



*Kali
Queen*

Bo Reid

KALI QUEEN

BO REID



For those that encouraged this journey.

Your story is finally here.

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PROLOGUE

*When I was little, he was my hero, my idol, my everything,
until the day he wasn't.*

He always wanted me to be just like him.

*I've been groomed from day one to take over the family
business.*

But it was never something I wanted.

Until the day he took everything from me.

*A king who's built an empire on top of the bones of those that
got in his way.*

He's a killer.

And now, I'm just like him.

I WAS six years old when I saw my first murder.

It's one of the few that I can vividly remember. All the others over the years seem to have just blurred together. The smell of rust and gunpowder permeating my nostrils made me want to vomit as the acid and bile climbed up my throat. He begged for his life, yet I couldn't even tell you his name, or

what he did to deserve the punishment he received, but I knew in some way, he had crossed my father.

Andrew Kane is not someone you cross if you value your life.

I wasn't supposed to be in the warehouse that day, but I was home sick from school and my mother couldn't watch me. So, my bodyguard brought me along when he received a call to go to the warehouse.

It wasn't unusual for me to go along with my father or his many employees to do their jobs. Always in the car, riding along to do things no child should be involved in. That's the mob life though. I didn't realize it at the time, but the amount of cocaine and illegal guns I was around by age five was more than most people would see in their lifetime.

I can still remember the twisting feeling in my gut when we pulled up to the warehouse that day. Something wasn't right. Even at six, I could feel the pressure of death in the air; it was suffocating. I didn't know it then, but it wouldn't be the last time I would feel the crushing weight of death in the air. And no one could have prepared me for the lives I would take, the bodies I would have to bury, or the kill orders I would one day give.

No one can prepare you to become a monster.

My bodyguard, Denny, brought me into my father's office and tucked me in to sleep on the couch. I always liked to be with him the most, he was an older man and his wife would bake me cookies. I would realize later that she took me under her wing in order to distract and protect me from the things my father and her husband were involved in. Denny would take me out to ice cream after school and even help with my homework. He taught me things like long division when my

dad taught me how to fire a gun. Turns out both are useful skills for a drug lord.

When I woke up to loud voices, the shouting was coming from downstairs. I knew it wasn't my father, he never shouted. Real power, true evil, never had to raise its voice to be heard, it was simply felt like energy.

I knew I shouldn't leave the office. I felt it in my bones, that whatever was happening wasn't something I wanted to know about. But something pulled me towards the shouting like a magnet. I left the office and crept down the hall. Even as a child, I knew when my presence would be detrimental to my well being. Sometimes hiding in the shadows is where you're safest. Sometimes monsters are the best company. When I got to the stairs, I couldn't bring myself to go down them, but I looked over the railing. The scene before me is one that I would witness many times in the years to come.

It was a turning point in my life, although I didn't realize it at the time.

I didn't understand how this one moment would start to shape the very fabric of my being. But I can honestly say that the downfall of my humanity and rise to power simultaneously started that day. Right there, in a cold, dirty warehouse, in the middle of the day when I should have been coloring with other kids, I watched a man die instead.

There was a man on his knees on the ground, he looked like he had been in a car accident. His clothes were torn from his body, there was blood everywhere. I think he was crying, but his eyes were so swollen shut that I couldn't be sure. He was yelling, screaming, *begging* my father for his life as blood dripped from his wounds and saliva poured from his mouth. He begged for mercy he wouldn't be awarded.

My father was composed, his knuckles were red, and raw. The chunky silver rings he wore on both hands were coated in a thick layer of blood, but he was calm. Not a single wrinkle in his custom-tailored suit, the picture of a king confident in his power.

He casually removed the Glock .40 from his holster and put a single round in the chamber. My father held his gun to the man's head, and, with a smirk on his face and a steady hand, he pulled the trigger.

He didn't flinch. He didn't blink. He was the eye in the hurricane, calm while chaos surrounded him.

It was the first time I looked at my father and didn't see the hero who tucked me in at night, instead I saw the devil within his soul.

He glanced toward the top of the stairs, his gaze connecting with mine and I was frozen in place. Instead of rushing to my side, trying to shield me from the horrors I just saw, he turned his back on me for the first time and walked away.

I wish I could say that was the last time he would ever turn his back on me.

I WAS ten when I helped bury my first body.

I grew up exploring the woods behind my father's club. I had always thought they smelled like pine and fresh rain, no matter the season. Now, all I can smell when I enter the woods is rust and rot. Whether the rot comes from the thick coating of

fallen leaves or the many dead bodies buried here, I'm not sure.

It was late in the fall, most of the leaves covered the ground already and there was a chill floating through the air. I carried the shovels and my father had the tarp-wrapped body draped over his shoulder. I watched as blood dripped onto the forest floor.

We seemed to walk for hours, but it was probably just a few minutes. The trees were so thick, it was easy to feel like we were a world away. When we finally stopped, my father dropped the body with a thud and reached out his hand for one of the shovels I was carrying.

“Do you know how deep to dig, Amber?” he asked this question like he was asking what I had learned in school that day.

“No, Sir.”

“Since there aren't many animals in these woods, we don't have to go so deep. But we have to make sure we go deep enough that the smell doesn't travel when the wind picks up.” He looked at me and smiled so large that I thought his face might split in half.

He looked like such a proud father in that moment, sharing a trade secret with his daughter. Except most proud fathers who share trade secrets don't have secrets that involve where the bodies are buried.

We dug in silence, until the hole was deep enough, and my arms shook from working so hard. My father tossed the body in and began to cover it with the dirt. “Come on now, Amber, get to it. It'll be light soon and we're meeting your mother for breakfast.”

We worked to cover the body of a man who's name I still don't know. I can't tell you what he looked like, why he died, or how. But I could show you where his unmarked grave is. I might not remember their faces but their graves are ingrained into my memory.

I WAS twelve when I lost my mother.

The men came in wearing masks. They broke into our house and dragged my mother away kicking and screaming. I was in shock, unable to move my feet, or look away. It was like a car crash on the highway, you know you shouldn't look, that you can't help them but you stare anyways.

She screamed and she fought. I should have done something but what I'm not sure. When one of the masked men bent down in front of me, gently cupping my cheek, I tore my eyes away from my mother as they hauled her into a dark van.

"It'll be okay, sweet girl. They won't touch you," he said in a soft whisper.

I cocked my head, looking into his kind honey colored eyes. Eyes filled with so much sadness, his pain broke my heart; almost as much as losing my mother did.

I knew I would never see her again, and if I did, she wouldn't be the same person she was before she left. Although, it's almost better if they don't come back at all, because if they do they aren't the same, and it's like losing them all over again.

"You're going to kill my mama," I told him.

He looked away from me, unable to keep eye contact and that's when I knew. "Just don't think about it too much, sweet girl." He stood up, turning to walk toward the door. "Your father knows why this happened."

"I'll find you," I said, glaring at his back until he turned around to face me. "I'll find you, and I'll kill you for taking her from me. She's innocent. If you wanted to hold someone responsible, you should take me. I have more sins than her," I say as I nod toward the van.

"That's not how this works, sweet girl. But I'll be waiting for you if you ever decide to come for me. I'll welcome the bullet," he said before turning around and closing my door.

I raced to the phone to dial my father's number, explaining everything in a voice too calm to be my own. When did I become this person? And how much worse will I get? I never saw my mother alive again. We buried her body, and never spoke of her again.

After that day, things would never be the same.

I WAS fourteen when I first fell in love and I was sixteen when my father took everything from me.

He moved in next door when I was fourteen. By that time, I was a perfect shot with nearly every gun on the market, legal and otherwise. I could take a life and hide the body without leaving a trace of evidence.

I knew what to bury, what to burn, and what could be cleaned. Ordering things like bleach and acid in bulk for my

father. I could edit the books at all my father's clubs to hide the dirty money.

I didn't have many friends at school considering my whole life outside of those four walls revolved around homicide, money laundering, cocaine distribution, and gun running, I didn't have much in common with other kids my age.

The day Dylan moved in was the first time I ever wanted to get to know anyone my age. I wanted him in my life, I felt a pull toward him. As if he was someone my heart couldn't live without.

My father was all about welcoming new neighbors, keeping up appearances and all that. So he sent me over to their house with a plate of cookies; the kind you buy from the store and pretend you baked them yourself. When Dylan opened the door with a bright smile on his face, I couldn't help but match his grin. He wasn't hardened by life yet, not like I was.

He was taller than me by a few inches, not a hard feat to accomplish as I've always been the smallest in my grade. He had long dirty blonde hair that fell nearly to his shoulders and blue eyes like the ocean on a summer day. He was the typical California surfer guy with his tan skin and laid-back attitude. It was his smile though. It was warm and inviting; he smiled without restraint like he wasn't weighed down by his actions and choices. My smile didn't come easily anymore.

"Hi, I'm Amber Kane, we live next door. My dad sent me over with these to welcome you guys to town."

He reached out for the plate, brushing his hand on mine as he took it. "Hey, I'm Dylan Bennet. Thanks, my dad will be excited to see these. My mom doesn't let him have many

sweets, but I doubt even she can tell him no if they're a gift from you guys. Where do you go to school?"

"I'm a freshman at Applevalley Academy, the private high school on the other side of town. Where will you be going?" I ask even though I knew there was only one logical place for him to go, the public high school.

"Private academy, huh? You must be pretty smart to get in there. I start at Hillsdale High on Monday. I'm a freshman too."

I couldn't help but laugh at his insinuation of my intelligence, but he did just move here so I doubt he knew what being a *Kane* truly meant in this town. Give it a week, he'll learn fast.

"Applevalley has better security than the public high, that's why I go there. My dad is, umm, well, he just likes knowing I'm safe. And he'll pay any price to ensure my safety," I said with a shrug.

From that day on, we were inseparable for two years. We did everything together, and I confided in him how badly I didn't want to run the family business. It didn't take him long in a town this size to realize that the family business wasn't the night clubs and bars my father owned in the city.

Dylan came up with a plan for us to leave as soon as we graduated. We'd run away the night of graduation and never come back. He worked during the summers and saved every dime he made. I stashed all the money I could from what I made doing jobs for my father. It wasn't what I wanted. I was running drug buys, hiding bodies, paying off the local cops, and going on gun runs up north with the guys. Unfortunately, getting a minimum wage job down at the local gas station

wasn't just not a family option, it wouldn't get us the money we needed to start a life together away from here.

I had so much blood on my hands, I wasn't sure I could ever actually make it out of this hell, but Dylan didn't care, he loved me. He hated what I had to do, but swore it wasn't who I was. Every night after I took a life, I would sneak into his bedroom window. He never asked questions, he never made me relive what I did. He would just hold me, tell me he loved me, and remind me that we were getting out of here. He promised to drag me from the pits of my own personal hell. The problem was I was so far in that he couldn't drag me out, all I did was pull him in.

I'm not sure how my father found out that I wanted to leave. That I had a plan, and it and a life outside of this hell hinged on Dylan. I made the money, I had the better car, and all the connections we'd need to disappear. But somehow, my father knew that if I didn't have Dylan to pull me from hell, that I would never make it out on my own.

When I walked into the backroom of my father's main club, with gunpowder on my hands, blood spattered across my dark clothes, and a body in the trunk of my car I had no idea what was in store for the night.

I just stopped by to get the shovels, then I was going to finish my job, and climb into Dylan's window and let him hold me 'til I forgot her face, and the sound of her begging for her life. Cries and pleads that didn't matter because I had a job to do and it was her or me.

I walked into the backroom and headed straight for the closet that held what I needed. I was in a trance, the same one I went into in order to complete a job, I saw nothing but my end game and my endgame was Dylan.

“Ahh, there she is. Amber, we’ve been waiting for you. I expected you back hours ago,” my father said.

I stopped mid stride, to anyone else he would have sounded normal, cheerful even, but I knew every aspect of my father, and I felt the chill in his words down to my bones. I turned to face him and what I saw made me catch my breath. Dylan was here, in the backroom of my father’s club, sitting across from the devil himself. There was my .9mm on my dad’s desk, a gift for my fourteenth birthday. It was solid black, with a custom onyx hilt, inlaid with rubies and blood diamonds. Clearly every fourteen year old girls’ dream.

“The job was a bit harder to track down than originally anticipated, Sir, but I got it handled, nothing to worry about. I just came by to grab something to finish up.”

“Oh yeah? She give you some trouble? Why don’t you tell me all about it,” he said with an easy smile that I knew wasn’t showing how he truly felt in this moment.

It was all a show, a manipulation. I didn’t know how to respond with Dylan sitting there, he knew what I did, maybe not all the details but he knew, but my father didn’t know that Dylan knew this side of my life. If he had known that I told Dylan the truth about our family, he would have seen him as a security risk and found a way to eliminate him from my life. I had to tread carefully, he couldn’t know how much Dylan knew. So, I tried my best to ignore that he was even in the room. I wasn’t sure if my father knew the depths of our relationship or if he thought he was just the boy next door, I hoped that’s all he saw.

“No trouble, Sir. She just wasn’t at the previously listed address, but I found her and made sure she wouldn’t be any more trouble for us,” I stated with a shrug that I hoped made

this situation seem like it was a normal business transaction, and not homicide.

“I see, so did you call in a cleaner, or did you handle that yourself? You know if you call the cleaners that cuts into your profits, Amber.”

Why was he asking me about the cleaners? I never called them, I always handled the bodies and evidence myself. Why was he saying all this in front of Dylan? Was he trying to show Dylan the devil inside of me? Trying to make him leave on his own?

“Uhh, I handled it, Sir. I just have one more thing to take care of, so I should really get to it. It’s getting late, and I don’t particularly enjoy leaving a job half finished.” Actually I just didn’t enjoy leaving a body in my trunk for too long, they start to smell, and I don’t want to reupholster my trunk again.

“Yes, yes of course, Amber, take what you need. There’s just one more thing,” he said as he stood up and walked around his oak desk.

“What’s that, Sir?”

He looked at me with the same smirk on his face that I’d seen so many times, the true look of evil shining through his carefully crafted image. He picked up my gun, and I felt my blood drain from my face. It was like time slowed down, I looked at Dylan, as my father raised my own gun, and shot the only person who’d ever truly loved me in the head. I didn’t even have time to scream, Dylan’s eyes widened when he realized what was happening, but it was too late. I fell to my knees, a silent scream threatening to rip from my chest, as my father set my gun down, and looked at me with a disappointed expression.

“Your job just doubled. Handle him too. And Amber? You’re *never* leaving. I’m not sure what gave you the impression that I would ever let you go. Put aside the fact you’re my own daughter, and only heir to the empire I’ve worked my whole life for, you’re a natural. You’ve raised our northern gun distribution by ten percent, and managed an additional fifteen percent in cocaine sales, something even I have failed to do in the last decade. You have a gift, and I won’t let you throw your talents away for a boy.”

I was numb, I couldn’t feel anything as I looked my father in the eyes and said, “You didn’t have to do that. I would have stayed to save him, I wouldn’t have left.”

My father pinched the top of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and put his other hand on his hip, letting out an exasperated sigh as if I was a complete idiot. “Amber, this was never about him. This was about you. You cared about him too much. He was holding the last piece of your soul. Even if you stopped seeing him, even if I paid his family to move away from here and you never heard from him again, he would always hold your soul. His existence made it impossible for you to become the person you need to be to truly own the world. Now that he is gone, you can move past this silly idea of love being a source of power. Love is weakness Amber, and in this world, you can never show weakness. Now, pick yourself up off the damn floor, and get the fucking job done. This is a lesson, and one you will never forget.”

In the woods behind the club, I found a place away from all the other buried secrets. I dug a hole under the light of the summer moon, and let my tears spill onto the forest floor. As I lowered Dylan into his final resting place, I said a eulogy that no one would ever hear. As I covered his body with fresh dirt, and made a grave marker from a heavy stone, I dried my tears,

straightened my spine and walked away from him, from my past, from any hopes or dreams I ever had. On the night I lost Dylan, I also lost who I once could have been.

I apologized to the ghost of Dylan for pulling him into hell and not being able to let him go. I selfishly asked for forgiveness for actions that were unforgivable.

Amber Kane died along with Dylan Bennet.

And now, I'm exactly who my father always wanted me to be, and the person I promised Dylan I'd never become. A killer. I'm soulless. Ruthless. Evil. A monster. I'm the thing your nightmares fear.

1. ALCOHOL

Amber

MATT WRAPS his arm around my waist and pulls my body into his. He grips my wrist in his hand and lays his leg over mine, closing me in, and I can't help but sink into his hold. For a small moment in time, I allow myself to just feel his body and his steady breathing grounding me into place. I take a deep breath and his scent engulfs me, and for just this moment, I allow myself to wonder what our lives could be like if they were just slightly more normal.

But just for a moment.

The buzzing on the side table pulls me back to reality before I allow my dreams of white picket fences to manifest.

That shit is toxic — *dreams* — it poisons your head with idealisms you will never have.

“Yeah,” Matt grumbles into the phone as he answers it, and I take the moment of lost contact to get up and make my way into the attached bathroom.

“Yeah, got it. I'll ask her how she wants to handle it,” I hear him grumble into the phone as I start the shower and watch as steam rises up.

Stripping out of my panties and Matt's oversized shirt, I step under the stream of water. I allow the water to warm my body, steam pouring out of the large walk in shower as I reach for my body wash. The door clicks open and I see Matt's large frame walk through it. He strips out of his boxers and opens the shower door, stepping in behind me. He quickly grabs the loofa from my hand and begins to massage the soap into my

body, placing light kisses on my shoulders as he runs his hand over my skin.

