you to fuck up. Can you behave?”

“Yes,” I gasped, tears stinging my eyes. “I’ll behave. I promise.”

Still using my hair, he pulled me to my feet. His gray eyes were like a tempest on the sea, churning and violent. “We have things to do now, my love. But first, I think I’m owed an apology.”

It took everything in me not to knee him in the balls, and I made a mental note to start self-defense training the second I was free of this psycho.

Instead, I licked my lips. “I’m so sorry, Eric. Forgive me.”

Still looking annoyed, he loosened his hold on my hair. His index finger notched my chin up. “Of course I forgive you. I love you.”

His love wasn’t a gift; it was a threat.

He kissed my lips softly, almost reverently. “I suppose I also owe you an apology. Perhaps I was wrong to not alert you that Camille was going to be

part of tonight's offerings."

"Bex," Cami begged at my back.

I stiffened my spine. "Can we please leave this area?" I wouldn't be able to fake it if I turned around and saw Cami stuffed in the damn dog cage again, makeup wrecked and dress torn.

"Of course," Eric assured me, wrapping an arm around my waist and leading me from the space as Cami started to scream.

Eric stopped and turned to the guard. "Shut her up."

I bit the insides of my cheeks until I tasted blood, watching in horror as the guard withdrew a syringe from the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He headed behind the black curtain, and a moment later, Cami's cries stopped.

My heart stopped beating. "Did he kill her?"

Eric laughed. "Heavens, no. She's worth too much. He simply gave her a sedative that will keep her calm for the rest of the evening. We're not savages, darling." He tweaked my nose. "Now, let's fix your hair." He smoothed my hair back from my face, stroking the loose waves back into submission.

"Thank you," I murmured like an obedient girl when he stopped and shot me a pointed look.

"You're welcome," he cooed, and then he pulled me through the crowd yet again, pausing to speak to a few people.

I stayed mute at his side, doing my part by politely smiling and nodding while inside I was shattering. I didn't see a clock anywhere, and I had no way of knowing where Court was or when he'd be here.

All I could do was hold on to the bone-deep, gut-level certainty that he would be here. He was coming *for me*.

It was amazing how much a week could change a person's life.

This time a week ago, I was vowing to cut Court Woods out of my life forever. Now, he was the only person I wanted. The person I needed. The one who made me feel invincible and precious, valued and strong.

Where are you, Court?

Eric led me through the crowded room and back toward the stage until we were near the VIP section. It was then that I noticed the room had another door near the stage, probably opening to the other side of the lot where we'd parked.

A few men were seated in the section, all holding drinks and laughing. All but one turned as Eric and I approached, but when we came to a stop in

front of them, I realized the man who hadn't bothered glancing at us was none other than General Jasper Woods.

Court's father.

The guy who'd used me like a chess piece, almost killing me in the process.

My breathing quickened as my pulse accelerated. I hadn't anticipated coming face-to-face with Court's dad. It had been years since I'd seen him. Maybe I'd get lucky and he wouldn't remember me. Or, maybe he wouldn't care at all about me being here, since he and my dad were still working together.

"General," Eric greeted, his tone hinting at polite reverence as he inclined his head. "My name is—"

"Eric Lambert-Durand," General Woods drawled, looking wholly unimpressed. "I hear you were quite instrumental in arranging all of... this."

"Indeed," Eric replied, not seeming put off by the other man's tone.

The general scuffed his toe on the dirty cement floor. "Interesting accommodations."

One of the men to his left snickered. "I've seen cleaner chicken coops." He had a thick Southern accent and a red handlebar mustache that twitched as he spoke.

Eric's cheeks flushed. "What it lacks in decorative charm, it makes up for in convenience and security."

"We'll see," the general replied, sipping his drink and effectively dismissing Eric.

And then his gaze landed on me.

It took me aback, for a second, how much Court looked like his dad. They had the same bone structure and jaw and hair color, but the eyes was where they were different, and not just because the general had green eyes and Court had brown. The general's lacked any sign of compassion, where Court was all heart.

I knew how they sparkled when he was amused. Went flat when he was pissed. And softened when he looked at me.

"Well, well," General Woods murmured, slowly standing up. He was a few inches shorter than Court, but he was heavily muscled and took care of himself. "I can't believe it. Little Rebecca Whittier."

"Hello, General Woods," I replied, my spine stiff. So much for him not remembering me.

The corner of his mouth tipped up. “What in the world are you doing here?”

Before I could speak, Eric cut me off. “She’s my fiancée.”

The general’s brows shot up to his hairline. “Fiancée?”

Mustache man leaned around to peer at me. “Whittier, huh? Related to Malcolm?”

“His daughter,” the general replied with an amused smirk.

“Ah,” Mustache said with a nod.

“The last time I saw you, you were... quite ill.” He shook his head, looking sad. “Had my son worried to death.”

“I don’t really remember much from when I was sick,” I told him and shrugged with what I hoped was an innocent smile. “And Court and I haven’t been friends in a long time.”

Not a lie.

Sometimes I wondered if we’d ever been friends, or if we’d just always belonged to each other. What we had was deeper than friendship.

“Of course,” General Woods murmured, his expression unreadable as he kept his gaze on me like a laser. “And how did you and Eric meet?”

“My cousin is... *was* dating his brother,” I admitted, unable to keep some of the bitterness from seeping into my tone.

His shrewd gaze turned to Eric. “And you had no idea who she was?”

“I knew she was related to Malcolm Whittier, but I had no idea how deep her connections ran to the organization prior.” Eric beamed at me. “Talk about a fortuitous coincidence.”

The general gave a slow nod as he rubbed his jaw. Then he looked at me, hate and scorn in his eyes. “Well, at least you’re consistent. You find young men with a modicum of potential and ruin them. Just how golden is that cunt of yours?”

I instinctively stepped back, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Excuse me, General, but that is my fiancée you’re speaking to,” Eric spluttered. “A woman you’ve known since she was a girl.”

“What the fuck would you even know about that?” he demanded, rounding on Eric.

Eric’s gaze jerked to me for a beat. “She told me that your families were friends. That—”

General Woods’s caustic laugh cut him off. “Fucking hell. You’re just as stupid as my son. He thought he loved her, too, you know. But he was wrong,

and she *ruined* him. Destroyed his potential.” He glared at me, his expression full of venom.

“Ruined?” Eric sounded confused.

Jasper pushed a finger into my face. “He was never the same after he saved you. Went off the rails, an absolute disappointment to the Woods name. All because his mind was so twisted up over *you*.”

“It must kill you, huh?” I asked, finally done with the whole farce of the evening. “That your precious son is absolutely *nothing* like the person you are. Court is good and kind and loyal.”

“*Is*, huh?” He arched a brow at me. “I wasn’t aware you and my son were once again on speaking terms.”

I gasped, realizing I’d slipped up.

“Where *is* my son? He seems to have forgotten how to answer a damn call these days,” he snarled. “Perhaps history will repeat itself. Think if I take *you*, he’ll come running to save you once more?”

My gaze darted around as I looked for a way out, my fight-or-flight instinct landing firmly in the *flight* category.

Mustache laughed and sipped his drink, watching like this was the best show he’d seen in years. Even Eric seemed absolutely stunned at the way Jasper Woods and I were going at it.

“Let me ask you a question, Eric,” General Woods snarled. “How much is she worth to you?”

Eric looked stunned. “Excuse me?”

“Her worth,” the general repeated, enunciating each word like Eric was a dimwitted kid. “Is she worth your place in this organization?”

Eric’s jaw dropped. “General, sir, I’m not entirely sure—”

“Let’s say we’re starting the auction early,” General Woods cut him off. “And the first purchase is this little bitch. So? How much will she cost me? Or, I suppose I should ask, how much is she going to cost *you*?” He jerked his head, and two guards peeled away from the wall to come over and flank Eric.

Eric’s gray eyes went wide as he looked at me. “I thought you said that you were friends with—”

General Woods’s laugh boomed through the space. “Jesus, you’re a pussy-whipped sack of shit, aren’t you? Do I need to repeat my question yet again? Or perhaps remind you just who is providing all this security? One snap of my fingers, and you’re just another bloodstain on the ground.”

Eric studied me for a beat and then shook his head.

My eyes slid shut, and I braced for what I sensed was coming next. I'd been betting the odds, pretending I was important to men like the general, to get on Eric's good side.

Well, it had worked.

Eric had bought every lie I'd told. Enough so that he'd brought me straight into the lion's den.

And now I was going to be devoured.

"Take her," Eric said, his tone cool.

The general snapped his fingers, and the two men behind Eric grabbed me, one on each arm.

"Good choice," the general told him. "Mind if we use your office?"

Before Eric could reply, General Woods turned on his heel and stalked toward the rear staircase. When I didn't move, the guards dragged me. My heels slipped over the concrete, catching on the hem of my dress until I heard it tear.

"Wait—stop!" I tried to fight back, but the two men's grips tightened even more.

The general turned, his arm flying as he backhanded me.

Stars exploded across my vision as my head snapped to the side. My face throbbed, tears instantly gathering. Holy *shit*, that hurt.

"Do you have any idea what you've cost me?" Woods hissed. "My son turned into a little bitch because of you. But not anymore. As long as I have you? He'll do exactly what I want." His thumb and index finger crudely grasped my chin. "Maybe I'll even let him have a little fun with you when he behaves."

"General—"

The second slap shouldn't have come as a surprise, but shock still struck me like lightning.

"Shut up," he seethed. "If I want you to open your mouth, I'll have my cock ready to shove in it."

Dazed, I let myself be pulled up the stairs to the office. My feet tripped on several rungs, but I never went down, thanks to the two assholes keeping me moving.

General Woods pushed open the door at the top. "Oh, honey. I'm home," he called out loudly, the mocking edge to his tone sharper than a sword.

I was pushed into the space by the idiots, my ankle twisting as one heel

slipped. This time, when I fell, no one bothered to catch me.

I landed in a graceless heap on cracked linoleum flooring, then braced myself on my hands and took a breath.

It couldn't be much longer now. Court would be here any minute.

"What the hell are you doing?" a horrified but familiar voice asked.

I shook my dark hair back... and looked right up into the face of my father.

CHAPTER 42



BEX

My father wasn't tall. He was average height and average build. He wore wire-rimmed glasses that he was constantly pushing up the bridge of his nose with one finger. His dark hair was thinning on top, and I knew he was self-conscious about it.

At least, he had been when I'd last seen him, several months ago.

"Becca?" Dad gaped at me from where he sat in front of a row of monitors and a keyboard. He twirled around in his chair and started to stand, but General Woods shoved him back down, hard enough that the chair would've toppled if the back hadn't been against the desk.

"Jasper, what in the hell do you think you're doing?" Dad glared at the man he'd once considered his best friend.

"Just making sure you hold up your end of the deal, Malcolm," the general replied indifferently. He crossed the room to stand beside me, petting the top of my head like I was a labradoodle. "I had no idea your daughter grew up to be so stunning."