In another world, in another place, in another time, I could get used to this. To being treated like this. But unfortunately for us, we're not in another situation and I can't allow myself to fall into this trap, I can't get used to this. But in these little moments, these early morning showers, where it's just me and Matty, and I don't have to put on a steel face, I can pretend and lean into his kisses and embrace his touch.

But only just for a moment, because if I give into more than just this, I risk everything.

“What was that about?”

“Trouble in LA,” he says. Pressing his chest into my back, he runs the soap over my arms and kisses up my neck.

His distant tone is a cold reminder as to why I cannot give into more than just a singular moment. We're not the people that get the white picket fence American dream. And we never will be.

“What kind of trouble?” I ask, my head falling back against his shoulder as his hand makes its way down my thighs.

“Matt,” I warn and feel him smile against my skin.

“New club opened up, they're peddling drugs at the bar — and not ours.”

“You mean mine,” I correct him.

My groan is a mix of pleasure from Matt's touch, and frustration at some idiot thinking they have a choice in where they get drugs from. Over the years I've worked very hard to make a name for myself. I have aligned our crew with some of

the most powerful people on the West Coast and because of that, I own everything north of San Diego, and everything south of Tacoma. If you get your drugs anywhere in my territory, one way or another they come from me.

You don't get to where I am by the age of twenty-eight by letting little things slide. If someone thinks they have a choice in their supplier, they're *wrong*.

"I suppose we're due for a trip anyways," I mumble.

"We can send someone. You're supposed to be off this weekend," Matt reminds me.

"I know. But if our people didn't already get through to this guy then you know it's my turn. We can go for the weekend and be back for northern shipments Monday."

"Day trip," Matt counters.

"Matt," I sigh.

He runs his hand over my ass, gripping the cheek and managing to place his dick in just the right spot to make me stupid.

"Day trip," he repeats, rubbing his dick against me.

"Day trip," I sigh once more.

"Good," Matt whispers against my ear before nipping at my lobe, causing me to moan. He runs his finger between my legs before pushing inside me and groaning against my neck. "You're pretty wet, Amber. Something I can do for you?"

"You can fuck me," I reply.

"Gladly."

He grips my throat with one hand, just enough to make me hazy, the way I like it. Pushing me forward with his other

hand, I brace myself against the wall. He lines his dick up with my pussy and rubs against my entrance, making me moan and drop my head. He pushes inside me gently at first, rocking back and forth until he is fully seated inside me. I bite my lip and moan as I push my hips back and beg for him to fuck me like I want to be fucked. Hard, rough, dirty — he knows how I like it.

“What do you want, Amber?”

“Your dick, Matt.”

He pulls me back up by my throat, turning us and shoving me against the wall. I groan as I hit the wall and I love every second of it.

After pulling his dick out and shoving it back inside me I smile, closing my eyes because I know he’s about to fuck me like his life depends on it.

“Do you like that, Amber?” he asks, leaning forward to bite my shoulder.

“Yes,” I moan.

“Good.” He pulls out and then rams his dick back inside me again. “What about that?”

“Yes, fuck yes.”

I reach one hand around my back, searching for his free hand, the one that isn’t wrapped around my throat.

He gives it to me. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want me to do with that?” he asks as he roughly shoves his dick in and out of me again and again.

I move his fingers to my clit, begging him to rub me until I cum. And I just know he's smirking behind me.

"Do you want to cum, Amber?"

"Yes."

"How do you want to cum?"

"I want you to rub my clit while you fuck me hard and choke me. That's how I want you to make me cum," I tell him, slightly turning my head so I can glance at him over my shoulder and, of course, there is the smirk on his beautiful face.

He leans forward, gripping my throat harder and pulling me in for a kiss as he starts to rub my clit.

"Then that's what you'll get," he tells me against my lips before gripping my throat harder and shoving me back against the wall. He goes to work on my clit as he fucks me hard, pulling out and slamming back inside of me just the way I like to be fucked.

I feel my legs start to shake and I moan as my orgasm builds around me. His grip tightens even more and I feel lightheaded. The smile spreads on my face as my orgasm crashes through me and my scream sounds throughout the shower. My legs give out, but Matt holds me up as he continues to pound inside me, chasing his own release.

When he's done, his grip loosens on my throat and we slowly sink to the floor of the shower. He pulls out and wraps his arms around me as we pant in a mess on the floor. The water streams over us as smiles spread on our faces.

"Thank you," I pant.

“Anytime,” he murmurs, leaning over to plant a kiss on the side of my head. “Fucking you is my favorite hobby.”

I can't help but laugh.

NORMALLY, it's a real good time teaching someone a lesson they'll never forget, but tonight, I'm terribly bored with this line of questioning.

Question. Wrong answer. *Punch.*

Question. Wrong answer. *Punch.*

Question. Wrong answer. *Punch.*

This guy is surprisingly loyal to whoever thought they could take over my area. But like I said, I'm bored here. I want to go home. I hate this city, it smells like smog and bad choices.

Whoever thought LA was a good place to live has clearly never seen the side of California that is draped in redwood trees.

I down my whiskey, and get up from my place behind this fucker's desk, tired of this shitshow. I guess if I want something done properly, I have to do all the work myself. Why do I even hire these goons?

“Okay, Dick. May I call you Dick? Here's the thing, we can sit around all night while I drink your shitty whiskey, and my guys beat you to within an inch of your life. But I would like to get home. I'm very busy and you're wasting my time. So here is how this is going to work. I'm going to ask you some very simple questions and you're going to tell me what I want to know. Because if you don't...” I bend down and

remove his wallet from his pocket, and hold up his driver's license and a family picture for him to see.

"I'm going to drag you to your house, tie you up and make you watch while I carve up your pretty little wife, and put bullets in your kids' heads. Just so there is no confusion in the matter, once I have to drag your fat ass to your house, there will be no saving your family. Got it? That means that once I load you into the car, you could spill your guts to me, and it still won't save them. At that point, I would slaughter your kids just to add them to my cute little list. So, you tell me what I want to know, or you lose everything that's ever meant anything to you." I pause, giving him a moment to catch his breath and a second to think.

After all, he has one shot at this.

"Now, Dick, who sold you the drugs? And why have you been oh so fucking loyal to them?"

With a terrified look on his face, he looks me dead in my eyes and I know what he sees. *Pure evil*. He realizes what I said is true, and knows that if he doesn't answer my questions I won't hesitate to fulfill my threats.. I didn't get to this point at such a young age because my father built up his operation and I slid in to take over. No, I got to this point because one too many people in the early years looked at me and saw an innocent face, a small girl who couldn't hurt a fly. But everyone who ever doubted what I was capable of soon learned a lesson they never forgot. My reputation is my own, and it's not a good one.

"M-my brother in law. He runs a small operation in Vegas. When I opened this location he came to me and offered a great price to work with him," he manages to stutter out.

“Why does your brother in law and his shitty Vegas operation want in on my LA turf?”

“I don’t know. He just said he wanted to expand, and he saw an in with me opening here.”

“Hmm, interesting. Now, tell me, Dick. What’s your brother in law’s name, and phone number? Seems I need to have a chat with him.”

“P-please, don’t hurt him.”

“Ugh. Dick, I don’t think you’re truly comprehending the situation here. You don’t want to piss me off. Do you see my face? I’m calm right now, got that? If you piss me off, I’m going to burn down your motherfucking club before I leave here.”

He starts blubbering like a damn fool, and I can’t hold back my eye roll. Come on, dude. You’re a grown ass man, act like it.

“His business card is on my desk.”

Finally, this guy is making smart choices. I walk over to his desk and hold up a black business card with gold writing. Que eye roll. I hold it up “This the one?”

“Y-yes.”

“Peachy. Now, Dick. I’m going to leave you my card, and the card of my LA distributor. You’re going to call him by the end of the week and order two kilos, got it? Cash up front. Then you’ll get a delivery the first of every month for two kilos. If you need more than that, you call my guy and you place your order, and you better have the fucking cash to backup your deliveries. I don’t deal in credit, I’m not the bank. You buy from anyone other than me again and I’m taking your hand just for funsies. These lovely gentlemen are going to stay

here and watch your sorry ass until I can contact your dipshit brother in law. Just to ensure you don't do anything stupid."

"I-I-I can't afford two kilos by next week."

What is with this guy? Did I stutter? "Good god, Dick. Did it sound like you had a choice in the matter? You *will* be buying two kilos by the end of the week, or I will be burning down your club. Just in case you're thinking because of your insurance premium it wouldn't cripple you, I'll make sure it looks like straight up arson, and I'll create a paper trail that holds you responsible. Not only will you not get the insurance money, but you will also be in prison. Then who will protect your family, Dick?"

I take his license, the picture of his family, and his idiot brother in law's business card, pull out my phone, and schedule a flight to Vegas.

Matt

"We didn't agree on Vegas," I grumble.

"Well, I didn't realize Vegas would come into play before we went to LA," Amber counters with a simple shrug of her shoulders as we make our way to the car.

"Amber," I warn her, despite knowing it won't do any good.

When Amber has made up her mind on something, there is no changing it, especially when it has something to do with her business.

She waits at the car and I open her door for her. After she slides to the far side I get in behind her. We're silent for some

of the drive before she finally speaks.

“I know it was supposed to be our weekend, I promised you that, but business comes first.”

“I know. It always comes first, it has too. That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is it about?” she asks, twisting in her seat. I glance and see the confusion on her pretty face.

The face of the girl I love, who doesn’t love me back, who can never love me back.

“We’re going into a potentially life threatening situation with no intel, and you aren’t the slightest bit concerned? Amber, you can’t do this shit forever.”

“And I won’t.”

“Then when will it stop?”

“When someone is brave enough to put a bullet between my eyes,” she replies with a sadistic smirk on her pretty lips.

The fucked up part is she isn’t even kidding.

She probably couldn’t care less if she died tonight, or any other night. She values her own life less than the ones she takes on a daily basis. That’s what makes taking them so easy for her. She truly sees no value in human life, not even her own.

Part of me thinks she puts herself in these situations because she wishes someone would take her out so she didn’t have to do this anymore. The problem is she’s simply too good at what she does that even when she isn’t trying to live, she’s better at getting the job done than anyone else.

“You might not value your life but I do,” I whisper, reaching out to grip her hand. “Try to be smarter than this.”

She rolls her eyes at me but squeezes my hand, her own way of letting me know she at least heard me.

2. AYAHUASCA

Rebel

AS I WALK into my dad's back office, I catch the tail end of a one-sided phone call, and he sounds worried, which is strange because nothing ever really worries him. That's what happens when you're a mob boss, even as a small-time boss, you get cocky.

"I-I-I understand, ma'am... yes, that will work... Do you have a place in mind? Yes, of course, I can provide tickets... O-o-kay, we will see you tomorrow night."

"Dad, who was that?" He looks up at me and before he can recover, I see sheer panic in his features.

"Huh? Oh. Uh, nothing, son. Just setting up a business meeting. After the fight, we'll have to come back to the office."

Ugh, I hate going to the fights and doing 'business' after, but something about all of this is strange. Why is dad so worried?

"Dad, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Reb, I'm fine. How's your mother today?" And just like that, he shuts down the subject of whatever has him so worked up.

"Mom's doing okay, but you know how it goes." The truth is my mother's health is declining with every passing day and the sad fact is, he just doesn't care.

I MAKE my way to the front of the ring to watch our guy compete. When I was sixteen, I started this entire set up as an underground fighting ring after my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Now, we host one of the biggest underground fight shows in Las Vegas, but I hate going to these. It's all hype. I miss the bare knuckle street fighting days. It's why I hardly ever get into the ring anymore.

If I can find a street fight, I will join in, but since we've made a name for ourselves, those days are pretty much over.

I take my seat on our side of the ring and wait for my father to arrive with his escorts. He's been acting funny since the phone call I caught him on last night, and I can't figure out what has his panties all in a twist.

When he finally arrives, he looks more nervous than I've ever seen in my entire life, and it can't be because of the fight. Our guy is a shoo-in to win this one.

I'm not going to worry about whatever issue he has cooked up right now. I just want to get this over with, get our meeting out of the way, and then go home to check on my mother.

As I scan the arena, my eyes land on a woman on the other side of the pit. She's striking with dark brown hair falling in waves all around her. Her tan skin, and full lips are the perfect combination. She wears a long black dress and a matching fur coat. There is a huge guy next to her in a custom-tailored suit that probably cost more than my rent. He looks menacing, with dark hair buzzed close to his head and tattoos covering his neck and hands.

They appear to be quite the pair.

My gaze shifts back to her, and I watch as she scans the room, her eyes eventually land on us — my father and myself.

She smirks, leaning into the man to tell him something. He glances our way and nods before they go back to looking around the room.

I wonder who they are.

The lights dim and the spotlights aim at the announcer entering the ring, who begins to go through the motions of announcing the fighters. Then the fight begins.

My gaze keeps going back to the female across the way and her partner. It's hard to see anyone through the darkness of the room, but I can still make out her general shape. She definitely has my interest piqued.

It isn't long before our guy has the other contestant knocked out and we're wrapping up this round and onto the next one. I go through the motions of congratulating our fighters as they win round after round. And before I know it, the night is done and we're heading toward the office for our meeting.

Despite my best efforts I lose track of the woman in the crowd. Not that I know what I'm wanting to do, seeing as the man she's with could probably snap my neck. But I can fight with the best of them. There's a reason I'm still the champion of this ring.

That would be if she even wanted to speak to me, but I guess I'll never know.

AFTER THE FIGHT, we immediately head back to the office, and dad is on edge. He's been like this for the last twenty four hours but won't talk about the meeting we're going into. Just

seeing him in this state, but him not telling me what's going on, has my nerves on edge.

As we pull up, there is a black town car waiting out front, and dad visibly swallows the panic clearly forming on his face. The guy from the fight is here and he is waiting out front of a town car that is parked. I wonder if he is the one dad is so worried about. Like I said, he is menacing, but I don't understand why dad would be this nervous. He deals with this type all the time.

As we exit the car, we slowly walk over to the guy, who looks us over with a murderous expression on his face.

“You Mr. Spencer?” His voice is deep and gravelly and sets the hairs on the back of my neck on edge. Who the fuck is this guy? I'm tall, six foot two, but this guy towers over me, and I'm not going to lie, he's actually scary as fuck.

My father is clearly trying to appear like he's not afraid and that he has his shit together. I wonder if we're starting a new deal or expanding and this is the guy we'll be dealing with. If that's the case, I'm pretty sure I don't want to deal with him.

“Yes. I'm Mr. Spencer and this is my son, Rebel Spencer.”

The guy doesn't introduce himself, he just double taps on the back passenger window, then puts a finger to his ear like he's listening to something and nods his head once in confirmation to whatever he was just told.

Then he bends down and opens the car door. It's dark outside, and the inside of the car is pitch black, so I can't see who is inside. The mountain of a man who I thought we were meeting bends down and helps the woman out of the back seat.

She's even more striking up close, and I have to suck in a breath. She has natural sun kissed skin. Long dark brown hair with deep red highlights that fall down her back in loose curls and honey eyes so bright they seem to glow in the dim alley. She wears a long black dress with a slit so high up her thigh, I have to question if she has any panties on, a matching fur coat, and black studded boots with a small heel adding three inches to her tiny height. Her crimson red lipstick is the perfect addition to her pouty lips.

I'm finding it exceptionally hard to breathe, let alone think straight. She's the smallest person here, but somehow, she gives off a vibe of pure power like nothing I've ever felt. She's like a tiny evil pixie.

I can see my father break out into a cold sweat, but I have a feeling it's not because of the way she looks.

"Ms. Kane, I'm Mr. Spencer and this is my son, Rebel Spencer. It's a pleasure to have you here. Did you enjoy the fight?"

She takes a moment to appraise both of us, and it's clear from the smirk on her face that she can clearly see how nervous my father is, even though he's trying not to show it. Instead, when she looks at me, she tilts her head to the side, and she makes no move to hide the way she looks me up and down. Now I'm trying really hard not to get hard, pun intended.

"Yes, Mr. Spencer, we had lovely seats. Thank you for the accommodations. Shall we go inside to discuss the matter at hand?"

"Yes, of course. Follow me," he says and moves to go inside.

Once inside my father's office, he takes his seat behind his large oak desk and motions for Ms. Kane to take the seat across from him. I stand off to his side, while mountain man stands just off to Ms. Kane's side, glaring daggers at my father and me, while also noting all the exit points and weapons. Clearly, he's ex-military or law enforcement of some sort, trained to know every way out of a situation.

"Now, Mr. Spencer, you know why I'm here, correct?"

"Y-yes. I do."

"And how are we going to fix our little issue in LA?"

LA? What's going on in LA? I'm trying to follow their back and forth, but I feel like I am missing key details.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Ms. Kane. It won't happen again. I don't know what I was thinking, but I clearly wasn't. I understand that's your territory. We're not trying to move in or push you out. I just thought I could help my brother in law get started over there. I was just going to supply him, no one else I swear," and now my father is rambling. Who is this chick, and why does my father have his panties all in a twist over her?

"I trust it will not happen again. As you're aware, I own LA. I own everything north of San Diego. If you want a piece of anything inside my borders, you come to me. You disrespected me when you *helped your brother in law*, in order to get your shitty cut coke into my town, and it will not happen again. Are we clear? You *helping* nearly got your brother in law beaten to death."

Well, that is a surprising turn of events. My uncle went into the hospital late last night and we were informed he was in a car accident.

"Y-yes, ma'am, I understand. Again, I'm sorry."

“Very well then. I see we’re done here.” She looks like she’s pissed she had to come here and deal with us. Yet I still don’t know who the fuck she is.

My father visibly exhales a breath that I’m sure he’s been holding for a while. But I’m still struggling to follow this conversation. I feel like I’m missing a lot of important details. Like we’re dealing in LA now? Where? When did this happen? She owns LA? And everything north of San Diego? This sounds vaguely familiar, I’ve heard of a huge crime syndicate on the West Coast that controls a huge portion of California and the Pacific Northwest. Does she work for them?

She moves to stand, and my father does the same, ever the gentleman. Then she looks at me, and there is something in the way her eyes scan my large frame that has me on edge. If any other woman looked at me like this, I’d want to take her to bed, but right now, I feel like I should run. She doesn’t look at me like I’m a snack she wants to eat, she looks at me like I’m a predator advancing on her cubs and she wants to rip my throat out to make a point.

“This is your son?” she asks, motioning her hand toward me. Now my dad looks scared again. What. The. Fuck. Is going on here?

“Y-yes.” I have never heard my father stutter so much in all my life.

She taps her finger to her chin like she’s thinking, “Hmm, is he set to take over this shit operation?”

Damn, she’s a savage.

“Y-yes, I’m hoping to step down in two years.”

“I see.”

Then it all happens in slow motion, she slips a hand inside her coat, pulls out a .9mm and shoots me in my fucking leg. Fuck, this shit hurts. I've never been shot before. I drop to the ground, and clutch my leg, crying out in pain, while my father just looks stunned. She casually tucks the gun away like she didn't just fucking shoot me and turns to speak to my father.

"This is your only warning, Mr. Spencer, 'cause I'm fucking nice like that."

"Nice? Nice! You fucking shot me!"

She looks at me like she couldn't be more bored of this exchange. "You'll live. Stop crying like a little bitch."

Then she turns to speak to my father again while I'm seeing fucking spots from the pain. She shot me! I can't believe this shit, I don't even know what's going on here and the bitch shoots me.

"You cross me again or set a foot inside my borders before I okay your entry, I will hunt down every person you've ever had a warm feeling toward and I will skin them alive, then personally deliver their heads to your door step until you clearly understand who the Queen of Kali is."

She looks at me with absolute glee in her eyes, like the idea of skinning someone alive is her idea of a party. As she continues to look at me, she keeps on with her threat and I can now understand why my father has been on edge. Queen of Kali, or Kali Queen, doesn't *work* for the West Coast crime syndicate, she leads it, owns it. She's pure evil. How did I not recognize her name? The crazy, evil, sexy as sin little pixie in front of me is Amber Kane. Soulless crime lord with a black heart. Now, I'm surprised she shot *just* my leg. She must like me.

“I will start with your whiney son. Do you know how long a person can survive their skin being removed from their body? Quite a while if you do it just right. I could keep him alive for days, while I record his screams.”

Okayyyyy. Maybe she doesn't like me so much. She taps her chin thoughtfully and continues talking in an almost dreamy voice like she wishes he would cross her again.

“I'd, of course, send you the recordings. I'm thoughtful like that.”

She claps her hands and her face lights up like she just got a pony for her birthday. “Oh, I could probably set his screams as my ringtone! Now there's a plan. Or maybe *your* ringtone. Yeah! Then you could hear him screaming every time you got my call and remember just what you did to cause him so much pain.”

She turns back to me and walks over. At this point, I'm in so much pain that I can't even fully comprehend how bat shit crazy she is. She bends down, and I have such a perfect view of her amazing breasts that I almost forget the bitch just shot me. Until, of course, she digs her finger into my leg, and I scream in pain.

“Hmm, you're lucky. Looks like there's an exit hole. Guess I won't need to dig in there again to remove the bullet.”

“If you saw the exit hole, why the fuck did you just dig your finger in there anyways?” I yell, absolutely exasperated.

She just shrugs her shoulders, stands, and says, “funsies, duh.”

With a sadistic smile still on her face, she turns and leaves the room, her henchman following her without so much as a glance my way.

Once the door closes, my father rushes to my side and applies pressure to my wound as I try my best not to scream out in pain.

“I need a doctor,” I grit out.

“We can’t go to the hospital. They’re required to report gunshot wounds,” my father tells me.

“I. Don’t. Care.”

“I do,” my father tells me. Standing up and moving over to his desk, he makes a call to our fight club doctor.

I roll my eyes as I writhe on the ground in pain, waiting for him to show up and tend to my newly inflicted wound.

The wait gives me time to think about the woman that shot me. The beautiful, bat shit crazy woman dressed in black, holstering a gun where no one could see. I want to learn more about her, but I feel like getting close to someone like her is a death wish.

3. METHAMPHETAMINE

Amber

FIVE YEARS AGO

It's five in the morning, and the sun is just barely starting to light up the summer sky. I'm exhausted since we've been gone for two weeks on a cocaine run. It was supposed to be simple. Head down to Mexico and check on the new operation, make sure the warehouse is in order, the trucks are running smoothly, and that everyone that needs to be paid off is happy. However, this shit never goes according to plan, and I just spent two weeks dodging bullets, and burning bodies while protecting my newly acquired coke stash. When normal twenty-one year olds spend two weeks in Mexico, it's on a beach, day drinking tequila, tanning, and buying weed and molly to have a hell of a party, but I'm not fucking normal.

I'm exhausted, I look like shit, and I can't tell whose blood is staining my clothes and skin. I've got at least three bullet wounds, and I can feel the painful scratch of glass in my shoulder that needs to be taken care of. The club doctor is meeting me here, since I can't exactly walk into the ER with bullet wounds. They have to report that shit, and I heard there's a few new cops on the force that I haven't been able to pay off yet, so that shit is a no go.

I walk into the back room and head straight for my whiskey stash. When I turn around, my father is there smirking at me like he knows the hell I just got back from and doesn't care. There is a very large man standing in front of my father, with dark hair buzzed close to his head, and tattoos peeking out of his shirt collar and sleeves. He wears black combat boots, black slacks, and a white button up shirt that's

rolled up to his elbows. His face is clean shaven, so I can clearly see that hard set of his jaw. Clearly ex-military, and I'm guessing a new member of our security detail. And he's hot, like panty melting hot. I sigh 'cause no matter how hot he is, he's not Dylan, and I'll never put someone else in that same position. I may have taken more lives than I can even remember, but Dylan's is the only soul that weighs me down, my only regret, and the only person I feel remorse for.

"Amber honey, how was the trip? Did you enjoy yourself?" I look at my father and honestly question if his idea of a good time is all out-gorilla style warfare. Hell, it probably is.

"The trip was fucking peachy, Sir. The coke is locked down, the rebels are handled, and everyone's paid off. It took a bit longer to finish, but now we shouldn't have any problems from here on out," I say, tipping a bottle to my lips and chugging the whiskey.

"Good, good. Here, Amber, I want you to meet Matthew Greene, the newest member of your team. He'll be filling in Denny's position."

I snap my gaze to my father, who's clearly amused by this reaction "I don't need Denny's position filled and I don't need a babysitter. I can take care of myself." I haven't had a babysitter since I was eighteen and "Uncle Denny" retired.

"Clearly," he deadpans and motions at my blood-stained body. "How many bullets is Eric removing this time, Amber?"

"One or two..." I mutter under my breath. It's not like I was strolling down the street and got caught in gangland cross fire. I was just in a literal rebel war in Mexico with no protection other than my tank top. Most people would have died in my situation. Hell, most people did die down there

since there's now a mass grave filled with dead rebels on the border of the warehouse property.

“This is not negotiable, Amber. Mr. Greene will be your right hand. He's not here to babysit you. You're going to be taking over soon, and you need to have your VIPs already lined out. You need to build a trustable relationship with the people you'll be working closely with. I know you don't want to slide into my position with the men that have been loyal to me over the last three decades and that's fine. I'm doing this because it's what you wanted. Now, be a good girl and say thank you, then go get cleaned up. You fucking smell.”

After Dr. Eric removes all the bullets, and glass and stitches me up, groping my ass more than is necessary, I slide into the passenger seat of my car while Matthew Greene slides into the driver's side. He's clearly trying not to react to the smell of my car. Yeah, dude, I know it's gross. I just drove for twenty hours soaked in blood, mud, coke, and sweat. I doubt I'll be patenting the scent and making millions off perfume sales.

“Okay, Matty, may I call you Matty?”

The look on his face is priceless and regardless of what he says I'll be calling him Matty just on principle. “No. I'd really prefer Mr. Greene.”

Oh, he's so cute when he tries to be serious and stern.

“Hmm, okay. Matty it is. Here's the deal, I'm sure my father gave you the low down of what your job entails, but here's my low down. You'll be living in my apartment with me, but don't fuck up my shit. If you drink the last of the coffee without making more, I'm liable to slit your throat or strangle you in your sleep. You do your own laundry and clean up after yourself. I'm not your damn maid, your mommy, or

your wife. You work for me, not the other way around. Don't cross me and never underestimate me, and we'll get along just fine."

I can tell he's trying to figure me out, and right about now, he's wondering if I'm as evil as the rumors surrounding my name claim I am. Or if I'm just a spoiled little mob princess whose daddy gives her the illusion of power. I'll let him figure it out for himself. It's more fun that way.

IT'S BEEN two weeks since Matty was hired, but we haven't left the apartment much considering I came back from my last run riddled with bullet holes. Matt has actually been pretty great. He makes sure there is fresh coffee each morning and has even gone out to get groceries so I can heal. Maybe he won't be so bad to have around.

My phone starts going off, and I really don't want to answer, but I know if I ignore it, they'll just call Matt and I'll have to deal with whatever the crisis is anyway.

"What? I'm busy," I answer, irate someone would even be calling.

"Now, Amber, we both know you're sitting on your balcony with a fresh cup of coffee in one hand and a joint in the other. Looking out on the city skyline and thinking way too hard about where your life is headed," Bear responds with a chuckle. He's my hacker.

I found him two years ago and he's the best in the business, and when he details exactly what I'm doing I know it's because he's got me on surveillance for his own fun, so naturally, I throw up my middle finger and he laughs deeply

into the phone. Which, of course, causes me to laugh as well. He's always doing that, making me laugh when I really don't want to. It's his gift and one of the reasons I haven't strangled him yet for being a high-tech peeping tom.

“What do you need, Bear?”

“Oh, I don't need anything other than to see you naked, baby girl, but since you haven't been answering your text, I was instructed to call you and let you know you're needed at the southside warehouse.”

“Oh, and why did they think I would answer just because it was you calling?”

“Because, baby, you always answer my calls. I know you love me, you're just going to have to accept our love then we can be together.”

And now, I'm full belly laughing because Bear and I have a weird completely platonic friendship where he says stupid shit about us being together, when we both know he doesn't see me that way, but he's right. I always answer his calls no matter what.

“Sure, Bear. Let's run off into the sunset and get married, but first, I have to probably go kill someone. Meet you at eight?”

“Sounds good, doll face. I'll bring the take out and we can have a movie marathon. Oh, by the way, have you decided to bed that sexy new addition to your apartment yet? He's a perfect specimen and I don't know how you've held out this long. Unless, of course, I just missed it.”

“One, you're such a pervert, stop spying on my apartment and two, no, I haven't slept with him and I don't plan on it. He's all yours if you want him.”

“I’m not spying. I’m watching over you from a distance. You came back from that trip shot all to hell, babe. I just wanted to make sure you were okay and not over exerting yourself again.”

I sigh because I know he just does this because he cares, and I’m running low on people who actually give a shit about me. My list is one person long, and that person is currently on the other end of my phone. How can I be mad at him for loving me in his own way?

“Thank you, Bear. I love you. I will see you tonight. I’m going to go get ready and head out. Let them know I’m on my way.”

“You got it, baby doll. I love you too. Be safe, okay? No more bullet holes.”

I hang up and drag myself off my lounging chair, and into my apartment where I find Matt already waiting for me in his typical uniform of combat boots, slacks, and a button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

“You know what’s on the schedule?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me that. I’ll be ready in ten. Bring the car around and I’ll meet you out front.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I swear to God, Matty, if you call me ‘ma’am’ one more time, I’ll push you off the balcony. Call me Amber,” I can see in his features that using my first name goes against everything he was ever taught, and he clearly sees this as a sign of disrespect.

“At least while it’s just us, please, call me Amber. When I’m at my apartment, I like the illusion of normalcy, and you calling me ma’am is the opposite of anything normal.”

“Okay, Amber.” He visually flinches at the use of my name “I will use your first name when it’s just us, but I have to show you respect when we’re around others, I hope you understand. I don’t want them to think you have any weaknesses.”

“Thank you, Matt. I’ll meet you out front.”

The southside warehouse isn’t very far. About twenty minutes outside of the city, it’s where we house our weapons shipments before they can be transferred to the proper party. As we pull up out front, I put my game face on. Walking into this building, I’m not Amber Kane, I’m a cold-blooded killer, a crime boss that will do whatever it takes to rise to the top.

“You good?” Matt asks. He’s not actually asking if I’m ok, or good, he’s asking if I’m ready to be back at work. He needs to know my head is in the game. It is. My head is always in the game. As soon as I lose focus, people die. Well, technically, people die either way, I just prefer to be the one holding the gun, not the one with a target. Since this is Matt’s first job as my right hand, he’s about to learn a very important lesson. I’m worse than the rumor mill claims I am.

“Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s get this shit over with.”

I stroll into the Warehouse, whistling like I’m going on a casual walk in the park. “What seems to be the problem, boys?”

There are four men on their knees, all half beaten, and a row of my guys in front of them holding various guns. Cage speaks first, “We caught these guys trying to steal some of the

Glock shipment. What do you want to do with them? They claim to have information they're willing to trade for their lives."

Cage is a new guy on my team and he's just 17, but he grew up in the pits of gang territory and seems to be able to handle himself well. He's starting out on guard duty, but I think he'll make a great addition to the team in a few years. He's got brown hair buzzed close to his head, and it's easy to see once he's done growing, he'll rival Matt in size.

I turn to look at the pathetic scene in front of me, while Matt stands off to the side, looking menacing as ever. I think we make a great team. He looks scary as fuck and I look like their saving grace. Oh, how wrong they are.

"Hmm, you guys were trying to steal from me?"

They all start speaking at once, trying to defend their actions, but I'm so not in the mood for excuses. I take my .9mm out and shoot one of them in the head, and the rest shut up really quick.

"Here is the deal. You either didn't know who this product belongs to, you have a death wish, or you're just plain stupid. But I don't really care why you made this mistake, the truth is that you did, and I don't really give a shit about your information. I'm not going to spare your lives, so you'll just need to accept that you will all die here today. The only option you have is how much I make you suffer before I end your life. Now, tell me whatever shit intel it is you have, and you won't feel any pain before the darkness overtakes you."

And now, they look the appropriate amount of terrified. Good.

The one on the far side lets out a heavy exhale and lowers his head. He's the first to accept his fate.

“We don't have any information for you. We heard you had weapons stored here and thought we could get in, take a few, and get out before anyone noticed we were here. We heard this location wasn't guarded as heavily as the others. We just wanted a few .40's and .9mm to sell on the street and make some quick cash.”

He lifts his head and looks me in the eyes. He's brave, stupid but brave. It takes guts to tell the truth even in the face of death. When I look away, I give a barely perceivable nod to my guy standing behind them. He walks over and puts a bullet in each of their heads before they can even comprehend their last moments. I let the guy on the end go first since it's hard to watch your friends die. He doesn't know it, but this was my own version of mercy.

I turn and walk out without another word. The guys don't need instructions, they know what to do with the bodies. Matt and I load into the car, and silently pull away from the warehouse. Now, he knows exactly who he's working for and living with, this moment will determine how we move forward.

“How about some lunch? I'm starving and haven't had a good burger in ages.”

I can't help but smile at him. We're clearly going to be best friends.

“Burgers sound great.”

Present Day

Matt and I load up into the rented town car and head to the small private airport just outside of the city. We're silent, Matt always waits for me to speak when I'm ready. We've been a team for five years, we live together in every major city where I do business, and he's always by my side. He's my best friend whether we're making pancakes at two in the morning or digging a grave, it doesn't matter. Everything with Matt is easy. I can be myself with him, I don't have to be a crime lord. I can just be a twenty-six-year-old girl.

Matt reaches across the seat and grabs my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. He knows tonight didn't go according to plan. Typically, all I would have to do is make a phone call, mention my name, and whatever idiot thought they could sidestep me realizes their mistake and backs off. But this whole ordeal was different, and I knew I had to make the trip out to Vegas personally. If an organization as weak as what Mr. Spencer has going thinks they can break into my territory then it means someone, somewhere thinks I'm weak. If enough people start thinking they can move in, there will be a West Coast war, and I don't know if I'm mentally capable of handling that kind of carnage.

When I originally called Mr. Spencer to arrange a meeting, I requested his next in line to be present. The plan was either kill Mr. Spencer and show everyone how easy I could take them out to make them understand who really holds the power. Me, obviously. Or his son. Nothing like killing the next of kin to really drive home the point of who's in charge. Yup, still me.

But during the short meeting, his kid looked like he didn't have a fucking clue who I was, why I was there, or why his dad was about to shit his pants. For some reason, it didn't seem right to force him into power. He clearly doesn't want this life. If he did, he'd have more information. It's not like he's a child. He's a grown man, older than me, yet he has nowhere near the standing I have. Rebel Spencer isn't a mob household name, not like Amber Kane is. I also didn't feel like killing him, but I can't figure out why. He means nothing to me, none of them do. So why did I let him live?