Dad's face was ashen. "Jas, no."

Fingers teased the ends of my hair. "She'd be popular at The Palace."

I'd never seen my dad get angry so fast. "Don't you fucking dare even *think* it. I've done everything—"

"You think I don't know about those side deals you've been cutting in Washington?" The general left me to stalk back to Dad, looming over him. "You think we don't have men inside every single facet of that city? Even the fucking president knows who's really in charge."

Dad's chest heaved, but he didn't speak.

"You always were a fool, Malcolm," Woods went on, sounding

disgusted. “You may be a genius around a computer chip, but with everything else in the world? You’re useless. It just so happens that Kent and I still need you, and, to make sure you do as you’re told, I’ll teach you the same lesson I taught my son.”

Turning, Woods nodded to his goons. They were on me in a second, picking me up until the tips of my shoes barely touched the floor. The one on the right twisted my arm behind my back.

I cried out, sure my bone was going to pop out of my shoulder.

“Stop!” Dad exclaimed, getting up. “I’ll do what you want. I’m sorry, Jasper. I just... Fuck.” He stabbed his fingers through his hair. “I promise. I’ll do what you and Kent want, okay? Just don’t hurt my daughter.”

Another snap of the general’s fingers, and my arm was released.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie,” Dad said to me, his eyes pleading for me to understand.

“Don’t do what he wants,” I hissed. “I don’t care what they do to me—this is *wrong*.”

General Woods got in my face, blocking my view of my dad. “Think you’ll be saying that when I have you strapped to an altar in The Palace? While I’m picking the biggest, fattest cocks to split your pussy wide open? Letting men and women impale that asshole on whatever they want? Did you know that with the right amount of pressure, an asshole can fit a baseball bat inside?”

I tried to pull back, but there was nowhere to go.

Woods sucked on his teeth, making a soft *tutting* noise. “Can’t say it looked too pleasant. There was a shitload of blood involved, but it was entertaining. I wonder if your pussy could—”

“Jasper, *stop!*” Dad roared.

General Woods whirled like a viper and punched Dad in the face, sending him crashing back into the desk.

I gasped and tried to move forward to help my father, but one of Jasper’s goons pressed a heavy hand on my shoulder, keeping me still.

The general didn’t let up, raining punches down on my father’s head until Dad slumped to the ground, blinking groggily. Crimson was smeared across the general’s knuckles, and it dripped onto the floor.

“You,” he seethed, glaring at Dad, “don’t *ever* tell me what to do. Don’t forget who owns your ass, Malcolm.” A smirk twitched across his lips. “And now I own your daughter’s ass, too. Behave, or I’ll sell it to every sick fuck I

can think of.”

My stomach pitched, nausea rolling through my gut.

Dad gave a weak nod and bowed his head in surrender.

I wasn't sure what to think. Seeing my dad literally brought to his knees was awful, but knowing I was being used as a pawn—*again*—was pretty twisted, too.

The general brushed the wrinkles from his shirt and straightened. “Now, Malcolm, you and your daughter are going to stay in here. I have shit to deal with.” He looked at one of the guards. “Watch the door. If either of them tries to leave, break their legs.”

The goon responded with an excited smile. “Will do, boss.”

Nodding, Woods jerked his head at the other guy, and they both stalked out of the room. After a beat, the one they'd left as our babysitter edged out and closed the door behind him.

I stumbled forward, dropping to my knees beside my dad. “Are you okay?”

A sob wrenched from his chest as he buried his head in his hands. “I messed up, Becca.”

He really had, but he was still my dad, so I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and tried to comfort him. “It'll be okay.” *Please don't let that be a lie.*

“Why are you here?” Dad asked, his voice hitching as he stared at me with a wild look.

I grimaced. “It's a long story, but, I think the better question is, why are you helping these people?”

Dad's head lowered once more. “I'm so ashamed of myself. You have to believe that I never wanted *any* of this.”

“And yet, you're here,” I replied, not ready to let him off the hook. I looked at the computers. “You're part of this.”

“Not by choice,” he quickly replied. “I tried to get away from them, truly I did. I even met a congressman who was going to help me. But then Jasper and Kent found out. They were already on edge after Gary's death and Beckett's disappearance, but when they heard I was planning to betray them, they threatened you and your mother after they killed the congressman and his entire family.”

Not surprising.

I pushed myself up, looking around the small space.

Aside from the desk and the rolling chair, there was a beaten-up wooden coffee table and two vinyl armchairs. A skewed framed certificate proclaiming the factory had once passed inspection was covered in a layer of grime and filth.

“We need to get out of here,” I murmured, going to the window that overlooked the auction floor.

The auction seemed close to starting. People had begun taking their seats, filling the space with noise. To the right I could see the small landing area outside of the office where our guard was. He was picking at his nails, oblivious to me peering at him through the one-way glass. When he turned, using the mirror side to inspect his teeth, I turned away with a grimace.

“What time is it?” I asked.

Dad got up slowly, wincing and touching his already purpling cheek. “Almost eleven.”

“Come on, Court,” I whispered, knowing he had to be close by now.

“Court?” Dad blinked at me. “Court Woods?”

I nodded.

“I wasn’t aware you two were friends again.”

I shot him a baleful look. “Well, Dad, you’d have to actually be part of my life to know who my friends are.” I didn’t bother keeping the acidic bite from my words.

“Becca—”

I held up a hand. “Don’t. Are you really trying to stop Jasper and Kent?”

He nodded.

I looked past him to the screens, realizing they were surveillance feeds. “What are you doing up here?”

“Monitoring the local channels to make sure we have a heads up if law enforcement gets wind of this event,” he replied.

“Auction, Dad,” I snapped, pointing a finger at the window. “They’re selling people down there. So, why not just call the cops now?”

He looked uncomfortable. “Because, Becca, I would be held responsible, too.”

I threw my arms in the air. “News flash, Dad, you *are* responsible, too.”

He looked at the floor. “I’m not a man equipped to handle prison, Rebecca.”

I gaped at him, wondering how he’d ever been my hero. He had the spine of a jellyfish; no wonder the general was so easily able to control him. “Well,

make a decision fast, Dad.”

He gave me a quizzical look.

“Court’s on his way here,” I explained. “He’s coming for me, and he’s bringing friends. The kind with badges and guns and the power to lock you away for a lifetime.”

He paled.

“Cami’s downstairs in a cage,” I added. “She’s been sold off to some sick freak who plans on doing God-knows-what to her. General Woods is about to do the same to me. So, you need to ask yourself—can you handle going to prison if it means saving me? Saving Cami? Or are you going to tell your friend *Jasper* that he’s about to be in a world of shit?”

Dad looked horrified. “I can’t... Becca, you don’t understand the—”

“I understand plenty.” I cut him off, bitter and hurt. “I understand more than you could ever know, but now you need to make a choice, because Court *is* coming for me.”

Clearly conflicted, Dad looked everywhere but at me.

It was like being stabbed in the heart with a rusty knife. “What am *I* worth to *you*, Dad?”

Finally he looked at me, hopelessness in his gaze. “I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment, Becca. I’m so sorry for the pain I’ve caused you. Your mother. All I ever wanted to do was help people.”

“You can do that now,” I insisted, tears blurring my vision as I laid my heart on the line. This was my *dad*. The guy who’d taught me how to ride a bike. The one who’d read me bedtime stories. I had to believe there was something in him that would do the right thing.

Shoulders slumping, Dad turned to the desk and peered at the screens. He enhanced one, showing an image of several men sneaking along a shadowed brick wall, balaclavas covering their faces and weapons drawn.

“They’re here,” he said in a wooden voice.

“Dad, *please*,” I begged.

He reached forward, turned off the screens, and shut down the computer just as someone welcomed the outside room to the auction over a microphone.

Clearing his throat, Dad met my eyes. “I choose you, sweetheart. I’m sorry if I ever made you doubt that.”

Relief hit me as I heard the first loud *bang* ring out. Someone screamed... and all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER 43



BEX

I raced across the room and pressed my palms flat against the window. All the assholes in their finery were starting to freak out.

Smoke billowed in from the emergency exit, and several men with guns ran from different areas, converging around General Woods, who looked pissed as he barked orders.

My gaze jerked to the door. This might be my one chance to get to Cami, but I'd need help getting past the guard.

"Dad." I turned, my heart plummeting when I saw Dad's laptop open and him typing furiously, his fingers flying over the keys. "What are you doing?"

He hit one last key and flashed me a grim smile. "The right thing. I just sent out an alert to local and international law enforcement. They'll be here in minutes. Then I sent out a tip to local news syndicates. The bigger the impact, the less likely they'll be able to hide."

I knew my dad was good with computers, but that was some Ash-level hacker shit. "You did that?"

He hung his head. "The disbelief in your tone tells me all I need to know. I'm so sorry I've disappointed you, sweet girl. I'm sorry I let you be hurt by this world. Hurt by my actions."

Emotion clogged my throat, and I had to try several times to swallow it down. "Thank you." Gunshots peppered the air in rapid bursts. We both dropped to our knees on instinct. "I need to get to Cami before someone else does."

"You can't go out there," Dad insisted, crawling to me.

"I have to," I replied, pushing up into a crouch.

"Rebecca!" he hissed as I crept toward the window again.

The guard was gone, likely having abandoned his post to join the others in fighting. A few people were hiding under the seats, but for the most part, the main room had cleared. I could hear pandemonium in the foyer and wondered how bad the room where the girls were was.

Another round of shots cracked through the night, followed by a *boom* that sent shudders through the building.

“Holy shit,” I whispered, wondering if the plan was to bring down the whole warehouse.

“That sounded like it came from the docks,” Dad muttered. He gave me a worried look. “We need to get out of here.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” I snapped, exasperated.

His jaw tightened. “We’ll go down the stairs and out the side door.”

“What? No. Cami’s in the other room, behind a black curtain,” I replied, shaking my head. “She’s already been s-sold.” I choked on the words.

“Camille isn’t my concern—you are.” Dad stared at me.

Why was he being so stubborn about this? He’d picked a helluva time for his paternal instincts to kick in.

Unless...

Aw, hell.

I lifted my chin. “Is that it? Or are you hoping Court will let you make a run for it if he finds us together?”

The guilty look was the last twist of the knife I could take. He was still thinking of himself.

“Think of all the good I can do to help people, Becca,” he pleaded as he grabbed my hands. “Locked up, I’m no good—”

I yanked away. “Screw you, Dad. Do whatever you want. I’m going to save as many people as I can.” I spun away and pulled open the door, then thundered down the stairs before Dad could stop me.

Not that he tried.

He didn’t even call my name, though I knew he followed me down because I heard his thundering footsteps. When I looked back, I saw him split off from me at the landing and run for the door on the opposite side of the room. He ripped open the door and ran into the night.

Fucking coward.

My heart splintered, another piece breaking off and falling into the abyss, but I’d unpack those emotions later when I had time. Not while people were shooting guns a few yards from me.