"I don't know why we're not getting rid of a body right now, Matty. Why did I let them live?" I can't help but voice my confusion to one of the only people left who knows every part of me.

"Not sure, Amber. Maybe that black heart of yours is finally figuring out how to beat again."

Que eye roll, Matty can be so damn cheesy sometimes. Which is pretty amusing considering he looks like he kicks puppies for fun. He doesn't, by the way, he just looks the part.

"Yeah, I seriously doubt that, Matty. I guess despite his age, he just looked so damn innocent. He would be easy to manipulate into power, but I couldn't care less about owning their shit operation. I have enough on my plate as it is, I don't need to add 'fix someone else's crime ring' to it."

Matt lets out a low laugh. "Yeah, you do have your hands full, but maybe you should have Bear put tabs on him. You know, just in case they do something stupid."

I know what he's doing. He's giving me an out, a way to explore my reasoning for my actions tonight without me having to express feelings, since, you know, I don't have those. I pick up my phone and dial Bear's number. He's been

with me for seven years, and he's the only other person who truly loves me. He's the best hacker in the business and with his help, I've been able to take over most of the West Coast.

“Hey there, baby girl. Calling to confess your undying love for me?”

“Not quite, I need you to put eyes and ears on the Spencer operation in Vegas. I want to know everything about everyone they have ever been in contact with. Mr. Spencer and Rebel Spencer are the highest priority.”

“Yes, my love. I'll have a file for you by the time you're back at your apartment. Shall I pick up the take out?”

“That sounds great, Bear. Matt and I will meet you there so pick out a good movie.”

“Oh, can we snuggle too?!” he asks with glee in his voice, like the idea of a snuggle party is the best thing he's ever thought of.

“You can snuggle with Matty,” I say in a teasing tone and Matt lets out a low growl that tells me he absolutely will not be snuggling with Bear, and it makes me laugh. I love these guys.

I hang up the phone and Matt wastes no time wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into his lap. “You keep offering Bear snuggles and I'm going to have to punish you,” he growls, gripping my hips.

A smirk pulls at my lips as I wiggle my ass in his grip. “What kind of punishment?”

Matt crashes his mouth to mine and grabs my hair. I part my lips and he runs his tongue along the inside of my mouth, I grip his neck and pull him closer to me, moving my hips along his erection.

When he pulls back and rests his forehead against mine, he whispers, “the best kind.”

“Please, tell me it involves your cock,” I tease.

“Always,” he grits and thrusts his hips up to rub his dick on my center.

“We’re here,” the driver says as he pulls the car to a stop at the private airfield outside of the Vegas strip.

Matt grips my ass and grinds me against him. “Wanna join the mile high club?” he asks.

“Pretty sure we have already done that,” I tease before moving off his lap.

I push my door open and Matt follows me to the private plane where we walk across the tarmac and up the steps. Upon entering, we’re greeted by a flight attendant with flutes of champagne. I don’t know why they do this every time, I don’t want champagne. This isn’t a party visit.

Matt takes my hand and leads me over to the couch. Sitting down, he pulls me into his lap, but instead of picking up where we left off in the car, he just wraps me in his arms and holds me close to his chest. He kisses the top of my head and whispers, “Sleep, Amber. We’ll be home soon.”

A yawn breaks from my lips, the exhaustion of the past few days settling into my bones. “I don’t want to sleep,” I whisper.

“I’m not going anywhere, I promise,” he says, running a gentle hand up and down my spine.

I don’t want to sleep. In fact, I *hate* sleeping. The nightmares always come when I close my eyes. His face, the way he looked at me. He haunts me every time I close my

eyes. I hate sleeping, but I brave the nightmares every night just for a single, pain filled glimpse at his face again. I need to remind myself of the pain I caused Dylan, I need to remember the weight in my chest. If I don't, then someday I will let Matt get too close. I will give into him the way I really want to, the way I know he wishes I would.

Matt loves me as more than a friend, and I wish I could let myself love him back or let him go.

As things are now, I'm just going to ruin us in the end.

4. Mescaline (PeYote)

Matt

I WATCH Amber walk across the street and take a seat at a small table outside the cafe in Sanorah. Waiting until Morana Valdis pulls up with her faithful Reapers in tow. They file out of the blacked out Jeep Wrangler and Morana takes a seat with Amber, while the guys make their way across the street to where I'm seated.

We are never privy to whatever it is they talk about during their bi-monthly meetings. Half the time we're convinced they're plotting our deaths. You just never know with them. Amber and Morana hug with smiles on their faces, and I swear this is almost the weirdest friendship.

The girls met about four years ago, Amber tried to take over Sanorah and the surrounding distributions and Morana almost killed her. They have been best friends ever since. Amber says "nothing like a few death threats to really drive home a friendship." I don't get it.

This is the only piece of California she doesn't own.

"What's good, brother?" Ranger asks, stepping up to me and extending his hand for a shake.

"Same shit, different day, you know how it goes," I say and nod my head at the black unmarked Crown Vic that pulls up and parks down the street.

Morana raises her hand in a little wave and a smirk pulls at her lips. I watch as Amber turns to face the car and Morana whispers something to her. Even from here I can see Amber rolling her eyes before she also waves to the cops tailing her friend.

“You guys got trouble?” I ask and tip my head towards the car.

“Don’t we always?” Nash quips, “Morana is the literal definition of trouble, pretty sure her picture is next to the word in the dictionary.”

“Yeah, I feel you on that. Pretty sure Amber’s picture is right there next to Morana’s, and don’t forget Delilah.”

“These fucking women, man, I swear they’re going to be the death of us,” Hunter sighs but the smile he is trying to hide tells me he doesn’t think there is any better way to go. And I would have to agree with him on that.

These women drive us fucking nuts but we would kill for them, or lay our lives down for theirs. As if they know we’re talking about them, they both turn to stare at us, pointing and then laughing.

Hunter sits up and takes a step towards the road. “Stop talking shit!” he yells, cupping his hands around his mouth so his words travel.

Morana just laughs and yells back, “Make me!”

Ranger grabs Hunter’s arm and pulls him back before he can walk across the street. “She is just yanking your chain, man.”

“I wish she would yank something else,” he quips and Ranger rolls his eyes.

“So what happened to her, and since when are you guys a thing?” I ask, nodding my head toward the girls. Morana is battered and I can see her stitches from here.

All three guys go on full alert to my question and their moods instantly change, “It’s been handled,” Hunter growls.

“Okay, okay. Easy, man, just a question,” I say, holding my hands up to surrender before he bites my head off.

“We had some problems the past few weeks, but things are better now,” Nash says and I know that’s all I’m going to get from them on the subject.

“And they just started fucking Morana in the past few weeks and can hardly keep their dicks to themselves now,” Nash says ever so helpfully.

“We’re not fucking her, we love her and you know it. Don’t make it sound dirty,” Hunter spits.

“Oh, you guys make it sound plenty dirty, no need for me to help with that,” Nash says laughing.

“She still pretending she doesn’t have feelings for you?” Nash asks quietly, nodding toward Amber.

I shrug my shoulders. “It’s what they’re good at.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth,” Ranger huffs. “So busy protecting us from themselves that they can’t see how much we would do for them.”

We sit in silence watching over the mob queens across the street. The women that can make any man drop to their knees and beg for their lives. Without remorse or trepidation, they take countless lives, and they only see themselves as evil. Never stopping to ask what it is we see in them.

They swear they’re nothing but darkness, but all we see is light.

Amber

“What do you think they talk about over there?” I ask Morana, nodding my head to the guys across the street.

She shrugs. “Us. What else?”

“We are pretty interesting,” I laugh.

I watch Morana stare at her guys across the street and it hits me. “Well, shit. You finally bucked the fuck up, didn’t you?” I nod toward them.

“Oh, shut up, Amber. Like you’re any better,” she huffs.

“Hey, all I’m saying is congratulations,” I say with a sly grin pulling at my face.

“Yeah, whatever. At least when I started fucking them, I also admitted I love them. Heaven forbid you tell Matt you love more than his cock,” she says and picks up her coffee for a drink.

“You know I can’t ever tell him that, it’ll...” I trail off. I can’t say that shit out loud.

“Yeah, yeah. Your dad. Boo-fucking-hoo. Who are you, Amber? Last time I checked, you’re the Kali Queen. Buck the fuck up and take him out then move on with your life,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“It’s not only him and you know it, it’s everyone. Once I have something for them to take from me, I paint a target on their backs. I can’t do that to him,” I sigh, running my hand through my hair. “Love is a form of weakness, not strength.”

“Then you show them who the fuck you are,” she whispers in a low menacing voice that would set my spidey sense on edge if I was anyone else. But I know the only reason I might have to fear Morana would be if I came between her and her guys. “And that ‘love is a weakness’ bullshit is you still letting

daddy into your head. She pushes her finger into my temple. “Plus, you have me,” she says with a smile. “And Delilah. What more could you want?”

“Hmm, a Queen, a Reaper, and a Witch all walk into a bar... Sounds like the start of a bad joke,” I laugh.

“It is, just like the rest of our lives.”

“Anyways, shall we talk about why we’re really here?” she starts and I take a long pull from my coffee mug, preparing myself for why we’re here.

Rebel Fucking Spencer.

5. COCAINE

Rebel

IT'S BEEN three months since Amber Kane swept into my life, threatened my father, and *shot me*. I've been spending more time taking care of my mom. The cancer is getting worse and the doctors don't think she has much time left. I'm still limping slightly, 'cause yeah, gunshots hurt, but I'm able to move around a lot better than I was before.

The additional fight nights that my father has enrolled me in against my wishes has not done well to aid in my recovery either. Somehow, word got out that I had been injured before the last fight and my opponent went in for a few dirty shots and almost got one over on me, but I was able to hold my ground and my championship title.

I tried to hide the limping from my mom — she doesn't need any more stress in her current condition — but when your only child comes home and can hardly walk, *moms notice*. I ended up having to tell her all about the storm that is Amber Kane, and she was pissed. More at dad than at Amber though, which is funny considering she's the one that shot me. Even mom understands we don't belong in California, even if dad was trying to help her brother, or at least that's the story he's sticking to.

Personally, I think he just thought he could fly under the radar, but we have no real idea what sort of organization the Kane's run. But if I had to take a guess, it's the type that doesn't take any shit and knows every inch of every city they've claimed. You don't run the West Coast by letting someone step into your turf. When one person steps in, it just gives others the idea that they can do the same. If she let

anyone get away with that type of shit, she would never have the territory she has.

I'm planning on taking my mom on a trip to Rouge, Oregon, a tiny coastal town where she grew up. It's hard to accept the fact that my mom probably won't make it 'til Christmas, but I'm determined to make her last few months as comfortable as possible, and as memorable as I can. She deserves the world and I'm going to give it to her.

I pulled as much money together as I could to get first class plane tickets for our trip. Mom has never flown first class.

When we touch down in Oregon, she's already exhausted from the flight. We stop for a quick bite to eat before we head to the house I rented us for the week. When we arrive, mom is in awe, and in that moment, I know I've done the right thing bringing her here.

"Honey, it's beautiful, I can't believe you did this all for me," she whispers.

"Mom, I would do anything for you. Anything. I would give you the world because you're everything to me. Come on, let's get you inside so you can rest. We have a busy day tomorrow," I say and lead her up the steps and into the house.

Dad should be here, he should be the one doing these things for her, but I'm pretty sure there hasn't been love between them for sometime.

Amber

Today is a dull one but one that is needed to continue our business ventures. I'm in my office at my southside warehouse overseeing the counting and bagging of our latest shipment of ecstasy.

My father has always been old school and only wanted to deal in cocaine and guns, but I saw a bigger market out there. One that would only make us more money if we dove into it head first. So, a few years ago, I expanded our operations into different drugs. Cocaine is no doubt one of our biggest selling points but the ravers of today love their party drugs and I, for one, am happy to supply them.

I'm standing in front of the window and looking down at the scene below me. We have fifty trustworthy counters bagging up the drugs and labeling them with our signature logo so that buyers know what they are getting and who it came from. There are around ten others walking around with semi-automatic weapons to insure no one gets any ideas and skims off the top of my supply.

Matt sits in the corner of my office reading a book, looking beyond bored with his day so far. He is someone that is all about action, so on days that we are simply sitting around, he isn't the happiest man.

My cell phone begins to buzz on my desk and Matt looks up from his novel for a brief moment before going back to it. I walk over to the desk and pick up the phone, noting the number on the caller ID is one of Bears — my surveillance guy.

"He's where?" I seethe into the phone, I cannot believe what Bear is telling me right now.

Rebel Spencer thinks he can just hop on a plane and fly his happy ass into my territory and have himself a little vacation?

I think not. I guess I wasn't clear when I said they needed my okay to enter my turf. I swear, some people think I'm joking when I'm very fucking serious.

“Rouge, Oregon, my love. He hopped on a first class direct flight last night out of the Vegas airport, and touched down early this morning. As far as I can tell, he's rented a house on the coast for a week, but I don't think he's there on business,” Bear explains, throwing in that last bit to calm me down. Which, of course, does not work.

“I don't give a flying fuck why he's there. The point is he is *there*. I knew I shouldn't have let him live. He's taking advantage of my kindness, Bear, and I don't fucking like it.”

I'm pacing. I can't help it. I'm so goddamn pissed I let this guy off with a little bullet in his leg and he decides that means we're besties and he can just enter my area whenever he damn well pleases. Well, he fucking can't. That isn't how this shit works. It doesn't matter that Rouge is practically a dead zone, and I don't operate out of the tiny coastal town, it's still in my area, all of Oregon belongs to me, and it seems Rebel Spencer needs to learn another lesson, since he forgot the first one.

I glance over at Matt, who is eyeing me carefully, patiently waiting for his turn to speak. I already know what he is going to say, something about how Rebel isn't worth it. That his father's shitty operation isn't worth the trip to Oregon, but to me, it is.

I don't know what it is about that man that rubs me the wrong way, but he does. I didn't have to shoot him in Vegas. Same as I didn't have to demand his appearance in that meeting with his father, but I did. Now, he is involved. I did that. I forced his hand and made him a part of something that he probably had very little involvement in before me.

I don't care though. He broke the rules that I laid out for him and I can't have that. I can't have someone go against something that I very clearly laid out for him. I'm done with Rebel Spencer. He had one chance too many to live and now, he's done.

"Charter the jet, Bear. I'm going to Rouge," I growl into the phone before hanging up.

"Matt," I sigh as I calmly set the phone back down on my desk

"I hear we're taking a trip," he says and cocks his head to the side.

MATT and I arrive on a private airfield in Portland, our SUV is waiting when we touch down. He grabs the bags, and I make my way over to the waiting vehicle. I'm still fuming and I'm going to have to sit in this car for nearly three more hours before we make our way into Rouge.

Bear already has all the needed intel on Rebel, and, as it turns out, he's planned this little getaway for his sick mother, looks like he's sweet. *I don't care.*

Now if I had a soul, I might feel like an asshole for crashing his party, but I don't, and I'm just pissed.

"Are you sure you still want to do this? He's not here for a job. He's here for his mother." Matt has been asking this same question for half the flight, ever since Bear called with this newly acquired information. All about how Rebel's mother is sick and dying of cancer. Something about how I should give a fuck, but again, I just don't. Like I said, this guy rubs me in all

the wrong ways and I want him to know just where he stands with me.

“Yes, I still want to do this. I promise not to kill him, but I can’t promise I won’t shoot his other leg. We don’t know that he’s not here for business. This could all be a cover, something he thought I would just let go, because he brought his sick mother.”

I’m explaining my reasoning while imagining a hundred ways I want to kill Rebel, and Matt knows this. He’s a good guy and it’s ‘cause I love him that we’re going to the house we rented *first*, and not straight to Rebel — he knows I need to calm down before I confront him. I tend to be a little reckless when I’m pissed off, or bored, or happy, or sad... Okay, I’m kind of reckless all the time, but whatever.

I work while Matt drives us to the rented beach house, making phone calls, confirming shipments, and arranging a meeting in Tacoma since we’re already this far north. By the time we arrive, I’m still so wound up that I’m not going to be able to sleep. I really want to go pound on Rebel’s rented house door because I know they’re only about one hundred yards up the cove, but Matt has put me on lock down. He might look like a hard ass, cruel killer but really, he’s a sweetheart and I’m the killer. Being my right hand, I know when I need to listen to his calm logic, and when I need to fight like hell for what I want. And right now, I just need to listen.

“Hey, I set you up a bath,” Matt says as he comes down the stairs. I really don’t deserve him.

“You’re too good to me, Matty.” He rolls his eyes at my nickname for him. He pretends he hates it, but I know he secretly loves it.

Matt takes my hand and leads me up stairs to the bathroom. The smell of jasmine hits my nose and I already start to relax. Matt pulls me into the bathroom and flicks the light off. There are small tea candles lit up around the tub and the sink and bubbles in the large clawfoot tub. Matt grabs the hem of my shirt and gently lifts it over my head, planting soft kisses on my shoulder as he moves his hands to undo my pants and slide them down my legs. I rest my hands on his shoulders for balance as I step out of my pants. He runs his hands up my thighs and stops to plant a kiss across my hip bones.

When he stands, he pulls his shirt over his head and drops it to the bathroom floor. He slips out of his pants and grabs my hand to help me into the tub. I settle into the hot water and Matt climbs in behind me, stretching his legs out and caging me in. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me to lay on his broad chest. I let out a sigh of contentment. It's these moments when I feel *almost* normal.

This is something that we've done many times over the past five years. He draws me a nice hot bubble bath, and forces me to relax for more than thirty seconds.

Normally, he'll come in after I'm settled and bring me a drink, then sit and talk with me. Sometimes we talk about our childhoods and what we would have been had our lives been different. I'm this way because my father took Dylan from me. Matt is who he is because he lost his sister. I think it's why he bonded with me so well in the early days. He saw me as someone he could protect when he failed his sister. His logic, not mine. We both know he couldn't have done anything to save her, but he feels the guilt of his perceived failure.

Sometimes, we talk about work, new shipments, or who we need to put a hit out on, and who we need to handle

ourselves. Sometimes, he tells me about the latest high-profile UFC fight, and sometimes, we talk baseball and pretend we know anything about the sport. We like to pretend we're normal people in these moments, even though we know we'll never be normal. Matt and I aren't the type of people that end up with a husband and wife, two kids and a dog, living in the suburbs with a white picket fence in a good school district. We'll never be those people, but we like to pretend sometimes that we could be. Over the last five years, we've had many domestic moments, where he cooks us breakfast and we eat on the balcony before we leave to go kill someone — it's the little things that count.

“You know, Amber, we could just take a break, handle the other business we have set up here, and then relax for a few days, then just go home. Bear can keep a heavy eye on Rebel and if he does any work here, you can kill him. But maybe we should leave him and his mother alone. She's sick, Amber. Bear found her medical file and she won't last 'til the end of the year. You said it yourself. This guy seems innocent, and maybe he is.”

Matt is really working my last nerve right now.

If Rebel's dumbass father hadn't tried to deal in my city, causing me to go to Vegas and handle them in the first place, then Rebel being here wouldn't matter. But the fact remains that his daddy fucked up, and Rebel is next in line to take over within the next two years and I cannot allow him to enter his place of power thinking I don't make good on my threats. My greatest power comes from underestimation, even with the stories and rumors that surround my name, people still underestimate me. It's a great tool, because people never see my true power coming, but sometimes, it's fucking infuriating.

“Matt, you know I have to pay him a visit. He has to know I was serious when I said they couldn’t come here. He needs to learn his lesson. And this is the last I want to hear about it,” I say, losing all sense of the calm I had moments ago.

“I know what you *think* you need to do, and that isn’t always that right answer,” Matt says as he holds me close to his chest, knowing that I want nothing more than to get up and leave his side — but he doesn’t let me.

I let out a heavy breath of air and sink deeper into his embrace instead of continuing to fight against it.

“He just...” I trail off.

“He just what?” Matt asks.

“He grates on my nerves,” I confess. “And I don’t know why.”

“And you think ruining his little vacation is going to give you an answer?” Matt questions.

“I don’t know what I think. I just know that he gets under my skin and something has to change.”

“Maybe you do...” Matt trails off until the silence between us makes his words sink in deeper than I would like.

Maybe Matt is right. Maybe I’m the problem in this situation and not Rebel. There’s more than one way to fix the issue of Rebel Spencer, but I’ve come this far and I’m not turning my back on him now. He needs to know he fucked up, even if maybe I’ve fucked up a little bit too.

6. PSILOCYBIN

Amber

THE NEXT MORNING, we wake up early to go running on the beach and Matt points out which house Rebel is staying at. It's early, just before five in the morning and his house is still dark. I wonder when they plan on getting up — maybe this is just a vacation for him. I still have time to back out, to return to our rental house, and take Matt up on his offer. I could let him fuck me into a goddamn sex coma and go back to work satisfied and in a much better mood. But I think I'll ruin Rebel's trip instead — it just sounds like so much fun. Plus, if I back out now, Matt will never let me live it down.

After our run, we return to the house to shower and change, grab some much needed coffee and breakfast, before we head over to meet Rebel. I say meet because it sounds friendlier than *threaten*. I've had Bear keeping tabs on his house, so I know if they leave before we get there. He's hacked into his rental car's low jack as well, so he'll be easy to find if they go out. Not like it would be hard to find him in this tiny excuse for a town.

“Ready to do this?” I ask Matt. I know he's not happy about this, but I don't care.

“Yeah, I guess. Let's go threaten a sick lady and ruin the last fun trip she'll have with her son before she dies,” Matt grumbles.

Jeez, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

I can't help but roll my eyes and huff out, “We're threatening *him* not her. I don't care about her, she's innocent in this. Well, as innocent as the wife of a crime boss can be anyway.”

The walk to Rebel's house is short, and Bear has confirmed they're still inside. As we march up the steps, I start questioning why I'm really here, but it's too late to back down. After fighting Matt on this every step of the way, I can't tell him I'm having second thoughts now.

We stand on the porch and I take a deep breath before knocking.

Showtime.

Rebel

It's about seven in the morning when I hear a knock at the door. I've barely had my coffee, mom's still asleep, and I'm in sweatpants that hang loosely off my hips, and no shirt 'cause it's fucking seven in the morning.

However, nothing could have prepared me for what I see when I open the door — or rather who.

Standing on the porch of my rented beach house in the middle of nowhere, Oregon, is none other than *Amber Kane*. I can't help it when my jaw falls open at the sight of her. She's still breathtaking, only now her face is free of makeup, her hair is braided down her back, she's in a tight white tank top, cut off denim shorts, and flip flops on her feet. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was on vacation too, but I highly doubt that's the case.

I haven't the slightest clue why she would be here though. Rouge isn't exactly organized crime material, but she does own Oregon, so I guess she could just be visiting or else, *oh fuck*. She owns Oregon. She fucking owns Oregon. And I'm in

Oregon. With my sick mother. And I didn't get permission. Fuck, was that a real thing? Was I supposed to call her up and ask if I could visit?

Fuck.

As I stand there like a complete idiot, she lets out a small laugh that tells me just how amused she is by my reaction. Then she brushes past me and lets herself into the house, along with her muscle mountain man who she's never without, I think his name is Matt.

"Morning, Rebel. You know, it's rude to leave guests out on the front porch, and close your mouth. You're starting to drool," she singsongs in the sweetest voice I've ever heard. I wonder how long it's going to take for her to start threatening me.

"Uhh, hey, Amber. What, umm, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, Rebel. Did you forget where you are?" she asks with a smile, but I feel the chill of her words hit me like a slap to the face.

"Yeah, umm, about that. See, I'm not here on business. I brought my mom here. She's, um, well, she's sick, and I didn't realize I should have called you. But clearly, I should have..."

"Reb, who are your friends?" I hear my mom murmur from the doorway.

Fuck, I really wish she would have slept through this. I try to protect my mother from this side of our life, and now, she's about to come face to face with the biggest crime lord on the coast.

"Morning, mom. Why don't you..."

“Mrs. Spencer, it’s lovely to meet you. Are you enjoying the coast so far?” Amber interrupts my attempts to remove my mother from her path.

“Yes, dear, it’s quite lovely. Do you live around here? Are you guys the neighbors?” my mother questions as she looks to me for confirmation and I haven’t the slightest clue what to do here.

“Oh no, ma’am. My name is Amber, and this stud here is my friend Matt. We rented a house just down the cove from here. We’re here for business. But I heard Rebel was in the area and as it turns out, he was right under my nose. When I found out, I just had to come pay him a *friendly* visit.”

Amber is a charmer that’s for sure, she has my mother eating out of the palm of her hand, but I know this is all for show, what I can’t figure out is why she cares if my mom knows who she is.

“Amber? That sounds so familiar. Reb, honey, didn’t you mention an Amber recently? When did you two meet?”

Fuck, my mom is going to piece this together then she’s going to freak out.

Please, Amber, lie, I send out a silent prayer.

“What was it, Reb? About three months ago?” Amber muses, looking to me with malice in her eyes.

“Uhh, yeah, that sounds about right,” I confirm.

“Three months ago? That’s when you were... oh God.”

And looks like mom figured that out quickly.

“You, you’re the one that shot my son, aren’t you?” Mom yells at Amber. Dear God, Mom. You can’t just yell at a crime lord.

Fuck.

“Yes, ma’am, that’s me.” Amber doesn’t even try to deny that she shot me. “You see, ma’am, your husband did a very stupid thing, which I had to rectify, so you’re welcome I only shot him in the leg. Anyone else left in Reb’s position wouldn’t have made it out of that room alive,” she states matter of factly, as if shooting people is a totally normal topic to discuss over coffee, and well, for her, it probably is.

“You, you want me to thank you? For shooting my son?” my mom exclaims.

“Well, I did let him live, so yeah. Considering you still currently have a breathing son *and* husband, I think you both should be a little more grateful,” Amber remarks incredulously.

“Why are you here right now? Because I don’t believe for a second you’re now friends with my son and popped in for a visit!”

Amber looks at me and cocks her head to the side like she’s studying me before responding. “Hmm, I suppose if we’re not friends, then I should just kill you now and get it over with, yeah?”

She casually pulls a .9mm from her back. Oh, hell. It’s the same gun she already shot me with.

“I don’t think that’s needed, Amber. We’re friends, we’re definitely friends. I really appreciate the, um, kindness you showed my father and I three months ago. Do you think you could show my mother the same kindness today? You can show her that she has you pegged all wrong,” I’m pleading and trying to manipulate the scariest person on the face of the planet. This could either go right or very, very wrong.

And then she laughs. She's bending over and clutching her side with her free hand and laughing, and I'm not sure what is so damn funny.

"Whew, shit, Reb. You've got more balls than I thought. Great attempt at ego boosting manipulation. That was good, but your delivery is a little weak. Work on that, but really a solid effort there," after she's done laughing at my expense, she continues. "Okay. Here's the deal, Reb. I was in fact very serious when I said you needed my approval to enter my turf, but since it's pretty clear you're not here for business purposes, and you've displayed more balls than your dad did, I'll let you live, and I won't even shoot your other leg." She tucks the gun back into her pants and smiles like she just told me the sky is blue, and have a great day.

"But know this, I make good on my threats, and if you pull this shit again, I won't be friendly. Mrs. Spencer, have a lovely week here, and make sure to go see the sea lion caves, they're a real treat."

Mom's jaw drops open. I feel just as shocked as she looks right now. Then Amber heads towards the door without a backwards glance.

"Wait, so that's it?" I ask while trailing behind her to the door.

"Yup that's it. I don't have time for your particular brand of idiot, I'm very busy. I've got places to go, people to kill. You know how it is." She shrugs like murder is a daily occurrence for her. Oh wait, it probably is.

"No, I actually don't know what that's like, but okay," I murmur under my breath.

She turns to face me. "Don't know what what's like?"

“Uh, murder. I don’t do that, so I don’t know what that’s like.”

Now she’s looking at me like I’m a complete anomaly, an alien, someone she wants to cut up to see what my insides look like.

“Huh. Interesting,” is all she says before turning and walking down the steps. Matt, the mountain, turns to me and runs his hands down his face letting out a deep breath like he’s fucking exhausted by life.

“Look, man, do yourself a favor and stop popping up on her radar. Have your vacation and don’t come back here. She’s already far too interested in you for your own good, trust me this cannot end well here. Also, if you ever tell her I told you anything, I will rip your head from your body and turn your skull into a cereal bowl. Got it?” he growls before turning and following Amber down the sandy path between rentals.

Matt’s warning kind of did the opposite. It didn’t make me want to stay away from her. It made me want to see her in a different light. I want to see what he gets to see. How would she act once they closed the doors to their beach house? Would she kick off her shoes, lay down, and drink a glass of wine? Or would she watch TV? What kind of movies and shows does she like to watch? Or does she never slow down and is always working? Who is closest to her? Who are her friends? Is Matt more than just an employee? I can’t help feeling jealous of him, because of whatever weird relationship they have. For some reason I want a real connection with her, not one where she shoots me and threatens my life. Hell, maybe to her, that is a relationship. I had to know more about the evil little pixie that kept popping into my life.

“Don’t even think about it, Reb. That girl is no good for you,” mom warns, but I don’t care. Maybe she wouldn’t be good for me, but maybe I could be good for her.

7. KRATOM

Amber

THE TACOMA MEETING WENT PERFECTLY, and now I've acquired a deal to send a couple dozen cases of AK's up to Alaska to help some trigger happy, doomsday prepping rednecks stack their underground storage units. I don't really care why they want my guns, I just care if they can pay. Considering they showed up to the meeting with half the money in cash, I'm happy to do business with those crazy fucks.

Today, I'm in my office running the numbers on the Alaska shipment, and seeing what else we can knock out on the way up north. Once a solid run is confirmed, I rarely go on shipments after that, but being the face of this operation, I make sure I personally set up meetings and attend the first runs. After that I task Bear with tracking my shipments until they reach their location, and to track my money till it's in my hands.

I can feel the chill hit my bones the moment he enters the club, I don't even have to look up from my notes to know the moment he enters my office. He walks over to my wet bar along the back wall and helps himself to a generous glass of my twenty dollar blackberry whiskey and starts choking the second the burn hits his lips.

I can't help chuckle to myself. He never did approve of my style, or well, anything. He hates that my clothes aren't name brand, and they don't come with a hefty price tag. He hates that I drink cheap whiskey. That I own a classic Dodge Charger, and I don't buy mansions; I prefer smaller homes, on lavish acreage, but Matt and I spend most of our time in our

apartment in the city. I refuse to bury bodies on any of my personally owned properties, and I give Matt and Bear a fat bonus at the end of every year. In short, I may have become a cruel bitch over the last ten years, but I've still found small ways to rebel against my father and remain true to who I am. It's the little things that mean the most, like pissing him off. It's become a hobby of mine, and I'm good at it.

I try not to think too hard about how things would have been different had Dylan lived; where would we be now? Would we even still be together? Would we have gone to college together, gotten married, and started a family? Or would we be struggling in a city on the east coast, renting a shitty shoe box apartment, and working dead end jobs? If that was the case would we still be happy as long as we had each other? Or would the stress eventually have ripped us apart? Like I said, I try not to think too hard about what could have been, it just gives me a headache and makes me feel a little stabby.

I can feel my father's eyes on me as I work on the numbers for this deal and try to pretend he's not here. If I'm lucky he'll just get bored of this game and go away before I have to deal with him.

"Amber, what is this shit I hear about Vegas?" Ah, so it's not going to be a lucky day, man I hope someone needs to be killed after this.

"It's handled," I murmur, but don't look up from my notes.

Can't he see I'm working here, *unlike him*. He hasn't worked the business for four years. He's just living it up in whatever city he's visiting this month, while I bust my ass, and he just lives off my success. I know people think he did so much for this organization, but before me we were nothing.

Now were everything, now I'm everything, I am after all the fucking queen here.

“I didn't ask you if it was handled, I asked you what it was. And look at me when I'm talking to you, girl, show some respect.”

Oh it's so fun to piss him off, knowing he can't actually do anything to me. He can't kill me or remove me from my position. If I go, so do all my contacts, and my contacts make up most of our business. Even most of his old contacts are loyal to me now, so they would go as well. He knows this, he has nothing to hold over me, not since he took Dylan. That's why I don't form attachments, if he knew how much I cared about Matt or Bear he'd hold them over me as leverage; and I refuse to allow them to be used like that.

“I'll show you the proper amount of respect that you have earned, and lately that amount is exactly zero, so if you don't mind, I'll be going back to work now. Wouldn't want this deal to wash out, and you lose your margarita fund.”

His face is beet red, and pushing his buttons is so worth the backlash I'm bound to get for my shitty attitude. I've barely looked back down at my notes before I feel the sting of his backhand across the side of my face, hitting me with such force that my chair rocks and I crash to the ground. I raise my hand to my cheek and feel the warm trickle of blood. He must have hit me with one of those stupid rings. wonder if I'll need stitches this time.

Matt comes running into the office, he must have heard the crash of my chair. But once he sees the scene, he looks at me, clenches his jaw so tight he might break a molar, balls his hands into his fists and stalks outside. He won't go far, but he knows he can't step in. Even if he is my right hand, as soon as

he shows that he cares for me, or that he doesn't respect Andrew Kane, he hands my father the leverage we don't want to give him. Matt knows I can take the beating, dad won't go too far, and I've had much worse than a backhand.

I look at my father from my place on the floor and smile at him, and I know I look insane. I taste the iron in my mouth and know blood is coating my pearly whites and dripping onto the floor. But I don't care, his reaction time is getting faster, he used to be able to patiently outwait my attitude, but lately he's more reckless than ever, and I intend to push all his buttons until he finally cracks.

"You should really start working out again, Dad. Your back hand's getting weak."

I push myself off the floor, grab the bottom of my white tank top, and pull it up to wipe the blood from my face. "The Spencer dealings in Vegas are nothing to be concerned about. They thought they could feed his brother-in-law's club some shit cut coke in LA, and that it would be a small enough amount that I wouldn't notice. But unlike some people, I notice everything, and that's why I own what I do."

"You mean what *we* own," he corrects.

"No Dad, I don't. You and I both know that I own our territory now, not you. You pushed for this, I wanted out, but you forced my hand. So, I built an empire, and I'm the queen here. You're nothing but a washed-up crime boss from the 80's."

There goes his red face again. Maybe I can push him until he pops an artery in his brain or some shit. What a way to go, right?

"I won't tolerate your attitude, young lady."

“Okay, dad, then I guess I’ll just go. But first, I’ll make sure to call all my people and tell them we won’t be doing business anymore. Who do you think will take you out first, the cartel? Or the Irish? Do you think they’ll just put a general hit out, or will they take care of you themselves? Maybe they won’t even touch you, maybe the customers will get to you first?”