Over the chaos of people scrambling and guns firing, I heard the low, familiar whine of sirens in the distance. Another blast went off, this one seeming to come from the direction of where the cars were parked.

A woman hiding under a seat to my left shrieked, her shrill cry bouncing off the walls until the man beside her slapped a hand over her bright red lips. He dragged her backward until they were out from under the seats. Then he grabbed her hand, and they ran for the side door, disappearing into the night after my father.

Tiptoeing toward the foyer, I peeked my head around a partition and gasped when I came face-to-face with Alex. The foyer was empty except for him and two bodies dressed in the dark tactical gear of General Woods's men. The front door gaped open ominously.

"Alex—"

He covered my mouth with his hand and propelled us backward into the room I'd just come from. My heels tangled in the hem of my dress, and we toppled to the ground, Alex landing heavily on top of me.

I struggled, fighting to get his weight off me.

"Stop fighting, dammit," he snarled, grinding the side of my face against the dirty gray floor. "I'll fucking leave you here."

I stilled, even as my heart thrashed inside my ribcage, my eyes wide as I tried to look at him.

"Don't scream," he warned, slowly peeling his hand from my lips.

"Get off me," I demanded as soon as I had the ability.

He scoffed, narrowing his eyes. "Looking for your boyfriend?"

"Fuck Eric," I snarled.

His left eye twitched. "You might not be as stupid as I thought."

"Where is he?" I demanded, realizing how quiet things had gotten. I tried pushing him off again. "I need to get Cami."

His eyes hardened. "Cami's gone."

Panic unlike anything I'd ever known exploded in my chest. Suddenly not being able to breathe had absolutely zero to do with the guy on top of me. "No."

Alex got up and reluctantly offered me a hand. "We need to get out of here while they're fighting out back. They blew up the dock and half the cars in the lot, but I know for a fact my little brother keeps a spare car half a mile from here. The key's in the wheel well."

"Why would you help me?" I got up by myself, ignoring his hand.

He looked down. “Because I couldn’t help Cami, but she’d want me to help you.”

I watched him, studied the self-loathing and regret in his eyes. “You brought her here.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” His words were bitter. “Eric—”

“Save it,” I snapped, over men and their excuses. And they claimed *women* were the weaker sex?

I was calling bull-fucking-shit.

Alex glared at me, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

“I’m going after my cousin,” I told him, leaving zero room for arguing.

He sucked in a breath and shook his head. “Fine. Let’s go.”

My brows flew up. “You’re coming?”

“Believe it or not, I care about Cami,” he muttered, turning to go back into the room where the women had been chained.

“I don’t believe it,” I retorted. “You let your brother sell her off to some sleazy perv.”

He winced, jaw tight, and then followed me through the foyer.

I took a deep breath before darting across the open space and pushing aside the partition to see into the room that had been set up like a preview for the buyers. Less than thirty minutes earlier, this room had been full of people. Women and kids, chained to the floors and walls.

Now it was empty.

The sirens were closer, likely out front by now, but none of that mattered if they were gone.

“Where are they?” I whispered.

Alex snorted before tapping my shoulder and pointing toward the curtained-off area where Cami had been. “The door behind that curtain leads to a hallway. There’s a staircase at the end they’ll use to access a series of tunnels connecting all the buildings on this pier. When this place was operational, they used them to move different goods and shipments. That’s how they’ll get everyone out. None of the tunnels are on the public schematics—they’ll just pop up in one of the other buildings.” Alex shrugged.

“You know a lot about this place,” I remarked.

He winced. “We played here as kids before... Well, before.”

“Okay, let’s go.” I took a deep breath and readied myself to rip back the curtain. My hand brushed the black fabric a second before an arm wound

around my chest, hauling me back against a wall of unmovable muscle.

A gun cocked, the barrel flashing silver as it was aimed over my shoulder at Alex's head.

Oh, shit. We'd waited too long.

CHAPTER 44



COURT

I couldn't wait any longer.

"I'm going in," I said in a clipped tone, the earpieces that Ash had outfitted us with communicating my plan to the rest of the team. We were split up, but Ash was keeping us straight. I glanced up, spying the blinking red dot of the drone recording everything. It was how Ash was protecting us all.

"I'm coming with you." Linc's voice sounded in my ear, but I knew my best friend's frame even in the inky darkness.

From several yards away, I spotted the wide shoulders of either Rook or Royal. At this range and time of night, it was impossible to tell who.

"Be careful." Okay, it was Rook.

"Who called the fucking cops?" Ryan snarled as red and white lights lit up the other end of the mostly gravel road leading to the warehouse.

I had to give it to Eric, the setup was smart. The property backed up to the water and was situated dead center in a dilapidated industrial park that hadn't had a tenant in a decade. The only people who came here were vagrants and criminals.

We'd lit the place up like the goddamned Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center.

To my right, cars were burning, thanks to a handful of Molotov cocktails Bishop had made. The guy had a serious hard-on for explosions, and he'd taken a lot of joy in setting up some carefully selected cars to go *boom* and essentially block the auction attendees from using cars to get away.

Sure, a few had managed to pile into cars, but the rest were on foot and easy for Trick and his team—the ones he knew for a goddamn fact he could

trust—to corral.

When Rook had made the call to tell Trick he had a viper in his nest, he'd apparently already known who. They'd isolated the man—whatever that meant—before hauling ass to meet us here.

Taking out the dock had been Royal's idea. We all knew what those barges meant, and if they made it to international waters, they'd be gone, along with anything and anyone on board.

Without the firepower to take down all the boats, the dock had been the best idea.

We hit the warehouse, Royal and Rook engaging and drawing out some of the guards from the front where the rest of us picked them off. The attendees made our jobs easier by dressing up in flashy clothes that couldn't be confused with the dark tactical gear the guys from Black Box Ops wore.

But things were quiet out here—aside from the literal fire burning and the approaching stream of cop cars—and that meant it was time to head inside.

I hadn't seen Bex, though I'd looked for her in every face of every person who exited. Some had fled through the side exits, straight into the crosshairs of members of Trick's team. They'd been rounded up, but no one had seen Bex.

No one had seen the women being sold off either, which meant they were all inside together, along with the majority of my father's men.

Something twitched in my gut—a feeling that something wasn't right.

“Where the fuck is everyone?” Bishop hissed.

Yeah, that.

Even if some had gotten away, we were missing too many people.

Like my father and fucking Eric.

“Sweep inside,” Royal ordered. “Trick's team can handle the police and red tape. Our priority is the women and Bex.”

No, Bex was *the* priority, at least for me.

I glanced at Linc, and he gave me an affirmative nod, reading my mind. Ryan joined us as we met my brothers at the entrance.

The foyer was empty, save for two bodies. I didn't give a shit about them, worried only about finding my girl. At the end of the entryway, there was a split. The double doors to the left were wide open, but a black curtain hung in front of the opening to the right.

“Rook, Court, Linc, go right,” Royal commanded. “We'll go left.”

It took all my willpower to fall in line behind Rook and let him take the

lead. He had all the experience in this area and had swept through more buildings as a SEAL than I'd ever know. He moved like a panther, all stealth, as he crept forward, nudging the curtain aside with the muzzle of his gun before stepping into the space.

"You know a lot about this place," a familiar voice hissed, drawing my eyes to two people on the opposite side of the room, standing by a dark curtain.

My feet were moving, my long legs eating up the distance between us. I missed whatever the guy said as my heart pounded, blood roaring in my ears.

She took a step toward the curtain, and I reached out and grabbed her, pulling her into my arms.

Right where Becca Whittier belonged.

CHAPTER 45



BEX

Time stopped as the warm body at my back held me prisoner. I inhaled deeply, and my knees almost buckled in relief as I recognized the soft scents of leather and citrus.

I knew that smell.

I knew these arms.

“Court.” I choked on his name. My knees wobbled as I leaned against him.

“Hey, princess,” he greeted, his voice a low rumble that reverberated through my body. His hand tightened on the gun aimed at Alex. “Get on the fucking ground, asshole.”

Alex shot me a look. “Uh, Bex? Can you—”

Court spun me away, into the arms of someone else, before stalking forward and pressing the gun to Alex’s temple. “Get. The fuck. Down.”

“Hey, Bex,” Linc murmured, angling himself in front of me. I spotted a third guy but couldn’t tell who it was. Just that he was prime panty-melting material—tall, dark, and muscled.

“Wait, Court, it’s okay. I think,” I added as an afterthought.

Alex lowered himself to the floor, and Court glanced back at me. His dark eyes were empty voids behind the black mask over his face.

“He’s helping me,” I continued.

Linc scoffed. “Like fuck he is. That’s Eric’s brother.”

“I know,” I replied. “He was helping me find the women. Eric sold Cami.”

“Fuck,” a voice that sounded a lot like Rook grumbled.

“Where are they?” Court demanded.

Alex let out a weak cough, sending a puff of dust and debris tumbling across the floor. “I already told Bex—they’re in the tunnels by now.”

“Tunnels?” Linc asked.

“Apparently there are tunnels that connect the buildings underground,” I informed them. “It’s how they’re moving everyone.”

“There aren’t any tunnels on the schematics.” Yeah, that was definitely Rook.

Alex let out a humorless laugh. “No shit, genius. They’re secret for a fucking reason. Hey!” he cried out as Court ground the gun against his head. “I’m trying to *help!*”

I snorted and shook my head before looking at Court. “We need to go. If they get away—”

I’d lose Cami.

I couldn’t lose her.

Rook sighed. “Royal, we need you in here. We have a lead on the women.”

I gave him an odd look. “Uh.”

Court tapped his ear. “Ear piece.”

That made more sense. “Your dad is with them,” I added.

“And the general,” Rook added to Royal with a snarl. An automatic rifle hung from a strap wrapped around his torso like a G.I. Joe accessory, but I knew that weapon was the farthest thing from a toy.

Moments later, three more guys dressed head to toe in black burst into the room.

“Where?” Royal demanded, his voice just this side of human. I’d read enough paranormal romance to question whether or not Royal was a bear shifter; the guy was that big and growly.

I pointed at the curtained area. “Door back there.”

“Court—”

“You’re *not* sidelining me,” Court hissed, his gun still aimed at Alex as he pressed a boot into Alex’s back to hold him still.

I couldn’t see his face, but I got the distinct impression that Royal was pissed. Maybe because that was his default setting, but still, he didn’t like anyone questioning his orders.

“What building will they come out of?” Rook asked, crouching by Alex’s head.

“You think Eric’s stupid enough to tell me that shit? I have no idea,

man,” Alex whined. “There are five different buildings, so five different options.” He hesitated. “But there’s one that leads to the other side of the pier. I doubt you guys hit it. There’s a small boathouse they could use.”

“Goddammit,” Royal swore.

“How long would it take them to get there?” Rook asked.

“It’s almost a mile away,” Alex offered.