Yeah, I might be pushing this a little too far, but I really don’t care. Either he leaves me alone, he beats the shit out of me, or he kills me, at this point I’m kind of okay with whatever he chooses. If he leaves me alone then at least I don’t need to deal with him. If he beats the shit out of me then it’s easier to push the pain out of my chest and focus on the pain in my body. And if he kills me, well then maybe I’ll get to see Dylan again, I kind of doubt that though. If there is a heaven, then Dylan is sitting on a cloud right now looking down on me, disappointed as fuck. When I die, I know I have a seat reserved in Hell, and it’s probably somewhere near Lucifer himself. I bet we could bond over torture techniques.

“*Amber Kane*, you are never fucking leaving.”

Smack. The sting hits my face and it’s all I can do to not roll my eyes.

Looks like we’re going with option number two folks, Beat the Shit out of Daughter.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Pops. I know the drill. I’m never leaving. I’m not going to squander my talents. Blah-blah-fucking-blah”

Smack. Kick. Punch. Hit.

I’m not exactly sure how long he spends using me as his personal punching bag, but I don’t really care, I’ll just lay here

until Matt comes back. Maybe I'll just sleep for a while, the floor is comfortable and warm, no wait, that's my blood creating a pool beneath me. Great, I'll need to replace the carpets *again*. I hear voices, I'm pretty sure it's Matt. He has a nice voice, all deep and somber. He's telling me something, but I can't tell what.

“Amber! Damn it, Amber, stay awake! Fuck, he really did a number on you this time. Why do you push him like that? One of these days he's going to go too far, and I won't get you back. Fuck, Amber stay awake!”

I'm not sure why Matt's yelling at me. Clearly, I'm fine. I'm just tired. He's the one that was saying I've been working too hard. He should be happy I'm taking a little break. I feel the darkness wrapping around me, it's so warm and heavy like the perfect blanket. I feel weightless, like I'm floating.

I like this place, I think I'll stay awhile.

“Amber, wake the fuck up! FUCK!”

WHEN I FINALLY COME OUT OF the darkness, which I miss it already, I'm in my bedroom of the apartment I share with Matt. Everything hurts, there's an IV in my hand attached to a bag for fluids. Guess I was out of it for a while if they needed to keep me hydrated with that. I'm sore everywhere, and I can feel the pull of stitches in my face. Great. I pull the covers back and realize I'm dressed in nothing but one of Matt's button up shirts and some underwear. I swear to god if Dr. Eric was the one to dress me, I'm going to slit someone's throat.

I can hear male voices down the hall in a murmured conversation. Probably Matt and Bear. I get out of bed, rip the

IV out of my hand, and go to the bathroom. After I pee, I chance a look at my face and the rest of me. Yup, I look like shit.

I walk down the hall to the living room, passing the men without even acknowledging they're there, and head straight for the coffee pot.

Coffee first. Lecture later.

After I make myself the best cup of coffee ever, I turn around to see who's here, there's Matt-duh he lives here- and Bear of course, he wouldn't stay away after hearing about this. And I'm surprised to see Rebel Spencer in my living room. Now why the fuck is he in my city? Why is he in my apartment? Why did Matt and Bear allow him here? What the fuck?

Now I'm pissed. I was fully prepared to take my lecture from Matt about not poking the beast. And Bear would make inappropriate comments about my current lack of pants. But fuck that, now these two have some serious fucking explaining to do.

“Why in the ever-loving fuck is this asshole standing in my apartment?”

8. MDMA (ECSTASY/MOLLY)

Rebel

THIS IS PROBABLY the maddest I've ever seen Amber and I think that's saying a lot considering this chick shot me. Yes, I'm still holding a grudge. Matt wouldn't let me see her until she woke up. He wanted me out of the apartment as soon as I got here this morning, but I felt I had to stay. I couldn't just leave her. This Bear guy is the one that finally said I could stay. All morning I was having a hard time keeping my jealousy on lock down, when Matt went into her room to change her clothes and her IV, and I found out Bear sleeps next to her each night he's here.

It's been three days since her father, Andrew Kane, beat the shit out of his daughter, and no one will tell me why. Bear just looks away and tries to apply humor to the situation. Matt just looks like he wants to murder someone. It's clear these guys care about her deeply, but if they really cared why would they let him do this to her?

When Amber finally woke up and sauntered her way into the kitchen, she bypassed the living room and completely ignored us. As I get the first look at her since Oregon, I feel the air leave my chest, and my blood start to boil. She isn't wearing any pants, so I can see the bruises, and cut on her legs. She's swallowed up by one of Matt's button up shirts, but I can guess her arms and abdomen looks like her legs.

How did she not have internal bleeding after this? When she turns to finally face us, with her coffee in hand like this is any other morning I see her face. Her lip is split, the right side of her face has a gash across it, closed with stitches, and a purple bruise on her cheek. The whole left side of her face

looks like one solid bruise, but if you look closely you can see its multiple bruises, on top of one another. There is a butterfly bandage across her right eyebrow, and it looks like the blood vessels in her right eye have popped.

“Why in the ever-loving fuck is this asshole standing in my apartment?” she yells at Matt, and the look on her face clearly states that if she was in better condition, she would probably shoot me, *again*.

“Bear let him stay,” Matt murmurs.

“Way to throw me under the bus, I thought we were bros!”

“We’re not fucking bros, Bear, I don’t strangle you because Amber told me I couldn’t.”

“Umm excuse me, I don’t care who said he could stay, I want him out. And someone shoot his other leg before he leaves,” Amber barks the order and then winces from the pain in her face.

“I’m right here you know, you could just talk to me. You could ask me why I’m here,”

Amber snaps her head to look at me as if remembering I’m still standing here.

“I don’t want to fucking talk to you! Why are you here?”

“Thought you didn’t want to talk to me,” I chirp in a singsong voice while rocking back and forth on the balls of my feet. If I just play nice, she can’t stay mad at me forever. And if no one gives her a gun, I’m confident I won’t get shot. At least I don’t think the guys will shoot me so long as I don’t hurt Amber, she’s their top priority.

“Look I called the number on your card to ask for permission to enter into California, when Bear here answered

your phone, he told me what happened, and I came straight here. I didn't really think about you being uber pissed off at me for coming. But that doesn't matter, the point is I was worried about you, so I came. I just wanted to see that you were okay."

"I don't need you checking in on me, Rebel. We're not fucking friends," she seethes

"But we could be." Please say we can be friends, please.

"No Rebel we can't. I don't have friends."

"Uhh you have Matt and Bear."

"They're employees, not friends," she states as if she runs a fortune five hundred company, not a drug operation.

I look to Matt and Bear to see if they're affected by her words. It's subtle, but they are. It hurts them when she says they aren't friends, but I get the feeling they know why she's saying this, and there is probably a good reason for her cruel words.

"Well I think we could be friends. But hey let's take it slow, we can be acquaintances. Would that make you feel better?"

"No. What would make me feel better is you going back to Vegas," she huffs.

"Great, it's settled then. I'll be staying in your spare room for a few days."

"Umm, what? No you will not!" she yells at my back as I turn to walk down her hallway.

"Yes I am. Bear already said it was okay. I'm visiting my acquaintance. It's only right she offers me her spare room while I'm here."

“I’m pretty sure acquaintances and friends stay in hotels when they visit. Only best friends get spare rooms.”

“Damn, well then I guess I just moved into best friend territory,” I laugh at how red her face is getting. She really doesn’t want to be my friend. Well too damn bad. I head down the hall to unpack my bag. I’ll give it two days before she’s totally in love with me.

And then it hits me, Matt has his own room, Amber has the master and there is one spare room. Which means... Fuck Bear is still going to be sleeping with her! Damn it!

Amber

“What the hell Matt?” I can’t believe he is just allowing this shit. “Give me back my gun,” I demand, and the asshole smirks at me.

“Nope,” he says with a smile, “You’re not going to shoot him again, Amber. Bear has run a hundred different versions of a background check, not to mention he’s been under surveillance for months. He’s not here for work, he’s here for you. He came as soon as Bear’s big mouth told him you were hurt. So, as much as you don’t want anyone to care about you, people do fucking care, Amber. So, you need to just deal with it.”

“Whatever,” I mumble, “forget it. We need to get back to work anyway, I was in the middle of finishing the Alaska deal when this happened, and I need to make sure that shit’s locked down.”

“It’s all handled Amber, Bear took your notes, finished running your numbers, and I made the calls. The shipment comes in two days, and it’ll be delivered to the proper party four days after we get it; they’re expecting us. You need these extra days to rest if you still insist on going with the first shipment,” Matt says, stepping up and wrapping his arms around me before planting a kiss on top of my head.

“Bath’s ready, doll face,” Bear says as he come skipping into the room — I didn’t even notice when he left — that fucker is always happy about something. I don’t understand how he can have the energy to be so happy all the time. I know he isn’t directly connected to all the carnage that is this life, but indirectly he is linked to it all. He watches every step, and every move that we take at all times to ensure our safety and the safety of our shipments, he sees more than most could even imagine and yet he always has a smile plastered to his pretty boy face.

“Okay fine,” I concede, because I can feel my energy draining the longer I stand here. “but this is the last day I’m resting. I’ve already been out too long, and I’m fine.” If I’m being honest I don’t even know how many days I’ve been down for, but just one day is too long.

I push myself away from Matt’s embrace and start to make my way down the hall. My head is pounding, so maybe a bath is just what I need. I stop and rub my eyes with my palms, everything feels far away, and the ringing in my ears is back worse than before. The room begins to spin around me, and I don’t know which way is even up anymore.

“Matty....” I barely whisper, and then I’m falling — great the floor will feel lovely on my bruises.

The floor never comes, two large strong arms wrap around my middle and pull me into a hard chest. Then he pulls me into his arms until he's cradling me, and I think we're walking. Matt must be getting faster, he was on the other side of the room.

Or did Bear catch me? I nuzzle my nose into the firm chest that I'm cradled against and take a deep breath, but the scent isn't Matt or Bear. Matt always smells like gunpowder, and Irish Spring soap. And Bear smells like beer and computers, don't ask me to describe how a computer smells, it's just what he smells like, okay?

The person holding me smells like sea salt and surf wax, it's intoxicating, taking over my senses as the darkness wraps back around me and pulls me under.

"Dylan?" It's a whisper of a question on my lips, and whoever is carrying me stiffens. Is Dylan here? Am I finally dead? Was the beating too much, did it cause internal bleeding that no one caught?

I think it's okay if this was the end, maybe I'll get to be with Dylan again after all. I feel myself being lowered onto something soft and warm. Is this what a cloud feels like, did I really make it to heaven?

"Dylan?" I ask, "am I dead now?" I can't seem to open my eyes to see his face, but I feel him here, I know he'll still save me.

He's pulling away from me now. No he's going to leave me. He's going to go, and I'll be all alone again. "Please, Dylan, don't leave me."

"Shhh, Baby, I'm not going anywhere," he whispers as I feel him brushing my hair from my face, the voice is soothing

but it's not Dylan's, or maybe after ten years I forgot his voice? No, I'll never forget his voice. The person who's here isn't Dylan, and sadly I'm not dead.

“Shhh Baby just sleep,” he says as he brushes a tear off my cheek — when did I start to cry?

As much as I don't want to, I curl into a ball on my bed and hold Rebel Spencer's hand while I cry into my pillow. Dylan's not here, Rebel is. Matt didn't catch me, Rebel did. I'll never be with Dylan again.

And for at least one more day, I'm still not dead — what a shame.

Rebel

The city skyline is dark through Amber's floor to ceiling bedroom windows when Bear finally comes in to get me. I've been sitting by Amber's side for the past twelve hours, ever since she passed out this morning. I have so many questions I want to ask her.

Questions I want to ask the guys.

Why did Andrew Kane beat her so badly?

Why did no one seem concerned by his actions?

Is Amber going to be okay?

Why isn't she in the hospital?

After she passed out this morning Matt called Dr. Eric — who is a douchebag, he kept groping Amber more than he needed to in order to do his job. I thought I was the only one that wanted to deck him, but when I looked at Matt and Bear it

was clear that if they could kill him, they would. He put a new IV in her hand, and declared her fine, but said she needed to rest. Went on and on about how it could have been worse and how he has personally seen her through worse than this.

He gave us a list of signs and symptoms to watch out for, but other than that he seemed only mildly concerned that she's been out for three days, and couldn't manage to walk from one side of the apartment to the other this morning.

“Honestly guys this is probably her body's way of forcing her to recover. You know as well as I do, that if she hadn't passed out this morning, she would have found a way back to work, and that's not what she needs now,” he told us.

The most pressing question that I can't get off my mind is, *who was Dylan?* She called me Dylan when I caught her before she hit the ground, and she begged Dylan not to leave her alone. It was the only time I've ever seen her vulnerable, she even cried.

I wasn't even sure if she was capable of feeling emotions, but in that moment, it was clear that she could feel. That she felt her emotions deeply, she was just better at hiding them than most people. What happened to her to make her that way? I don't believe that it was just her role in their family business. I had been a part of the same way of life, and yet I'm not nearly as closed off as she is. Why doesn't she allow herself to have relationships, or even friendships? What happened to her? And who caused her so much pain?

“Who's Dylan?” I ask when Bear comes in to get ready for bed.

I'm still pissed as hell that he gets to sleep in here with her, and I don't understand why he is, but Matt says it's just how it

is. I see Bear's spine go rigid — color me curious — what is it with these people and *that* name?

“Not my story to tell man,” he says, pulling his shirt off.

“He was important to her,” I state, it's not a question, it's clear that whoever this guy was, he was important to Amber.

“Look man, if you're really going to do this then you need to understand something. Amber isn't like anyone you will ever meet, and I don't mean that in the badass crime lord way — you don't need me to tell you how scary she can be. I mean that in the girl whose innocence was stolen from her a long time ago. She built walls so high that you'll never break them down or climb over them, unless you really care for her. If you care about her, and I mean truly care about her, you will need to accept the fact that nothing about her is easy.

“She won't welcome you with open arms. I've known her for seven years, and Matt has been here for the last five years, and she still won't admit that we're her *friends*. Not just friends, we're her best friends, she's our person, and we will do whatever it takes to protect her. Yet she will always claim we're her employees and we mean nothing to her, she has to, she can't have attachments.”

“You need to be prepared to fight like hell for a place in her life, and if you're going to fight then do it, cause she's fucking worth it, but if you leave, if you break her heart. I will find you, no matter where you run, I will always find you. And then Matt will rip your still beating heart out of your chest and crush it in front of you before you have a chance to exhale your last breath. So, before you keep up this chase, understand that once you decide she's worth it, you can *never* leave her. No matter how hard she pushes you away, and she will push you.”

This is the first time I've heard Bear say anything serious. There isn't a hint of mockery, or an underlying joke in his words, he cares about her.

“She's worth the fight, but it'll be the hardest battle you'll ever face, and you'll never win the war for her heart. You need to accept now that what you think you can have with her, whether that's a friendship, or a relationship, you'll never have it. She'll never give it to you, she can't. Understand that you will fight like hell to get into her heart but in the end, the only thing she's capable of giving in return is the knowledge that she would give her life to defend yours. To her that's love,” Matt says from the doorway and I get the feeling these guys would throw me off her balcony if they thought for a second I might hurt her.

“I already know she's worth it, and I won't ever stop trying. But you guys are wrong, I know that given the chance she's capable of loving someone. That someone might not be me, but if I can help her see that — even if she loves someone else — it would be worth it to see her happy.” I know now more than ever that I want Amber to be happy, no matter the cost.

“We never said she wasn't capable of love, you don't get it. She's capable of feeling a stronger love than anyone else, but she will never *allow* herself to feel that love. Not since...”

“Not your story, Bear,” Matt interrupts with a low growl.

“Yeah, I know. Alright time for bed, get the fuck out,” Bear chuckles, and I reluctantly release Amber's hand and stand. Bear climbs onto the other side of her bed, and jealousy rages through my body.

Matt moves farther into the room and passes me, pulling his shirt over his head and dropping it to the floor. I watch

from the doorway as Matt and Bear climb into Amber's bed. They wrap her up in their arms, and hold her close — like I wish I could do.

Turning, I walk down the hallway and into the spare room where all my stuff is. I flop down on my bed and let out a deep sigh, running my hands down my face. She claims they're employees, not even friends, but something tells me they are much more than that. More than even *best* friends, she loves them in a way that I want her to love me.

I should get up, pack my bags and walk out. She already has two guys fighting for her love and they have been at this for years. If they can't get through to her what makes me think I can? And if I do manage to get her, what do I get? A piece of her heart, a fraction of her soul? Do they take turns, a week here and a week there? If I got the chance to have Amber, really have her, could I share her with someone else?

When I was little I thought my adult life would be so different, I wanted to watch the woman I love walk down the aisle in a white dress with a smile on her face. I wanted to marry someone, to have kids with that person and grow old with them.

I didn't want a marriage like my parents, one of convenience and necessities. I wanted a foundation of friendship and a love unlike any other.

But I have a sinking feeling that the woman I am falling for piece by piece has already shared her heart with someone else, and I will never fully have her. Is she worth it I ask myself and the only answer I can come up with is yes, yes she is worth only a fraction of her heart, her soul, her love.

I just hope I can manage to convince her that I am also worth it.

9. MARIJUANA (CANNABIS)

Amber

WHEN I WAKE UP, the sunlight is streaming through my windows, and there is a heavy arm across my middle. I know that arm. Bear is here with me. Ever since we first met and I hired him to be my hacker, we've been sharing a bed after our late night take out, work, and movie sessions.

He makes me feel normal in these moments. When he stays over, he gives me all the slumber parties I missed as a child and I love him for understanding I need these nights, but never making me ask for them, or admit to liking them. Bear and I started sleeping together about a year after he first started working for me. We have attempted to keep feelings out of it, and when Matt came along it was bound to happen with him eventually too. I think Matt and I managed to keep our hands to ourselves for a full six months after he moved in.

I know how I feel about them, and I have a good idea of how they feel about me but none of us will ever speak those words out loud; it's not worth the risk.

I ruffle Bear's hair and he lets out a long dramatic yawn while stretching. Everything still hurts, but I'm feeling more refreshed today than I was yesterday. With any luck, I'll actually stay on my feet today.

"Hey, Doll Face, how did you sleep?" he asks on a yawn.

"I don't think passing out is actually considered sleep. But I feel better."

"Good, now let's get you in the shower, cause, honey you smell," he makes a face that clearly shows just how badly I need a shower.

“Ha ha very funny, like you smell any better.”

“Darlin, I smell like sunshine and roses.” He dramatically rolls his eyes as he hops out of bed, and heads for my attached bathroom to start the shower. I throw the covers back and swing my legs over the side of the bed. Standing up very slowly, I take the IV out of my hand and then make my way to the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes as I go.

Bear comes out of the bathroom and looks me up and down with a lustful fire in his eyes. He gently grabs my hand and leads me into the bathroom, lifts me onto the sink, and presses his lips to mine. Running his hands lightly down my body, he pushes my legs apart and steps between my thighs.

“How much do you hurt, scale of one to ten?” he whispers as he moves to kiss my neck.

“What number is sore but not too sore for you to bury your head between my legs?” I whisper in a husky voice and feel him smile against my neck.

“I don’t know, but I’ll take it,” he laughs.

He grips my ass and pulls me to the edge of the counter before getting on his knees in front of me. He leans forward and places soft kisses along my bruised thighs.

“How is it that even like this you’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen?” he asks before moving his fingers to run along my already wet pussy.

“You just say that to get your dick wet,” I moan when he pushes two fingers inside me.

“Nope,” he quips before leaning forward to run his tongue over my clit. Moving his fingers in and out of me while sucking my clit, I lean back into the mirror and try to brace myself on the counter. It doesn’t take long before my legs start

to shake and I feel my orgasm flow through my body. I moan and roll my hips trying to get as close to Bear as I can.

He stands up and pulls his dick out, removing his fingers from me, before lining himself up with my cunt and burying himself balls deep. He grips my hips, and I rest one hand on his shoulder while he thrusts inside me. He starts off slow, taking it easy on my battered body. With one hand he grips my ass, while running his nails down my back with the other. Bending down, he takes one nipple into his mouth until every suck and bite causes me to moan even louder.

“You going to cum, Doll?” he growls in my ear as he moves his hand to work my clit.

“Yes,” I moan, unable to keep it to myself. I bite my lip to keep from screaming as Bear works my body into another climax. “God, right there,” I pant.

“Not God, but close enough,” he teases as my orgasm crashes over my body. Bear keeps working my clit to prolong my pleasure, as he moves inside me chasing his own release. When his hips still he grunts and bites my neck, spilling himself deep inside me, and marking me as his.

He pulls out and grabs a small hand towel to clean himself off. Picking me up off the counter, he puts me on the floor and holds my hand while I step into the shower. He presses a quick kiss to my lips before he playfully smacks my ass and heads towards the door.

“I’ll make sure those Neanderthals make the coffee right.”

“Thanks Bear... wait, you don’t mean... he’s not still here, is he?”

“Doll Face, if you honestly thought he was going to leave before knowing you’re okay, you have some shit to learn,” he

chuckles to himself.

“Bear he can’t stay, it’s not safe,” I whisper as I wrap my arms around my waist.

Bear walks back over to me, puts two large hands on my shoulders and bends down so we’re eye to eye. “Honey, you’re going to need to explain the situation to him or else he’s going to keep fighting for a spot in your life. He needs to know the truth. He sat by your bedside for twelve hours yesterday, holding your hand. You’ve done nothing but threaten him and shoot him, and yet he dropped everything when he heard you were hurt. Then he stayed by your side. He cares for you, even if you don’t want to accept it. So, you need to tell him why you are this way.” He reaches up and brushes a tear from my face. “You said his name.”

My breath catches in my throat and he doesn’t even have to say it, I know, *Dylan*. The memories come flooding back. Rebel holding me and tucking me into bed, calling Dylan’s name and begging him to stay, crying.

“Relax and shower, Doll, I’ll have the coffee ready when you get out.”

For once in my life, I do as I’m told without fighting it. I’m not sure how long I stand under the shower head, letting the hot water scald my skin, and wash away the blood. I cry, willingly for the first time in ten years.

I cry because I lost Dylan.

I cry because of who I allowed myself to become.

I cry because Matt loves me.

I cry because Bear loves me.

I cry because I fear I can't love them the way they deserve to be loved.

I cry because Rebel wants to be a part of my life.

I cry because I wish he could be.

I cry because I'm going to have to tell him about Dylan.

Sobs rack through my body, as memories assault my vision. Dylan in my father's office, *my gun*. Dylan's eyes meeting mine moments before my father pulls the trigger. Hauling his body into the woods, digging his grave. And walking away from him. The last person I loved and I had to walk away from, was dead and it was all my fault. I will never make the same mistake. I cannot allow Rebel to become a part of my life. The thought of losing Rebel sends a sharp pain through my chest, but the thought of him dying because of me causes even more pain.

If I want him to live, he must leave. I just hope he walks away so I don't have to be the one to turn my back on him in order to keep him safe.

10. LSD

Dylan

TEN YEARS AGO

When I got Amber's SOS text asking me to meet her at her father's club I was confused, she never wanted me anywhere near those places. She was worried her father would find out about us, about our plans to leave, so she kept our relationship a secret. We never went on dates to the movies or hung out at the beach with kids our age. We met in the shadows late at night. From the day she showed up on our doorstep, I knew she would become my everything. When we were fifteen, I told her I was in love with her and that one day she would be my wife and meant every word.

Late one night I heard a tap on my window. It was Amber standing outside, soaked in rain, but it was the blood that caught my eye. Even the summer storm couldn't wash it away. I pulled her into my window, and started looking her over for where the blood was coming from, but I couldn't find the source.

There was so much blood.

"I'm fine Dylan. It's... it's not mine," she whispered.

I snapped my head up to look at her face, and saw nothing but pain and guilt. So, this was the job she had to do tonight. Her father made her kill someone, or clean up the body. She never shared her work with me, but it wasn't hard to understand the type of things she had to see. Before that night she never wanted me to know this side of her. She didn't understand that I would love her no matter what.

That night, she let me strip her out of her blood-soaked clothes, wash away the evidence in the shower, and kiss away the memories of whatever she had done before she came to me. I gave Amber every part of my soul, and in return she gave me her heart to keep safe. I just wish I had done a better job.

When I arrived at the club and parked, I didn't see Amber's car in the parking lot, but I made my way through the back door anyway. Denny was waiting for me. He grabbed my shoulder and forcefully pushed me down the back hallway and into the main office where Andrew Kane was sitting behind his desk.

"Mr. Kane," I greet.

"Ahh, Dylan, please come in and have a seat, Amber will be here shortly, but I thought you and I should have a little chat before she gets here, man to man."

"Yes, Sir. What would you like to talk about?" I was trying my best to sound like I was completely unfazed by this meeting, but the truth is, this man terrified me.

"Why, Amber of course. Tell me, Dylan, what are your intentions with my daughter?" he asks with an easy smile.

"Uh, my intentions? Sir, we're just friends, neighbors, we hardly even talk," I say, attempting to convince him of something I knew he saw right through.

"Cut the shit, Bennet. I know you have a relationship with my daughter, and I know you think you'll be able to save her, but unfortunately for you that's just not an option."

"I love her, Sir, I'll do whatever it takes to give her the world. If she wants to stay here, then I'll build a life with her

here. If she wants to leave, then I'm going to make that happen. I will do anything for Amber, anything."

"Do you know what she does? Do you know what she's doing right now son?" he asks with a wicked grin.

"Yes, Sir I do, and it doesn't matter to me, I love her no matter what you force her to do," I grit out. My blood turning to fire as I think of the things he makes my girl do.

"Ha what, I force her to do? Son, I simply hand out jobs, and she picks which ones she wants. Funny though she always seems to take the ones that end in bloodshed." He strokes his beard like he's deep in thought. "What do you think she enjoys more, the blood spilled, or the screams of agony?" he muses.

I ball my hands into fists in my lap, and clench my jaw shut, I know Amber hates this, he's just playing me, he wants a reaction. Amber told me he's all about manipulation. I can't give him what he wants.

"Whatever it is she enjoys, doesn't matter. I love her, Sir. I will always love her."

When Amber walks into the room, she's covered in blood, and her eyes are glazed over, she makes her way to a closet in the back of the room, not even seeing that anyone else is in here with her. I want to go to her, I want to hold her, and tell her everything will be okay. But I don't, I just stay in my chair because I know I'll make things worse by trying to comfort her in front of her father. She always says you can never show him weakness, and I'm Amber's weakness.

"Ahh, there she is. Amber, we've been waiting for you. I expected you back hours ago," Mr. Kane says, grabbing Amber's attention. She turns and doesn't even look like she registers I'm here.

“The job was a bit harder to track down than originally anticipated, Sir, but I got it handled, nothing to worry about. I just came by to grab something to finish up.”

“Oh yeah? She gives you some trouble? Why don’t you tell me all about it?”

He’s trying to get her to show her hand, by telling him about this job in front of me, but she doesn’t. She makes sure not to let on how much she tells me when we’re in my dark room hiding under the covers.

“No trouble, Sir, she just wasn’t at the previously listed address, but I found her and made sure she wouldn’t be any more trouble for us.”

I’m watching this exchange and it’s the first time that I’ve seen Amber in this element. I knew she was fierce, and strong but I didn’t realize just how tough my girl really was. If anyone can fight against Andrew Kane, it’ll be Amber.

“I see, so did you call in a cleaner, or did you handle that yourself? You know if you call the cleaners that cuts into your profits Amber.” He’s trying to bait her into going into details.

Baby don’t take the bait, you got this.

“Uhh, I handled it, Sir. I just have one more thing to take care of, so I should really get to it, it’s getting late, and I don’t particularly enjoy leaving a job half finished,” she shuts him down, and hopefully he’ll just let us go, we’ll have to be more careful after tonight.

I’ll do everything to protect my girl from this monster; even if I have to become a monster to protect her I will.

“Yes, yes of course, Amber, take what you need. There’s just one more thing,” he says as he stands up and walks around his oak desk.

“What’s that, Sir?”

Time seems to slow down, Andrew Kane picks up the gun from his desk, smirks at Amber and raises it to me. In a split second I see Amber’s face pale, and I know he’s going to kill me. He’s going to take her away from me. I try to tell Amber I love her, but I’m too late. I hope she never forgets me. I know she’ll still get out of this hell, she won’t let him trap her here.

My girl is stronger than anyone else on the planet. She just needs to realize it. She always thought I was the stronger one, that I would be the key to us getting out of here, but I always knew I was her weakness, not her strength. Amber was always the source of strength, it was never her who couldn’t live without me. It was me who couldn’t live without her, and because I’ve been selfish, I’ve let her believe more in me than in herself.

I wish I could apologize for leaving her.

Amber, I’m sorry I failed you. I couldn’t protect your heart, but you’ll always hold my soul.

11. KHAT

Amber

PRESENT DAY

Long after the water in the shower runs cold, and I have no more tears left to cry, I pull myself off the tile floor and leave the bathroom. I dry my hair, and throw it into a messy bun, then head to my closet and pull out a sports bra, and some loose-fitting workout shorts. I know the guys won't be letting me leave the apartment, so no sense in putting in an effort. I pad down the hallway in my bare feet and do my best to ignore the various stares the guys throw my way.

Matt and Rebel are hunched over, quietly arguing in the corner of the living room. What are they fucking besties now?

Bear is in the kitchen dancing around while making coffee and what looks like all the fixings for breakfast burritos; my weakness. He spins around and grabs my wrist as I reach for the coffee pot, pulling me in for a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I'm sorry, Doll, are you okay?" he whispers in my ear, he doesn't need to elaborate. I know he's apologizing for bringing up Dylan this morning. We never say his name, it's enough that Bear and Matt know the truth, but other than that, there's no reason to bring him up. But it's not his fault.

"Yeah I'm good. Just in need of a caffeine IV," I reply with a forced chuckle, that I know he sees right through. "I'm just going to take this out on the balcony," I say motioning to the coffee.

"Okay, Doll, I'll bring you out a burrito when they're ready, you want yours grilled?"

"Yes, please," I say with a smile.

“You got it.”

“You’re too good to me, Bear,” I whisper and lean into him for a hug.

“Naw, you deserve the world, Doll. You just don’t realize it,” he whispers, and gives me a sad smile.

Fuck, I want my happy Bear back, this shit is a total downer.

I head for the balcony and when I get close, Matt and Rebel quit talking. I narrow my eyes and glare at them. Not cool. Not fucking cool. Instead of giving them both a piece of my mind, I decide to ignore them. Pulling the slider open, I step into the warm morning sun, and slam the door shut behind me.

I settle into my favorite lounge chair and dig into my stash jar. I pull out a pre-roll and light up the joint. When the sativa hits my lungs, I hold it in, and slowly exhale. Nothing like coffee and weed to start the morning off. I’m just starting to relax when the slider opens. I smell bacon, and eggs, so I don’t open my eyes to greet Bear.

“Bear said I should feed you, before I tried to talk to you again. Apparently, you suffer from Hanger,” Rebel chuckles.

I snap my eyes open. Rebel is holding a plate with my burrito on it and blocking my sunshine. I narrow my eyes at him and snatch my burrito from the plate he’s holding. He sits in the chair next to me and lets out a slow breath.

“You’ve got a killer view,” he murmurs as he takes in the skyline.

“Does anyone know you’re here?”

“My mom knows I’m in the state, but she doesn’t know where I am, or why I’m here. Why?”

“No one can know you’re staying here. Rebel, it’s important that no one knows.”

“Worried I’ll ruin your reputation?” he chirps with a smile on his face. He just doesn’t fucking get it.

“No, I’m worried you’re going to get yourself killed.”

His face falls. “Why would me staying here get me killed?” I think he honestly wants to know, but he really doesn’t get it.

“Because Rebel, I’m a bad person, and I associate with bad people. You think you know anything about my life because your dad runs a small outfit in Vegas? You don’t know shit. In this world anyone will turn on anyone, and a friend is just someone who hasn’t tried to kill you yet. You’re all buddy-buddy with Matt now? Well guess what, he’ll shoot you without a second thought if he felt it was necessary. You think Bear is the good guy here because he jokes around and is always smiling? Bear can hack any missile launch code in the world and send them wherever he pleases, and never leave his apartment to kill hundreds. We’re not good people, we’re not your friends; if you want to outlive your mother you will stay away from us.” I know bringing his mother into this was a low blow, and a shitty thing to do, seeing as how I know she won’t survive the year. But dammit he doesn’t understand, and if I must throw her under the bus to get it through his head, then I fucking will.

We’re silent for a moment, staring out at the skyline, and the view of the people on the street below us.

“Tell me about him,” he asks on a whisper, and I snap my head to look at him. I know who he means, but he needs to say it. I don’t make it a habit of assuming what people are thinking.

“Tell you about who?” I question but it falls flat, we both know what and who he means.

“Dylan. You said his name, if you tell me about him and still want me to leave then I’ll go, and you’ll never hear from me again.”

“He is none of your fucking business and you will not blackmail or guilt trip me into giving you information to get you out of my apartment. You will just do as you’re fucking told and *leave*.”

It’s not Rebel’s fault that I can’t talk about Dylan, and I should, I should share his memory with everyone, so he lives on. But I can’t, I can’t talk about him, I can’t share him with others. Matt and Bear know, and that’s too many times I had to share him, I won’t share him with Rebel as well.

After I shot Rebel and left Vegas, I couldn’t understand why I even left this pain in the ass alive. It took him being here when I passed out, and my messed-up brain thinking he was Dylan, before I realized I couldn’t kill him because he reminded me of Dylan.

Rebel’s hair is cut shorter, but it’s the same dirty blonde. He sports the same easy smile, tanned skin, and piercing ocean blue eyes that remind me of the boy I once loved and *lost*. He even smells like Dylan, sea salt and surf wax, despite living in the damn desert.

That’s why I couldn’t kill him, that’s why I must save and protect him. I failed Dylan, and he paid the price of my failure

with his life. Losing Rebel would be like losing Dylan all over again and I don't think my heart could survive that. Pushing him away to save his life is something I must do, but I know that if I tell him about Dylan, that he will push to stay. He'll want to be a part of my life, because it's not just his appearance that reminds me of the boy I loved. His personality, and good heart, the way he cares for his mother and still wants to get to know me even though I shot him. He's just like Dylan. Because of that, he can never be a part of my life.

“Amber I just...” he starts, but Matt pulls the slider open and steps onto the balcony. I can tell by the set of his jaw that this won't be good.

“Phone call, Amber, it's *her*,” he says and hands me one of my burner phones.

Her. She is *La Bruja*, a hitman, paid assassin, murderer, whatever. She earned her nickname because she can slip into a location and handle a job and get out before anyone even realizes they have a hit out on them. She claims she has no loyalties, but she's loyal to me, in the 'I'll never accept a job that has you as the target' type of loyalty.