I turned to Royal, assuming by default that the guys flanking him were Bishop and Ryan. “They have almost two dozen women and children with them, including my cousin. I’m going too.”

“The fuck you are,” Royal snapped.

Court stiffened. “Don’t speak to her like that.”

“This isn’t a fucking democracy,” Royal retorted. “And we’re losing time standing around here. Civilians stay the fuck out.”

“He’s right, Becca,” Court said. “You need to go somewhere safe.”

“Fuck that noise,” I challenged. “I’m going.”

“Fuck me sideways,” Royal hissed. “Trick, can you hear me? Yeah. I need backup, if things can be managed out there by the cops.” He paused, listening for a minute before angling his body toward Court. “You want your girl safe?”

Court nodded.

“Then you get her the fuck out of here,” Royal told him. “Goes for you two as well.”

Linc sighed. “Guess that means it’s time.”

“You sure that’s smart?” Ryan asked. “You might need the support.”

Heavy footsteps clomped from inside the entryway. A moment later, Trick, Wanda, and seven more guys who looked like a terrorist’s worst nightmare stormed into the room, armed to the freaking teeth with weapons. They looked ready for war.

“National Police and Europol are here,” Trick said, Wanda sitting at his side. Her head tilted up to watch him. “My CO is working with them, setting up a containment zone. I heard what you said about the boathouse—we’re sending people that way to pin them between us.”

“Then let’s go,” Linc growled, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Phoenix protocol,” Royal snapped, sucking the wind from Linc’s sails. “We’re going. Court, get that fuckwad in the hands of the cops.” He motioned with his gun to Alex. “Get your girl safe, and then all of you get the fuck out of the public eye before the press shows.”

“Ask for Lieutenant Striker,” Trick advised, ripping back the first curtain. He tore down a second, revealing a simple wooden door that led to the tunnels Alex had described.

“What’s Phoenix protocol?” I asked, confused, as Court yanked Alex to his feet.

“It means Royal’s in charge,” Linc replied with a weary sigh. “And we’re getting benched.”

Bishop cackled as he ran by, following Trick and Royal into the curtained area. “Catch you on the flip side, Bex.”

“Bishop,” I called, grabbing his arm. “They have Cami.” I didn’t need to voice what I was begging for.

“I’ll get her,” he swore, giving me a nod.

I stayed, watching them disappear behind the wooden door into a void where I couldn’t follow.

“Take him,” Court snarled, shoving Alex in Ryan’s direction.

Ryan caught him with ease and pushed Alex ahead, then followed him with the barrel of a gun pressed between his shoulder blades.

“Fuck,” Alex complained. “I’m not fighting you. We’re on the same team.”

“No, we aren’t,” I shot back, still furious that he’d given Cami to Eric.

Linc touched my back briefly as he followed Ryan, leaving me alone with Court.

Court pulled his mask up, revealing his stupidly symmetrical, gorgeous face. His chocolate brown eyes were molten as he holstered his gun and yanked me to his chest. His lips descended, and he kissed me hard as his tongue swept into my mouth and he devoured me whole.

I wrapped my fingers around the straps of his bulletproof vest as my legs started to tremble.

He pulled away from me. “You’re shaking, baby.”

“C-cold,” I managed to get out between chattering teeth. My skin pebbled like I was in a freezer. Even my bones rattled.

“Shit,” Court murmured, hugging me to him. “Becca, you’re in shock.”

“N-n-no I’m n-not,” I forced out, even as a strange buzzing sound filled the space between my ears.

“Yeah, you are,” he countered, swinging me into his arms with ease.

I hated the hard Kevlar that kept me from burrowing against him, but I settled for tucking my face against his neck and inhaling his scent.

“Can you pull my mask down, princess?” He kissed the top of my head.

It took a few tries to remember how my arm worked, but I managed to clumsily tug the mask back over his face, hating that it hid him from view. It was the best damn view in the world.

“In the world, huh?” he teased me with a soft laugh as he started to walk.

Crap. I’d said that out loud? I needed to get it together before I admitted those pants made his ass look utterly biteable.

“You can nibble on my ass all you want later.” His chest shook with laughter.

I huffed a sigh.

“Keep your head down when we go outside, okay? I don’t want anyone to see you,” he warned.

I didn’t know why. I honestly didn’t care. I did as he requested, letting my hair fall around my face as we stepped into the chilly night air. There were so many sounds—sirens, yelling, arguing—but at least no gunshots.

“Hey!” someone shouted, and Court paused.

“Does she need medical treatment?” a raspy female voice demanded in a heavy French accent, and I peeked through my hair to see a woman dressed in a three-piece business suit, her strawberry-blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. A gold badge was clipped to the front of her jacket.

“No. I’m looking for Lieutenant Striker,” Court told her in a detached voice, angling his body to show her his shoulder. I peeked around, spotting a small phoenix patch sewn into the material.

The woman studied me for a beat, noting the way I was holding on to Court like he was my lifeline, before nodding. She pointed somewhere behind us. “She’s back there.”

Court spun on his heel and stalked in that direction.

I tried to clench my teeth together, but they wouldn’t stop chattering. I couldn’t stop shaking.

“Almost there, Becca,” Court whispered. “Hang on, princess.”

I managed a small nod, the burning urge to cry building behind my eyes. I squeezed them shut but was immediately flooded by the memory of the viewing room. Of the women and kids. Of the cages and Cami begging me to help her.

A sob ripped free of my throat before I could stop it.

“I know,” he murmured, his arms tightening around me.

Night had long since fallen, but the sky was bright with colored lights

streaking through the darkness. Fire glowed in several places, and I spotted a few burning cars. Farther away, it looked like the fire had spread from the pier to engulf one of the vessels.

Fancy-dressed people were clumped in groups on the dirty parking lot and patchy grass, some with their hands zip-tied behind their backs.

“Lieutenant Striker?” Court asked, bringing us to a stop.

“You are?” a brusque, no-nonsense voice demanded.

“Court Woods,” he replied. “Trick said we should ask for you.”

“Ah,” she mused. “Part of Phoenix?”

I felt him nod.

“Is she one of the rescued women? We’re setting up triage over there. Social workers are on their way to help with housing and treatment.”

“This is... She’s not one of them,” Court finally answered.

There was silence, and I got the sense that the lieutenant wasn’t a fan of vague answers.

I looked up, taking a gamble that this was safe ground, since Court had spoken his name and Trick had vouched for the lieutenant .

“My name is Rebecca Whittier,” I supplied. “I came here with Eric Lambert-Durand.”

Lieutenant Striker was a tall, leggy brunette with sharp eyes that appeared almost violet. The smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose might’ve been cute, if I didn’t think she’d punch me in the teeth for saying so. She commanded the very air around us, even if she was a few inches shorter than Court.

Her brows lifted as I spoke. “You’re the inside girl.”

Court stiffened.

“Relax,” Lieutenant Striker assured him, then sighed and cracked a tiny smile for me. “Are you all right, Rebecca? Do you need medical attention?”

“No, ma’am,” I answered. Even though she had a decade on me at best, I felt compelled to be as polite as possible. “And it’s Bex.”

“Bex,” she confirmed with a nod. “We need to debrief you—”

“I’m getting her the fuck out of here,” Court snarled.

The lieutenant huffed out an annoyed breath, her eyes flashing. “If you would let me finish,” she said, her tone sharp as a razor before softening as she spoke to me. “That can wait until tomorrow, when this circus has cleared out. Trick, Royal, and I already came to an agreement. You’re free to go with your friend.”

“Friends,” I corrected.

Her strangely purple eyes flicked to Court, a perfectly sculpted brow raising.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said in reply.

She planted her hands on her trim hips. “Thank you for your assistance tonight.” She jerked her head behind her. “I believe you know where to catch your ride?”

He nodded.

“Take care of yourself, Bex,” she said to me. “We’ll speak soon.” Her gaze moved behind me. “Motherfucking, cock-sucking roaches.” She swore enough to make a sailor blush. “When I find out who called the press, I’m making earrings out of their balls.”

I swallowed the answer, not sure where my dad was.

The lieutenant stormed away, looking like she was going to raise hell.

“Let’s get out of here,” Court told me, already moving away from the scene.

“Wait,” I protested. “She said friend—what’s going on?”

Court sighed and shifted me, his gaze meeting mine. “Ryan’s meeting us at the car. Linc’s not coming.”

“Why?” I demanded.

He cursed softly under his breath. “Because we have a plan to catch his father, but we need to make it look like Linc isn’t one of us.”

“But... That...” I was at a loss for words.

“Baby, I promise to explain it all in detail, okay? But right now, we’ve gotta go.”

I shook my head. “I can’t leave until I know Cami’s okay.”

“I promise that we’ll find out what happened to Cami, but I need to get *you* out of here, princess.”

I pushed at his shoulders. “Put me down, Court.”

He hesitated, and for a second, I thought he might actually do it. But then his grip grew harder, tighter, and we were moving through the darkness again.

I began to struggle, fighting to get out of his hold.

“Enough, Becca,” he snapped, stopping short and glaring at me. “Be pissed at me if you want, but we aren’t going back.”

“You don’t get to make that call!” I bucked, trying to break free.

“It’s not *my* call!” he shouted. “We have a plan, and we have to stick to it.”

They'll get Cami, but we need to get the fuck out of here before we get caught up in this shitstorm and it blows the plan to fuck."

Tears spilled over my eyes. "I hate you right now."

He flinched like I'd slapped him. "If you need to hate me, fine. Fucking hate me. But you aren't going back, Becca."

There were too many emotions hitting me too fast. Everything I'd suppressed all night—fear, pain, heartbreak, terror—all manifested itself in a total meltdown. I sobbed in his arms as he kept walking.

Darkness swallowed us up as we walked, and I let myself drown in it until I felt Court go rigid beneath me and stop.

"Princess, I need you to be quiet," he murmured, yanking his mask up and off. His dark eyes scanned the area, searching for an unseen threat.

Something in his tone instantly shut down my crying. I swallowed a hiccup and lifted my head.

"Can you stand?" Court demanded, his tone low and urgent.

"Yeah," I replied, my gaze darting around, but all I saw was darkness. "What's going on?"

"Pretty sure we're being followed," he said through gritted teeth as he lowered me to my feet.

I tottered in my heels, my ankles threatening to buckle, but I locked my limbs and stayed upright as fear churned in my chest.

Court maneuvered me behind him. "Becca, listen to me. The car is about two hundred yards ahead. Keys are in the front driver well. I want you to run for it when I tell you."

Was he insane? Even if I wasn't in the heels from hell and wobbling around like a newborn deer, the ask was too great.

Leave Cami? I'd done it.

Leave Linc? Fine. I'd done that too.

But I drew the line at leaving him.

I opened my mouth to argue... and heard a soft *click*. The sound broke the stillness of the night, and time seemed to crawl to a stop.

"You always were blinded by this girl," Jasper Woods said with a chuckle as he pointed the barrel of a gun at Court's head.

CHAPTER 46



BEX

Court's gaze slid to mine. I saw the concern in his eyes as he realized we were in trouble. "She has nothing to do with this."

"You know," Jasper mused, "this is quite the coincidence. First, I run into Rebecca here, and now I see you? If I didn't know any better, I'd think you joined my other disappointments in rebelling against me."

Court didn't reply. He didn't move a muscle.

"General..." I'd try begging. "Please—"

"Shut up," he snapped, his dark gaze flicking to me. "This is all your fault, you little bitch. Should've killed you when I had the chance back when you were an annoying little brat fucking up my son's future."

"Fuck you," Court hissed through clenched teeth, the heavy rise and fall of his chest showing he was close to losing his shit.

General Woods sighed and looked at me. "See? Even now, I have a gun to his head, and he's more concerned about me insulting *you*. Be a good girl and come stand the fuck in front of me."

I moved on wooden legs, watching as he used his free hand to grab the gun tucked into the back of Court's pants. He hurled it away from us.

Court grimaced. "Just let her go. You don't need her. You have me."

"Weak," General Woods muttered. "So fucking weak. Such a damn disappointment."

"Then let's settle this once and for all, *Dad*," Court offered. "You and me—unless you need a weapon to beat me."

The general gave a dark laugh. "Court, this isn't going to be a fair fight. This is going to be *you* doing exactly what *I* say for the first time in your fucking life."

“How did you find us?” I asked, not sure what I could do except keep the general talking. I looked around, praying that Ryan or someone else on our side would materialize.

General Woods looked at me like I was insane. “You honestly think I didn’t have an escape plan? I didn’t get where I am in life by taking chances, little girl. Though I must admit, I wasn’t expecting to run into the two of you out here. Talk about *fortuitous coincidence*.”

Court let out a slow breath. “I’ll go with you. Let Becca—”

“No!” General Woods cut him off. “We’re all going together.”

“Just take me,” I offered, hoping to de-escalate this situation. “I won’t fight back.”

“Becca, *no*.” Court had never sounded so pissed off.

“That’s an interesting proposition,” the general mused, looking like he was considering my offer. “You’d definitely be easier to handle than my son. And more... *fun*.”

I stepped back as his gaze raked over me. Fear pulsed in my veins, but I’d go with him if it meant saving Court.

“I accept your offer, Rebecca,” General Woods finally decided, his hand tightening around the gun. “I’ll even let you say goodbye to my son before I end his pathetic life.”

“No!” I screamed, my desperate cry ripping through the night. I moved toward them, not sure what I was going to do, but I’d do *something*.

Everything happened in slow motion. Jasper started to turn the gun on me, and the very second Court seemed to sense the gun wasn’t on him, he spun and grabbed his father’s wrist. The gun fired, the muzzle flash illuminating the dark as a bullet zipped by me.

Court knocked his father to the ground, and the gun went flying as they traded blows.

Shock held me in a stranglehold. Then I realized the gun was lying a few feet away. I’d never held a gun before, but I wanted to grab it now. To aim it at Jasper Woods and fire until all the bullets were gone. To protect Court.

I lunged forward, already envisioning his father’s end even as Court caught a foot to the stomach and staggered back.

Pain ripped through my scalp as something jerked me backward. Instead of falling forward and grabbing the gun, I was tumbling down.

“I’ve got you, love,” Eric whispered against my ear.

My eyes watered as I fought him. “Let me *go*!”

Court, hearing my scream, looked up and gave the general the opening he needed. General Woods kicked out and swept Court's legs from under him, knocking him to the ground. The general climbed on top of his son and began raining punches down on Court's head.

"No!" I twisted and fought, feeling strands of my hair rip free of Eric's hold.

"Dammit, Bex," Eric hissed, letting go of my hair to wrap his arms around me in a frighteningly strong reverse bear hug. He dragged me back a few steps. "You're safe now. I've got you."

I couldn't break free. All I could do was watch in horror as General Woods lifted Court's head to bash his skull into the asphalt and gravel.

I'd heard of women doing incredible things when they were in untenable situations, like a mom lifting a car off her kids. Where the hell was that strength now?

Eric's hot breath hit the back of my neck, and I snapped my head back, catching him in the nose and mouth. He howled in pain, releasing me.

I hit the ground on my hands and knees, then scrambled forward to grab the gun. The second I felt the cold metal in my hands, I swung and aimed it at General Woods. "Stop!"

Woods looked at me, freezing in place, and then his lips curled into a snarl. "You don't have it in you."

Court slammed a fist into his father's temple, knocking Woods off him. He rolled to his feet and came to me. When he held out a hand for the gun, I wordlessly passed it to him as Eric screamed about his broken nose.

"No, she doesn't," Court agreed, "but I do."

Woods pushed himself to his knees. "What now, son?"

I leaned against Court's legs, adrenaline thrumming in my blood. To my right, Eric was still holding his hands over his face, blood dripping between his fingers.

"Now I live the rest of my life with my girl," Court told his father.

"And I spend the rest of mine in a prison cell?" Woods smirked.

"Sounds good to me," Court agreed. "I like the idea of you in a cage, being someone's bitch."

The general growled. "Fucking shoot me, you pussy."

No, my mind said. I didn't want Court to kill his own father; I didn't want him living with that. Did Jasper Woods deserve a bullet to the skull? Absolutely. But killing him wouldn't undo the past.

“And let you get off easy? Fuck that,” Court replied. “I want you to spend the rest of your pathetic life knowing your sons are out there, undoing everything you’ve ever done. We’ll dismantle Black Box Ops. We’ll petition the government to strip you of all your titles and awards. The world will forget the name *Jasper Woods*. You’ll be nothing. You *are* nothing.”

The sound of footsteps pounding across the deserted parking lot hit my ears, and I could only pray it was the good guys and not the general’s men.

Eric turned and started to run.

A snarl ripped through the night, followed by a blur of fur and fury as Wanda launched into the air and landed on top of Eric. She tackled him to the ground with a ferocious growl, grabbing his forearm. He screamed as her teeth sank into his skin.

“Game over,” Court said to General Woods.

Royal, Trick, Rook, and Ryan ran toward us. Trick kept going until he got to Wanda’s side and spoke a foreign word that had her releasing Eric and backing away to sit beside Trick.

Royal got to us first. “Good job, little brother.”

General Woods glared at his oldest son. “Fucking ungrateful pricks. I tried to give you all the fucking *world*.”

“We don’t want your world,” Rook informed him, a hand on his gun.

Ryan knelt by my side. “You okay, Bex?”

I nodded, still pressed to Court’s leg. “Where the hell did you come from?”

Ryan gave me a lopsided grin. “I handed Alex off to the cops and heard the shots when I was heading over to meet you and Court.”

I looked over at where Trick had handcuffed Eric. “Is it over?”

“Yeah, princess,” Court told me, passing the gun to Ryan as Rook handcuffed their father while Royal kept a gun trained on him.

I looked around. “Where’s Bishop?”

Court bent and picked me up once more, holding me against him. A tremor ran through his body as he kissed the side of my head.

“With Cami,” Rook told me, yanking Jasper to his feet. “We found her in the tunnels, but when we figured out the general and Eric weren’t with them, we started searching for them. Wanda must’ve heard you guys, because she took off running this way.”

As if summoned, Wanda trotted over to us and nudged my thigh with her wet nose. I reached down and ruffled her fur.

“Everything secure?” Court asked.

“Yup,” Royal answered. “We’ll get these two to Striker and meet you guys back at the hotel, okay?”

“Bex, please,” Eric was begging. “Tell them who I am. I love you—”

With a growl, Court handed me to Ryan like I was a bag of groceries. Ryan and I watched Court stalk the five feet over to where Eric was and deck him. One punch, and Eric was on the ground.

“Dammit,” Trick sighed. “Now I’ve gotta carry the bastard.”

“Drag him back,” Court snapped. “Let his head hit every fucking rock in the damn parking lot.” He took me back from Ryan and cuddled me to his chest. My head found that perfect spot between his shoulder and pec to rest on.

I needed a freaking shower and a bed. “Is Cami okay? The others?”

“There’s a team of social workers and therapists already gathering to help everyone we found,” Royal assured me. “Some of them have a few injuries...” He trailed off, his gaze locking with Court.

“What?” Anxiety sliced through my exhaustion. “What happened?”

Royal gave me an unreadable look. “When we found Cami, she wasn’t with the others. They’d left her behind.”

“Why?” My mouth went dry.

“In the chaos of evacuating, she must’ve fallen. Looked like she broke her ankle. Bishop was taking her to the medical team—”

“I need to see her,” I told Court.

Court grimaced and looked at his brother. “Is she still here?”

“No way of knowing,” Royal replied. “Might be best if you head to the hospital later. That’s where they’ll take her.”

“But—”

“He’s right, princess,” Court said softly, meeting my gaze. “We need to get out of here before it becomes a three-ring circus.”

“Pretty sure we’re way past that point,” Trick commented, hefting Eric over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. “But you should go unless you want to be dragged into an international incident.”

My brows shot up.

“Pretty sure a few of the men we collared are foreign ambassadors. This is shaping up to be a political nightmare,” Rook added.

“Just wait,” General Woods seethed, not done yet with spewing hate. “You’ll all pay. Especially you, bitch.”

Royal swung around and punched his father in the mouth, knocking him down again. “Shut the fuck up.”

With his arms cuffed at the wrists behind his back, Woods had no way to break his fall. He hit the ground like a bag of bricks, his head bouncing off the cement. He slumped, eyes rolling back as he lost consciousness.

“Guess we’re carrying two,” Rook muttered, bending down and picking up Jasper. “Let’s go.” He and Trick started back toward the lights glowing in the distance.

“Get out of here,” Royal told us again, but this time his tone was gentler, his focus on me. “It’s going to be a long night for all of us.”

“We’ll see you soon,” Court told Royal, nodding at his brother.

One of my shoes fell off, and Ryan wordlessly picked it up and carried it for me as we started walking in the other direction.

I barely noticed when we arrived at the car, and it was like I wasn’t connected to my body when Court sat us in the backseat, keeping me on his lap as Ryan drove us away.

“It’s okay, princess,” Court said, his lips against my hair. “Just rest. We’re all okay.”

Exhausted, I closed my eyes.

CHAPTER 47



BEX

The steady hum of the car engine went silent. Panic speared through my chest, and I jolted awake. “Cami,” I gasped.

“Easy, baby,” Court murmured against my head, his hand stroking my back.

I twisted away, putting a few much-needed inches between us. My eyes felt heavy and swollen as they filled with tears all over again. “Court—”

“They found her, remember? She’s at the hospital,” he told me, not moving as Ryan exited the car.

“I need to see her.”

Court’s expression tightened. “We will, but first we need to get you cleaned up.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, my eyes going wide as every worst-case scenario pummeled my brain.

“She’ll be fine,” he added, his voice reassuring and somber.

But would she? Would any of us? Right now it just seemed so overwhelming.

Ryan knocked lightly on our window before pulling open the door. “Maybe we can talk about this inside?” His blue eyes flashed as he looked around the street for threats.

Aside from a couple walking away from us to the intersection at the end of the block and a taxi rolling by, the side street next to the hotel was empty. But I understood his unease.

Court helped me slide off his lap and onto the pavement, wobbling on one heel.

Ryan reached out and steadied me. “You okay?”

I peered up at him. “No.”

He gave me a grim nod, letting me go as Court got out of the car. Once he'd closed the door, Court tugged me to the curb and turned around. “Jump on.”

It had been years since I'd hopped on him for a piggyback ride. When I was little, my legs had been so much shorter than all of theirs that it had become our go-to mode of transportation when we were all together.

He was a lot taller now than we were as kids, and I was still a lot shorter. I had to jump, but I threaded my arms around his neck and wrapped my legs around his hips, losing my second shoe in the process.

“I've gotcha, Cinderella,” Ryan muttered, grabbing my other shoe so he now carried the pair.

We approached the side door of the hotel, and I was surprised when Maddie opened it.

“What the fuck are you doing down here?” Ryan growled, glaring at her.

Maddie didn't even flinch. She tossed back her long swath of pale blonde hair and returned his look. “Letting your ass inside. Ash is watching the monitors.”

Ryan looked pissed as he rubbed his forehead.

“Hey, Mads,” I said.

She brightened and moved to hug me, but Ryan cut her off.

“Reunion inside where we're safer,” he told her, but his tone was gentle.

Maddie gave me a small smile and nodded at Ryan before turning and leading the way to the service elevator.

Taking the keycard from her, Ryan swiped it over the panel and ushered her, then us, inside before joining us. Maddie hit the button for our floor, and Ryan pulled her into his arms as we started to ascend.

“You okay, Bex?” she asked me, her head against Ryan's chest.

“Not really,” I admitted, my chin resting on Court's shoulder as the elevator chimed and the door slid open. We headed down the hall toward the hotel room we'd stayed in before.

Using another keycard, Maddie opened the door and held it as we all went inside.

I tapped Court's shoulder, feeling like a toddler who was done being carried around. He let me slide down his body, and then Maddie was all over me.

“Don't ever scare me like that again,” she demanded, squeezing me hard.

“Sorry,” I whispered, clinging to her.

“Where are we at?” Ryan demanded. He tore off his Kevlar vest and tossed it aside. Court did the same, the sharp sound of the ripping velcro almost too loud.

Ash spun in his chair, looking exhausted. He tugged off a headset and set it aside to gesture at the TV. A local Parisian news station was muted, but the camera was showing the scene at the warehouse from behind a police barricade.

It cut to shots of men and women in cuffs being escorted into police wagons, victims wrapped in blankets with their faces blurred, and back to an aerial shot of the dock, still smoldering.

“Jesus,” I whispered, stepping around Maddie and going to stand in front of the TV.

“It’s gonna be a long night,” Ash mused, scrubbing his hands over his face. His bright green eyes were alert but weary. “They saved twenty-six people.” He looked at me. “Including your cousin.”

Maddie gripped my hand.

“Eric?” I demanded, needing to know what happened to the asshole.

“In custody,” Ash confirmed. “Apparently unconscious, but in police custody nonetheless.”

“General Woods?” His name tasted bitter in my mouth.

Ash smirked. “Also confirmed as in custody, but *not* unconscious.”

“Should’ve hit the bastard harder,” Ryan said.

“Or shot him,” Court added with a glower.

I shook my head, my gaze on Ash. “What happens next?”

“Well, we’re looking at a bureaucratic nightmare,” Ash admitted. “Everyone’s trying to figure out what the fuck happened tonight while simultaneously trying to take credit. The news is crediting Paris PD at the moment, but someone’s going to have to make a statement.”

Ryan sat down on the edge of an armchair. “And our guys are ready for that?” Maddie crossed the floor and climbed onto his lap, snuggling against him. Ryan held her like she was a living, breathing teddy bear he could use for security.

Ash hesitated. “Actually? We might’ve dodged a pretty big fucking bullet.”

Court moved behind me, looping an arm around my waist and anchoring me to his chest. “How so?”

Ash leaned back, the chair creaking as he stretched. “Because someone tipped off every international and domestic agency in Europe *and* called the damn press. The top law enforcement agencies in this corner of the world are fighting over who gets the credit. They’re already calling this the largest human trafficking bust this century. With this much press, they *can’t* sweep this shit under the rug, even if they try.”

“How does that help us?” Ryan demanded, all business even as his fingers lazily drew circles on Maddie’s hip.

“This many people, they’re going to take the U.S. task force at their word. Lieutenant Striker is planning to keep *our* involvement to a minimum in the public eye. She likes the idea of having—and I quote—‘an elite task force in my back pocket.’”

Court scoffed. “We’re not dogs that she can bring to heel.”

Ash arched a brow. “No, but she *is* in a position to help keep us secret and let us work in the shadows. The longer we can keep Phoenix International quiet, the better it’ll be for all of us. Eventually someone will draw the connection between us and what we do. When that happens...” He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth.

Court’s arm tightened around me. “It’ll put us and the people we love in danger.”

Ash nodded. “Exactly.”

Ryan exhaled and rested his forehead on Maddie’s shoulder. “Okay. Maybe it’s not a bad thing that someone tipped off the press.”

I cleared my throat. “It was my dad.”

All eyes turned to me.

“You saw your dad?” Court asked softly.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe start at the beginning?”

“It can wait,” Court told him. “She needs to rest.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him, even as a weary shudder rippled through my bones.

“Bex, you look exhausted,” Maddie pointed out, biting her lower lip as worry filled her azure eyes.

“What if we table this for an hour or so?” Ash suggested. “Royal, Rook, and Bishop will be back by then, and you won’t have to repeat the story.”

“I could really use a shower,” I murmured, tipping my head back to look at Court.

He didn't look happy but gave a single nod. "Fine. Shower, *food*, and then we'll chat."

"Hospital," I reminded him.

"Okay," he gritted out. "But then your ass is in bed for the foreseeable future."

"Yes, sir," I quipped, loving the way his eyes heated.

His hand covered the curve of my hip, his thumb stroking my ass. "Let's go."

"Wait. What about Linc?" I needed to know that he was okay, too.

Ash grimaced. "Linc is fine."

"But—"

Court turned me in his arms. "We'll tell you the whole plan when we're all together." He looked over my shoulder at Ryan. "Can you guys order some food?"

"I'm not hungry," I mumbled, my stomach the last thing I wanted to think about.

"On it," Ryan responded, ignoring me.

"Do you need help, Bex?" Maddie offered, her voice sweet and kind.

Court shot her a baleful look. "I've got her covered."

Maddie barely hid a smile as she leaned back into Ryan. "Just making sure."

Court took my hand and led me into what I'd always consider *our* room. He nudged the door shut and leaned against it, his dark gaze boring into me. "I need the truth, Becca."

I paused, watching him.

"Are you... Did you get hurt?" His jaw clenched as he tried to tactfully ask the question haunting him.

I sighed and moved to stand with him, my arms going around his waist as I tipped my head back to look at him. "Other than a few bruises and scrapes, I'm fine. I promise. Your dad has a helluva right hook—"

"He *hit* you?" Court's voice was low, lethal. It charged the room with an anticipatory sort of electricity that made the fine hairs on my arms stand up. Murder flashed in his eyes, making them cold, dark pools of fury. He pushed back my hair, hissing at whatever he saw. "Fuck. I didn't notice it before. That son of a bitch. I'll kill him."

"Court," I started, meeting his gaze and holding it, "I'm *fine*. Bruises heal. I'm here with you now. We're okay."

That was all that mattered. Not revenge or fear or rage. Right now, I just needed the guy I loved to remind me that we were together and nothing would change that.

His gaze searched my face, his entire body pulled taut. “Becca—”

“Right now I need a shower,” I said slowly. “And I need you to help me out of this dress. Can you do that?”

He swallowed reflexively and nodded. “Yeah. I can do that.”

I turned my back to him so he could access the zipper. His hand found the piece of metal and tugged it down. The dress loosened around me, and I didn’t stop it from slipping off my shoulders and pooling around my feet.

Court’s warm breath ghosted across my neck as he brushed my dark hair over one shoulder. His blunt fingers traced the edge of the white corset I’d worn underneath before he started to open each clasp.

I was painfully aware of the way my breaths quickened the more skin he exposed until he reached the end where the corset matched the white panties that hugged my ass.

“Becca,” he rasped, dipping his fingers into the elastic of my underwear and dragging them around to my front.

My eyes fluttered closed as he brushed my slit, a soft gasp leaving my lips as need pulsed between my thighs. I fell back against him, my corset landing on the floor with my discarded gown.

His lips pressed against the curve of my neck, lightly sucking on the flesh there. He peppered kisses up to the curve of my jaw, and I turned my head toward him.

His mouth covered mine as he worked a finger between my folds. I gasped into him as his tongue swept in to take control and his finger fucked me with slow pumps.

I widened my stance, the heady thrum of arousal soaking into my bones and making my blood pound.

When he added a second finger, my knees started to shake. As if sensing I was close to breaking, he banded a strong arm around my chest, locking me against him as he used his fingers to drive me crazy.

He swallowed every sound I made, feeding off my pleasure like it would give him all the energy he’d ever need. His thumb rubbed tight circles over my needy little clit as he crooked his fingers inside me, rubbing that magic spot that sent a cascade of sparkles bursting behind my eyes.

I shattered in his arms. My sex convulsed around his fingers, greedily

trying to suck him in deeper. He caught me as my legs turned to jelly, unable to bear my weight another second.

I'd barely come down from my high as he carried me to the bed. He spun me in his arms, his lips crashing against mine with dominating force. All I could do was cling to the front of his dark shirt, my back arching into him.

Then I was falling. My back hit the mattress, and I looked up at Court, dazed. My stomach clenched at the feral glint in his eyes as he gazed down at me and licked his lips.

He reached behind his neck, fisted his shirt, and yanked it over his head. He tossed it aside and toed off his boots, then reached for his belt buckle.

I scooted higher up on the bed, my mouth going dry as I watched him strip. Every piece of clothing exposed more tanned skin. The phoenix tattoo inked on his ribs seemed alive as it moved when he did.

Each flex of his muscles reminded me how strong he was. And, in some stupid little way that made my heart go flippity-flop, reminded me how safe he made me feel.

"You're staring," he teased, pushing his dark pants down.

I couldn't hide my grin. "What can I say? It's my favorite view."

He palmed the hard length of his cock through his boxer-briefs, the corded muscles of his forearm flexing as he gave it a hard squeeze. Like he was seconds from losing control if he didn't figure out how to rein it in.

I let my legs fall open, positive my panties had a massive damp spot.

Court groaned. "Fuck, what you do to me, baby."

I coasted a hand down my body, my fingers slipping into my underwear. "I could say the same thing."

Like a rubber band being pulled too tight, his restraint snapped. One second he was at the foot of the bed, and the next his body was covering mine. His hips settled between my thighs like we'd been created for one another. Two pieces that fit together to make something whole.

My arms went around his shoulders. "I love you." I needed to say it. Needed him to know I meant it. That in all of this craziness, he had become my constant.

His palm cradled my jaw like I was the most precious thing in the world. "I love you, Becca."

We managed to work my panties and his underwear down, kicking them off in a tangle of limbs that made me smile. But all humor vanished when he pushed himself inside me with one smooth thrust.

My eyes screwed shut as pleasure whipped through me with the force of a hurricane. Every nerve ending flared to life. I wrapped my legs around his waist, letting out a happy sigh when he slid in a little deeper.

“Oh, fuck,” Court groaned. He reached down, hooking an arm under one knee, drawing my leg up higher, spreading me wider. “I can’t be gentle, Becca. I need you too damn much.”

My fingers tangled in his hair. “I’m yours, Court. Take what you need.”

His hips withdrew, and then he plowed back in. The utter fullness nearly stole my breath. All I could do was hang on and enjoy the literal ride as he fucked me... as he *loved* me.

Tears gathered in my eyes as he moved in me.

His hand came up, his thumb catching a tear that tumbled down my cheek. He slowed down. “Am I hurting you?”

“No,” I managed to choke out, shaking my head emphatically. “I just... You and me...”

Understanding lit his eyes, his expression somehow fierce and tender at the same time as he gazed at me. “I know, baby girl. I feel it, too.”

His gaze held mine as he resumed thrusting, his hips pistoning in and out of me as my thighs started to shake. My back bowed off the mattress.

“Eyes on me,” he murmured, bumping my nose with his.

With a gasp, my gaze snapped back to his. “I love you.”

His eyes hooded, a small smile hooking up the corner of his mouth. “Not as much as I love you.”

I raked my nails down his back to grab his ass, feeling the muscles tighten as he flexed into me. “Court.”

“Let go, princess,” he whispered. “Come for me.”

My body seized, my pussy greedily clamping around his cock as I came with a strangled cry. My vision went unfocused as waves of pleasure rocked through me. His cock jerked inside me, and then he was coming with me. My center milked his cock, clenching and convulsing around his length as he rode me through my climax with jerky thrusts.

“I love you,” he whispered again before capturing my lips with his once more.

I sank into his kiss, reveling in the way he held me and the knowledge that I was loved by the man I’d never thought I’d have. That we were together, and nothing would ever change that.

CHAPTER 48



BEX

When we emerged from the bedroom nearly an hour later, I was swimming in a pair of Court's sweats and one of his old Pacific Cross football hoodies. Court had tied the waistband strings as tight as he could, but one strong breeze or me tripping on the dragging hem, and they'd be around my ankles. Luckily the hoodie was practically a dress on me.

I snuggled into it, comforted by the soft fabric and the scent of the guy I loved. It was like being hugged by him, but with fewer muscles.

He was officially never getting this piece of clothing back. I was invoking the girlfriend's right of eminent domain, adding the hoodie to the list of his things that now belonged to me.

Like his cock.

Just thinking that had me smiling as I wrapped my arms around myself.

As we came back in, Maddie looked up. At some point, Ryan had gotten up, and she'd taken over his seat while he was on the phone, pacing in front of the window that overlooked a desolate side street with a healthy dose of the roof next door.

Ash was still at the computer, this time with Royal and Rook hovering over his shoulders. Bishop was sprawled on the couch. It looked like he was asleep, but I had a feeling if he heard one small move, he'd be up and ready to go.

"Do you want me to get you some clothes?" Maddie offered, swinging her long legs where they were draped over the arm of the chair.

My best friend had a good five inches on me, but her clothes would

definitely fit better than the ones I had on.

And yet...

"I'm good," I said with a smile, tucking my head into the loose neck of the hoodie to take another hit of Court's smell.

Court smirked at her before kissing the top of my head. "Food," he ordered, gently pushing me toward a stack of boxes piled on the table in the kitchenette.

I scowled at him. "You need food, too."

He grinned. "I ate earlier."

I gulped down air, and my cheeks heated as I remembered the way he'd sunk to his knees in the shower and eaten me out.

My gaze instinctively shot to his dick, wondering if I could get away with the same excuse if I dragged him back into our room.

His brows lifted, and he shot me a look that said his cock wasn't an approved food group. He was wrong, but I wasn't going to argue that point in front of our friends and his family.

I pawed through the boxes of pizza and other stuff before snagging a garlic knot. I ripped off a chunk, then popped it into my mouth and chewed the doughy garlic and butter concoction.

Bishop swung his legs off the side of the couch, putting himself in an even more awkward sprawl by giving me a place to sit. He cracked an eye open. "How ya doing, Bex?"

I shrugged and ate another bite as all eyes turned to me. "Thank you for taking care of Cami."

He gave me a sad smile. "Of course. I wish I could've done more."

"Was she okay? I mean other than her ankle?"

He looked away. "She's gone through a lot tonight, Bex. She'll need time and for people to just love her and let her heal."

Tears gathered in my eyes. "Fucking Eric and Alex. They got Alex, too, right?"

"I handed him off to Striker myself," Ryan assured me.

Good. I knew Alex had kinda been trying to help me, but he was the reason Cami had been there. He was the reason her ankle had been broken.

Royal pushed away from Ash. "Okay, let's—"

"Wait." I held up a hand. "I need to know what's going on with Linc first."

Royal looked annoyed, but Court stopped him from complaining by

asking, “Do we have confirmation?”

Ash sighed and nodded. “He’s currently being taken to La Santé. They’ll arraign him, and his name will be leaked as one of the people arrested.”

“Linc’s going to prison?” I gasped, my mind blanking at the name of Paris’s maximum security prison. “But he’s one of the good guys. How...” I turned and glared at Rook. “Did Trick betray us? Lieutenant Striker?”

Rook shook his head. “No one betrayed us, Bex.”

“It was Linc’s idea,” Ryan added, but frustration bled through his tone.

I looked at Court, needing answers.

He sat on the edge of the coffee table in front of me and took my hands. “Remember how we were worried that going after Gary and Beckett would accelerate our timeline for Phoenix going public?”

I nodded. “But that doesn’t matter, right? Ash said—”

“I know,” he interrupted gently. “But we went in tonight thinking we were still working under a tight deadline. We can’t keep Beckett in the dark forever, and if he’s able to get word to Linc’s dad that we’re setting them up, then we’ll lose our chance of getting to Kent.”

“Right,” I agreed, remembering that flimsy plan that had seemed like it was being held together by prayers and clearance-bin duct tape. “Kent Westford is the head of the snake.”

“He’s the head of *this* snake,” Rook corrected with a weary exhale.

Court shot him a dirty look.

“What?” Rook didn’t back down. “This doesn’t end with Kent Westford. Once we end this group, there’s another waiting to step into the power vacuum it’ll create.”

“Fuck,” Ryan muttered, rubbing his temples, “can we just take the win for tonight? We all know we’re in it for the long haul. It’s why we started a company instead of a fucking club.”

“Lieutenant Striker made things better, though. We don’t have to rush things,” I said, cutting through the tension.

Court glanced back at me with a soft look. “We, huh?”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re not cutting me out of this, Court Woods. I’m part of the team now.”

“Baby, you were always part of the team. I was just too fucking stubborn to admit it,” he confessed, squeezing my fingers.

Royal scoffed. “Can we get back on track? This isn’t couples counseling.”

Maddie tipped her head back and looked at him upside down, pointing an accusatory finger. “Hey, you. Chill out. We’re all stressed, but you don’t have to be a butthead.”

Royal glared at her while Bishop cracked up.

“Butthead was really the best insult you could think of?” Rook asked, sounding amused.

Maddie shrugged. “I got used to censoring myself because of Cori. She’s freaking relentless with that swear jar.”

Court drew in a deep breath. “Linc had the idea to get caught. Grab Kent’s attention, and get him to pull Linc back in. Let him think he can control Linc, so we have a guy on the inside.”

A pit opened in my stomach. “No. Court, what if Kent doesn’t go for it? What if Linc’s stuck in prison?”

“He won’t be,” he promised me. “Worst-case scenario, Striker will help us acquit him and say he got lost in the mess of the night.”

“Wait, what’s to stop Court’s dad from telling everyone what he saw tonight?” Maddie demanded, eyes wide with worry. “He saw all of you. He knows—”

“He’s known about *us* all along,” Royal interrupted. “Well, not Court and Ryan, but that doesn’t matter. Jasper won’t be in some random-ass prison with everyone else. He’s going to be held in a top-secret facility run by Interpol.”

Rook shot Maddie a reassuring look. “And on the very slim chance the general is able to make contact with the outside world, that might work in our favor.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because he never saw Linc,” I murmured, realizing that because Royal had sent us away, Linc had already been in “custody” when General Woods got to us.

Rook nodded. “Exactly. It gives Kent more incentive to help Linc. At this point it looks like Linc’s on his own. Like we all abandoned him.”

Ryan leaned on the back of Maddie’s chair. “Kent’s been looking for a reason to make himself invaluable to Linc. He has all the power and the money in the world, but Kent can’t bring his only son to heel. Bailing him out of a shitty situation is just the opening a guy like Kent has been praying for.”

“Then what?” I asked.

Court pressed his lips into a tight line. “We have to wait for Linc. We’ll

monitor things from a distance, but he says he has this under control, and we have to trust him.”

“That’s a horrible plan,” I blurted out.

Maddie snapped her fingers. “I said the same thing.”

“Anything can happen to him in prison,” I added, worrying my lower lip. “Look at what happened to Ryan.” Last year, Ryan had been wrongfully incarcerated, and in the week it had taken the lawyers to get him out, he’d been stabbed and had nearly died.

Ryan winced. “Unlike Maddie’s father, Kent’s not going to pay someone to try and kill Linc.”

Maddie looked stricken, the same sick look on her face that always showed up when we talked about her dad. Gary had been an absolute monster, and he’d done a lot of damage to the people in this room.

“Now that we’re all caught up on Linc,” Royal said, his gray eyes piercing as they flashed at me, “can we get back to what you saw tonight? What the fuck happened in the warehouse?”

The events of the evening played out like a horror movie in my mind. I told them everything that had happened once I’d gone inside with Eric. When I got to the part about the general and how he “took” me from Eric, Court changed our sitting positions.

Plucking me off the couch, he sat down and arranged me on his lap, holding on to me like I might vaporize and blow away any second. Royal, Rook, and Bishop looked furious, but for me, everything with the general had taken a back seat to the shit that had gone down with my own dad.

Disappointment weighed heavily in my gut as I remembered him choosing himself over me. Over a few dozen innocent people, and who knew how many others during the past decade.

“So he’s the one who called the press? It was a good call,” Ryan mused, looking thoughtful. “It gave everyone attending the auction nowhere to hide. We were so busy trying to keep everything an organized secret, but maybe we should’ve gone for maximum chaos instead.”

“I think I want that on a t-shirt,” Maddie quipped, flashing me a wink.

Royal let out an undignified snort. “Chaos is never a good thing.”

“I don’t know, big guy,” Maddie teased. “You could probably stand a little chaos in your life.”

Rook chuckled. “I’d pay to see that.”

Bishop nudged me. “See? Your dad did help. Kinda.”

“Yeah,” I drawled, my stomach sour. “My dad’s a freaking genius.” Actually, he was. It was why men like General Woods wanted him in their pocket. His technology had helped them do a lot of illegal shit over the years.

“He didn’t get away,” Ash told me with a sympathetic smile.

My eyes widened. “Wait—what?”

“Trick’s team had the side exits covered,” Bishop confirmed. “Your dad was caught early on. He’s being transported to La Santé, too.”

“The general is the only one getting the VIP experience,” Royal said with a humorless chuckle. “He’s going in a black hole somewhere in Siberia.”

“Siberia?” I echoed.

Royal’s lips twitched. “Hell yes. They’ll put his ass on ice. Literally.”

“Knight said we’ll celebrate that win when we all go back home,” Bishop chimed in. He looked at Royal. “*When* are we going home, big brother?”

Royal frowned. “We still have shit to sort here, but a couple days, tops.”

“That gives us time to explore the city,” Maddie told Ryan with a hopeful expression.

He smoothed her hair back with an indulgent smile. “Whatever you want, baby.”

Ash turned to Royal to discuss more stuff on the computer while Rook wandered toward the bedroom he’d been using. Bishop turned to Maddie and Ryan and started suggesting places they should visit in Paris.

“You’re quiet,” Court remarked.

I turned on his lap, giving him my full attention. “A lot to think about.”

“Your dad?” he asked, his expression cautious.

“No. Well, kinda. I guess I’m not sure what comes next,” I confessed.

His head tilted. “In terms of…”

“Us? Me?” I let out a brittle laugh. “I didn’t really think past what we’d do this week. Stopping Eric and your dad. But now… Court, I moved my whole life to Paris. My mom put our house on the market, and I’m willing to bet that my dad’s stuff is going to be seized by some government.”

He gave a slow nod. “True.”

“And, shit, I need to talk to my mom. My grandparents. I need to see Cami.” It was all so much, the weight of responsibility crushing me under the enormity of it all.

“Princess, you’re spiraling,” he murmured. “You don’t need all the answers tonight. We’ll figure it out.”

A hysterical laugh bubbled from my chest. “Court, I don’t even have my

phone. It's in Eric's limo."

"We'll get you a new one," he replied. "You can use mine right now if you need to."

A stupid thought struck me. "I don't even know my mom's new phone number! I just programmed it into my phone—"

Court pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocked the screen, and hit a few buttons. When he turned the device to me, my mom's contact info was in it.

"You have her number?" My brows pulled together in confusion.

"Of course. I covered all my bases in case I needed to get to you or —*oof*." The air slammed out of him when I dove at his chest, hugging him as hard as I could. His chest shook as he laughed.

"Can I call her now?" I asked, peering up at him.

"Of course," he answered, like my question was ridiculous. He pushed his phone into my hand, and I hit the green button to initiate the call.

Mom answered after three rings. "Hello?" She sounded exhausted and uncertain.

"Mom?"

"Rebecca Whittier," she gasped into the phone. "Where the hell have you been? We've been worried sick!"

"I know, Mom," I whispered, emotions knotting up my throat. "It's a long story, and I promise I'll explain it all. Where are you?"

"The hospital," she replied. "Cami was in an accident and, well, her ankle was broken in two places. She's in surgery now."

"Surgery?" My heart sank. That didn't sound like it was a simple break.

"Yes. Honey, where are you?"

I glanced at Court. "Not far. I can be at the hospital in about thirty minutes. Are Mémé and Papa there, too?"

"Of course," she answered, sounding baffled.

"We'll be there soon," I told her.

"You're with Eric?" she pressed.

I met Court's eyes, finding my anchor in the hurricane. "I'm with my boyfriend."

His gaze warmed with approval.

"I'll see you soon." I hung up and handed the phone back to Court.

"Ready to go to the hospital?" He cocked a brow.

"Definitely. I need to see my family before I can sleep. They need to

know everything that happened.”

His lips turned up. “Already taking me home to meet the family, huh?”

Bishop laughed. “I hope you can win them over, Court.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said with a tiny shrug. “They can either accept him or not. It doesn’t change the fact that we’re together.”

“Damn right, baby,” he growled before kissing me hard.

CHAPTER 49



COURT

Becca and I left the hospital hours later, arriving back at the hotel as the sun was rising over Paris. I could make out the curve of the Eiffel Tower's peak in the distance.

"I feel like I've been put through a blender at high speed," Becca moaned, taking my hand and letting me pull her to her exhausted feet. I pushed her car door shut, and she leaned against it while eyeing the hotel.

"That was a lot," I admitted. I hadn't done much except stand by her side as she told her family everything that had happened during the past few weeks.

She'd glossed over parts of it for her grandparents' and mother's sakes, but she'd revealed enough that they were rocked. Dr. Whittier had also been made aware that her soon-to-be ex-husband was staring down the barrel of a lengthy prison sentence.

"At least Mémé and Papa insisted on a prenup when Mom married Dad," Becca murmured.

I nodded. "And their divorce is almost finalized. She won't have to worry about assets being frozen while shit gets worked out."

Becca nodded, her hazel eyes exhausted. "Is it wrong that I never want to see my dad again?"

"I mean, I feel the same way," I admitted with a smirk.

She lightly punched my chest. I caught her hand and dragged it to my lips, then kissed her knuckles.

She was quiet for a long moment, the sounds of the city filling the morning air. It was cold, but in a refreshing sort of way. Like starting over with a clean slate.

“I can carry you inside again,” I offered. She’d borrowed clothes from Maddie for the visit to the hospital but was still wearing my hoodie. I liked seeing her in my clothes.

She grinned at me. “I think I can handle walking inside. I just...”

“What?” I tipped my head to the side, moving closer to rest my hands on her hips.

“I don’t know what to do,” she admitted.

“About?” Everything in me went cold, wondering if she was going to pull away. If, now that the craziness of the past few weeks was over, she was rethinking us.

She hooked her fingers around my belt loops. “I came here with my mom to help her get a fresh start. I’ll feel bad if I leave and go back to California, but I don’t want to be away from you.”

Relief hit me in a dizzying wave. She wasn’t trying to end things; she was trying to find a way for us to be together.

Not realizing I’d been bracing for my worst fear only to have it vanish just as fast, she kept talking. “I miss being with you guys. I miss Maddie, but I also think I need to stay here for a while. Cami’s going to need a friend.”

Camille’s ankle had been broken in two places and required a plate and two screws to put it back together. That would be followed by a lengthy recovery and physical therapy. She wouldn’t be dancing for months, and that was *if* her ankle healed right.

“I mean, I’m sure we can make the long-distance thing work, but is it wrong that I just don’t want to?” Her nose scrunched up adorably as she peered up at me. “We’re finally in a good place, and I *really* hate the idea of not seeing you every day.”

My lips twitched as I tried to hide a smile.

“Oh, God. I’m being *that* girl, aren’t I? The needy, stage-five clinger who can’t get out of bed without texting her boyfriend.” She looked horrified.

I chuckled. “I don’t think you have to worry about that, because I have zero plans of you waking up in any bed that doesn’t have me in it, too.”

She softened in my arms, the trust in her gaze staggering. Like I had the answers for her problems. Or, at least, for *this* problem.

“I only have my internship this semester,” I reminded her, “and technically I’ve met all the requirements for that already. I can check in remotely and fly back if I need to for a few days.”

Her eyes sparkled. “You’d stay in Paris?”

“Princess, I’d stay in a goddamn *shoebox* with you,” I told her, leaning in to kiss the top of her head.

“What about Phoenix? And Linc?”

I sighed. “Phoenix can run just fine without me, especially if we have people like Lieutenant Striker in our corner. Royal and Rook handle most of the day-to-day shit, and they’re bringing on one of Rook’s SEAL buddies, too.”

“Trick?” she asked.

I shook my head. “His contract isn’t up with the Navy yet. It’s Rook’s old CO.”

“CO?”

“Commanding officer,” I explained. “Royal met with him a month ago and offered him a job. I haven’t met him yet, but his wife’s a nurse and they have a kid. Rook’s trying to convince him to move closer to Pacific City, but we’ll see.”

“You’d really be okay living in Paris until I go back to the States for college?” She sounded so unsure. What was it going to take to prove that I was all-in? That she was it for me?

“I’d really be okay living in an igloo at the North Pole with you,” I assured her.

She giggled. “Okay. So you’ll... what? Find an apartment?”

“We will find an apartment,” I corrected. “Somewhere close to your grandparents and mom.”

“And when I go to college?” she pressed.

“We’ll figure that out, too,” I answered, confident in the answer because there was no alternative. Just because I’d been accepted into Stanford didn’t mean I *had* to go.

“I don’t have to go to PCU,” she added, her voice brightening with hope. “I can apply at schools near you, too.”

“Or,” I countered, “I can find a law school near PCU. We have options, baby.”

“I guess we have a few months to figure it all out,” she murmured. She stared up at me, wonder in her eyes. “I can’t believe it.”

“What?”

Her body pressed against mine. “That we’re here. Together. That we all survived *and* I got the guy.”

“Princess, you’ve always had the guy,” I told her. “I can’t believe I got

my girl.”

She pursed her lips. “Keep that in mind the next time I drive you crazy.”

My hands palmed her round ass and squeezed. “You can drive me crazy any day of the week, Becca.” I leaned in, nuzzling the side of her neck. My lips feathered a soft kiss over the skin under her jaw, and I felt her shudder in my arms. “Just as long as I can drive *you* crazy.”

She let out a breathy giggle. “Deal. Now how about you take me inside and show me just how crazy you can make me?”

I pulled back, arching a brow. “Is that a challenge?”

“If you’re up for it,” she replied with a coy smirk.

Pressing my already hard cock against her stomach, I growled, “With you? I’m always *up* for it.”

She tipped her head back and let out a full laugh that did funny things to my heart.

This was it. This was the moment I’d been waiting for; the moment when my entire damn life just made sense. And it was all because of this woman.

She was mine, and I was hers.

For-fucking-ever.

NEWSLETTER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you've been following any part of my journey the last year, you know what a struggle it's been. I'm talking *uphill in the rain, pushing a boulder with a broken leg* hard. I flat out wouldn't have survived it without my tribe of people.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today bestselling author Hannah McBride has been many things in her life: a restaurant manager, a clinical research coordinator, a dreamer, a makeup brand ambassador, an event coordinator, a blogger, and more. But at heart, she's always been a writer, and in 2020 she decided to make it official. Good luck stopping her now.



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