I unknowingly saved her from being tortured for information when I was on a drug run a few years back. They thought they got to her because she was married to La Bruja, turns out she was the one they were after all along. That one move gave me the best type of friend, the kind that owes you a favor.

“Since I doubt you're calling to invite me to your family BBQ, I'm going to assume this is a warning that someone put a hit out on me,” I grumble into the phone. Man, a family

BBQ does sound like a good time though. I've never done one of those, but they seem nice in a normal type of way.

“Got the call about forty five minutes ago, it went out as a ‘kill on site’ to the top ten in the game. Be wary, not even instructions to make it appear to be an accident. They can sniper you through your apartment windows or bomb your car. You need to get to a safe house that no one knows about. The hit was nameless, so I can’t even tell you who you pissed off.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s a long list, I kind of have a talent for pissing people off. So, how much is my head worth?” I wonder aloud, partially because I really want to know, and partially because the amount will allow me to narrow down the suspect list.

“Two point five million,” she says like its chump change, for her it probably is.

“That’s it? Fuck I really thought I was worth a little more than that,” I’m honestly slightly offended.

“Fucking hell girl. Only you would be more offended by the hit amount than the actual hit,” she laughs into the phone line, and I can’t help my grin.

“Yeah, well, you don’t get to where I am by playing by the rules. This isn’t the first hit and it won’t be the last. Thanks for the heads up.” With that I end the call and pass the phone back to Matt, who is staring daggers at me, while Rebel looks like he’s going to faint.

“What?” I huff out. These guys really need to get a grip.

“Get your ass inside, Amber, now.” Matt orders. He really is cute when he thinks he can boss me around.

“Naw, I’m going to finish my joint and my burrito. But could you be a dear and freshen up my coffee?” I ask while

batting my lashes at Matt, pretending this will work is almost as fun as irritating Matt.

“Already got it, Doll,” Bear steps onto the balcony and hands me a fresh cup of coffee. Which Matt promptly knocks out of his hands and causes the mug to tumble to the ground and break.

“What the fuck man!” Bear yells.

“*She* called, Amber has a hit on her, she needs to get inside, and pack for the safe house not sit here and drink fucking coffee like the Brady Bunch!”

Now Matt is yelling, he must be worried because Matt never yells, growls yes, yells no. Either way he is starting to give me a fucking headache.

“Yeah, that’s not happening. We need to head over to south side and check the Alaska shipment. Then we need to get it ready for transfer. We leave in two days and I’m going. If I stopped working anytime someone tried to kill me, my business would have died years ago.”

I stand up and push past the guys to head inside for more coffee, because I was serious when I said I needed a caffeine IV today. The three guys follow me into the living room, Matt hot on my heels and practically breathing fire down my neck. After I get a fresh cup of coffee I turn and head to my room, ignoring all their protests and start to get ready for work.

Like I said this isn’t going to stop me from doing my goddamn job.

Rebel

I want to go with Amber to their gun shipment, but I know it is going to be one hell of a fight. Maybe if I can get Matt and Bear on my side before asking Amber, they might actually have my back. I doubt it, but it's worth a shot.

“So I was thinking...” I start my pitch to Matt and Bear.

“Oh, for fucks sake, now what?” Matt growls.

He does that a lot, growls his words instead of speaking them.

“I want to go with you guys to the gun shipment,” I tell them with all the confidence I can muster at this moment.

The truth is, I have never been on a drug or gun shipment and have no idea what those things might entail. See, from what I understand, Amber is like the top of the food chain in the crime lord world. She gets her products straight from the source, the manufacturer if you will. From there she breaks down the large quantities into smaller more manageable batches, and by more manageable, I mean a kilo or four. Then she sells those smaller amounts to distributors, who cut and sell to their dealers. I'm not exactly sure how the guns come into play, but I imagine it's kind of the same thing, just different. Either way, it doesn't get much higher on the food chain than buying a pure product from the person that made it.

“Absolutely not,” Matt says, the sound of shock resonating through him like he can't actually believe that I just asked that, and if I'm being honest I can't believe I did either.

“I'll be invisible, you won't even know I'm there,” I try to convince him.

His face hardens, his lips press into a thin irritated line before he shakes his head and simply walks out of the room and away from the rest of this conversation.

I sigh and slump down on the couch, scrubbing my hand over my face in pure exhaustion.

“Why do you want to go?” Bear asks.

When I remove my hand from my face, I find him standing in the kitchen with a skeptical look on his face before he sips his coffee.

“You both said that if I want to be a part of this, then I have to fight for her. Well, that’s what I’m trying to do. Fight. It’s what I’m good at, actually.”

“But you don’t need to go on this shipment to fight for her heart.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I have a feeling that I’m not going to be winning any rounds with Amber if I don’t know the extent of what I’m fighting for. This is her life and I doubt she is leaving it anytime soon, so if I want a part in it then I need to know what I’m actually fighting *for*.”

I watch as Bear sips his coffee and mulls over my explanation. I keep out the part about not wanting to be too far from Amber anymore, and wanting to help keep her safe. That information is just for me.

“Okay,” Bear says with a nod before setting his coffee cup down on the counter and walking out of the room, he heads down the hallway towards Amber’s bedroom and doesn’t come back.

There is the sound of muffled shouting coming from that direction, followed by the slam of a door down the hallway before Amber walks into the living room looking overly flustered.

“You can come, but stay the hell out of my way,” she demands before heading for Matt’s bedroom.

“You’re welcome,” Bear says with a shit eating grin on his face.

“Thank you,” I tell him, and I honestly mean it. I know that whatever he said to her was the ticket to convincing her to let me tag along with them. Without him I would have been shot down before I even opened my mouth.

HONESTLY, Amber must be exhausted, it’s the only thing I can think of why she didn’t put up *more* of a fight about me tagging along with her and Matt to go to her gun warehouse. Bear took off back to his apartment to pack up his equipment, and then he’s going to head to one of Amber safe houses. A safe house that Amber is still refusing to go to, even though she has a hit out on her life. I want to drag her to a safe location, somewhere far away from here and lock her up until we know for sure it’s safe, but apparently, I’m not allowed to do that. When I even suggested a safe house, Amber pulled her gun on me, and I can’t risk pissing her off because I know for a fact, she will shoot me.

Again.

Matt is driving, Amber is in the passenger seat staring out the window, and I can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking about. She changed before we left into what I’ve come to consider her ‘work wear’. Ripped jeans, tight black crop top, and chunky studded boots. It’s killing me to see how badly bruised she still is even after five days of recovering. She doesn’t try to hide her injuries, she wears them on full display. Anyone else would want to cover up a point of weakness, but for Amber her injuries aren’t a weakness, they’re part of her power. It’s her way of showing everyone that even though

she's hurting she can still do her job. And that she can do it better than anyone else.

“Stop staring at me,” she says without turning around.

How does she do that? I guess you don't rise to the top if you can't sense when you're being watched.

“I just don't think you're taking the threat against your life very seriously.”

She shrugs, “I'm not.”

Damn, she is infuriating, but right now there is no sense in arguing the point. Matt and I will just have to work double to make sure *our* girl stays safe, and alive. Even if she doesn't know it yet she's mine, or at least she will be one day.

We turn down a gravel road, and it isn't long before we're stopping in front of a massive metal warehouse. Matt gets out and does a quick perimeter check, before coming around the side to open Amber's door. She jumps out and heads inside.

I guess it's time to see what this chick does.

I used to think my dad had a solid operation, a little bit of coke, a few fights, and some extortion. But his operation never could have prepared me to walk into this building behind Amber.

I'm kind of in awe at everything inside here. While the outside looks like your typical large metal warehouse, or industrial barn setting the inside is nothing short of high tech. There are scanners and sensor panels. The inside walls are actually twelve inch thick rebar reinforced concrete, instead of the outside illusion of simple steel walls.

Matt told me they had a theft attempt five years ago, when he was first hired on, and after that Amber made the necessary

upgrades. I've noticed she doesn't spend much of her money, even though I know she probably has billions, but she does take her operation seriously. I guess you have to when you run as much as she does.

She walks over to one of the steel doors, punches in a code on a keypad, does a retina scan, and then a full palm scan. It's the sort of thing that you see in movies and don't think could ever be real. When the door slides open, I can see into a small room that has two dozen wooden cargo crates. Amber starts opening the lids on a few of the crates, and pulls out an AK, loads it and walks out the back door. Matt stays inside, but I want to see what she's going to do next, and I hate her being out in the open alone.

There is a makeshift target range setup just outside the back door, and before I can even take in the sight of tiny Amber with an AK-47, she lights up the far targets. When she's satisfied, she turns around, completely ignores me, *typical*, and walks back inside.

Matt doesn't say anything the whole time we're here, but I'm itching to ask her a hundred questions. Maybe I'll wait till we're back in the car, and she isn't inspecting crates of automatic weapons.

"So, was the product to your satisfaction?" I ask Amber once we're back inside the SUV and heading down the road.

"If it wasn't, I would have gotten to kill someone, since everyone is still breathing you can assume the product was to my satisfaction."

"What else do you supply?" I ask.

"What's with the sudden interest in my operation? You're only here because Bear thinks you won't hurt my business.

That doesn't mean you get to know all the details. Stop asking so many fucking questions."

"I asked two questions, but if you don't want to talk about your operation then what's your favorite color?"

She turns around and looks at me like I just asked her to suck my cock. Yeah that's quite the visual, but I just want to get to know her.

"My favorite color? What are you fourteen? We're not playing twenty questions Rebel." She rolls her eyes and turns back around while Matt is clearly trying to keep from laughing at our exchange.

"Mine's green, you know like your eyes," I say and Matt can't keep his laughter in anymore.

"You're so cheesy. Does that actually work for you? What's next Rebel, going to ask me to go with you to prom? Maybe we can go steady," she mocks.

"I'm just trying to get to know my new best friend."

"We're not friends," she mumbles.

She's yet to accept it but I'm not giving up.

Once we're back at the apartment, Matt starts pulling down specialty window covers, he says they prevent snipers from using heat seeking scopes to take us out. I think that's supposed to be comforting. He said Amber also had all the windows replaced with bulletproof glass a year ago, so if the hitmen aren't using missiles, we *should* be safe here. Again, I think he's trying to be comforting. We should really work on his delivery though because yeah, I'm not feeling comforted.

"So, when do we leave for Alaska?"

“You are not going anywhere other than back to your dessert, *we* fly out in thirty six hours. And I need to check in with Bear.”

Amber picks up her phone and dials Bear’s number, while heading into the kitchen. She pulls out a bottle of whiskey and pours herself a glass, and before she can take a drink Matt takes it from her, oh this will be fun to watch.

“Hey! What the fuck, Matt.”

“You have spent most of the last week passed the fuck out, and you’re covered head to toe in bruises, did you really think I would let you drink this?”

“Whatever, Matty... Bear, how’s it going?”

Matt pours her glass down the sink. “Matt! What. The. Fuck.” she seethes, punctuating each word like it is its own sentence.

“Yeah, Bear I’m here, Matt’s just being an asshole....He took my whiskey....Don’t fucking agree with him, Bear....Shut the fuck up and tell me we’re set to go,” she pauses to listen and nod. Matt starts moving the contents of the liquor cabinet to the highest point in the kitchen and I’m trying hard not to laugh.

“Okay good, make sure they have our flight info, and that they’re paid off. It’ll be our first run up there and it needs to go perfectly, these guys are just the first order, there are more of their type up in the sticks and we can hit the market hard if we have the control tower on our side. In fact, pay them double for their loyalty to our deliveries. If anyone else tries to move up there I want them to have to pay a fuck ton of money to do it.”

Huh, and that's apparently how it's done. It's hot watching Amber calling all the shots.

Once Amber hangs up with Bear she turns around to face Matt. "Fucking for real, Matty?" She sighs when she sees what he's done with all the whiskey.

She could climb the counter, or get a chair but she doesn't, and he just smirks at her, taps her on the nose and leaves the kitchen. I have a feeling this isn't the first time he's leveled up her stash. It seems like it's his way of moving it just far enough away that she could get to it, but she doesn't because she respects him and knows he's right to take it away.

"I'll order sushi for delivery, Rebel, write your order down. Take out menu is in the drawer next to the fridge," Matt says as he exits the room.

I get up and grab the menu. "What do you usually get? I haven't had sushi very much, it's hard to get fresh seafood when we live in the desert."

"I can imagine your seafood is probably awful," She chirps and takes the menu.

I look at it over her shoulder, close enough that I can smell her coconut shampoo, but far enough away that we're not touching. I'm worried that if I get too close to her, she'll turn back into blood thirsty Amber, right now she's more like early morning Amber. I notice when she's still half asleep she's more laid back, playful, and sports a lazy grin on her face. It's like getting a glimpse of the girl she was before all this happened. I wish I could see that every morning. Once she fully wakes up though, she instantly turns into crime lord Amber, that version of her is ruthless. And more often than not that version wants to shoot me.

“I normally get various types of sashimi, which is basically slices of different fish, mostly raw, with a side of white rice, but this place has a really great spicy octopus stew. Matt and I normally share some pot stickers and calamari too. But if you’re not into the whole raw fish thing, and octopus seems a little out there, they also have regular Chinese food staples like fried rice, or sweet and sour pork,” she says, then hands me back the menu as Matt walks back in, wearing red gym shorts and nothing else.

“You guys know what you want?” he asks while holding his phone, and dialing the sushi place’s number.

“Just get my regular order and add a cup of the octopus stew if they have it tonight,” Amber says and heads toward her bedroom, probably to change.

“Just get me whatever she normally gets, plus the stew, and throw in an extra order of pot stickers, in case I hate everything else,” I laugh, “and thank you.” I turn and head to my room to change too.

When I come out of my room, Amber is just coming down the hall, and for the love of all things holy she’s wearing the smallest pair of black sleep shorts, and has the waistband rolled up, so when she turns I have the perfect view of the bottom of her ass. Which in case you were wondering, is literal perfection. She’s also wearing a crimson red tank top, and she’s not wearing a bra under it, and if that wasn’t bad enough, I’m pretty sure her nipples are pierced — and hard.

Because of course, they fucking are. She is basically the embodiment of every sexy sinful thing wrapped into a tiny package designed specifically to torture me.

I thought tonight would be a great time to get to know her better, but now I’m not going to be able to focus on anything

she says. How the hell has Matt lived with her for five years, this sight alone is torture. And Bear? How does he have fucking snuggle party sleepovers every week?

“Okay guys, what are we going to watch?” Amber asks.

I look over at Matt and the bastard is smirking at me, because he knows exactly what I’m thinking right now as I stand in the living room entryway, and track Amber like I’m a hunter and she’s my prey.

“Your call tonight, Babe, just please not another Friends marathon,” Matt pleads.

“Okay, Friends it is then.” Amber laughs, grabs the remote, switches on Netflix, and plops down on the couch next to Matt. While Matt runs his hands down his face and lets out a loud breath.

“Are you going to stand by the door all night or are you going to come watch with us?” she questions without even looking my way.

“Well, I was going to join you guys. But now that you’re planning on torturing Matt because he leveled up your whiskey stash, I might stay by the door, so I have a better chance of escaping with my manhood still intact,” I tell her.

“Ha-ha you’re so funny. Come on, marathon and sushi night aren’t optional, they’re mandatory. You wanted to stay here, then you’re going to participate in the torture. Plus, you can reach the whiskey stash, and you didn’t bring any back down for me, therefore you deserve to be tortured just as much as Matty. And grab that blanket off the chair before you sit down,” she instructs.

I do as I’m told, ‘cause she’s too damn adorable to say no to, and I think that’s the scariest thing about Amber. When

she's adorable Amber, she's too cute to say no to. And when she's crime lord Amber, she's too scary to say no to. I'd wonder which version the real Amber is, but I'm certain they both are.

When the delivery arrives, we all sit on the living room floor, huddled around the coffee table with food and drinks covering the whole surface. I keep a close eye on Amber and love it when her face lights up after a funny scene plays. Or how she can mouth the lines in nearly every episode we watch.

After we have successfully demolished every last bite of food, we sit back on the couch and it isn't long until Amber is starting to fall asleep. She leans into Matt and he wraps an arm around her, and I feel that familiar pull of jealousy that he gets to hold her. When she's finally asleep and snoring softly it's around two in the morning. I could have passed out hours ago, I don't know how Amber stayed up so long.

"She has trouble sleeping, this is an early night for her," Matt says when he catches me staring at her.

"Early? What time does she normally go to bed?"

He shrugs, "Around two if she's waking up at five, but normally she crashes around three, and wakes up at six or seven."

"She can't possibly run on three hours of sleep? That's not healthy."

"No, it's not, but insomnia is a bitch, Rebel, and she doesn't like to sleep," he tells me and reaches for the remote and turns the TV off. He hauls her into his lap, and stands as she curls into his chest more.

"Why doesn't she like to sleep?" I ask as he starts down the hall to her room.

He turns back to face me. “This will be the first night since you got here that she’s both sleeping alone, and not passed out, I’m sure you’ll see why she doesn’t like to sleep.”

Because that’s not fucking cryptic.

12. KETAMINE

Amber

THE SCREAMS PIERCE MY EARS, and a sharp pain radiates out of my chest. All I see are visions of his dead body. The blood that I had to clean from the office. His cold body lying on the hard-packed dirt in the woods. I haven't been back to his grave since the night I lost him. But every night for the last ten years, I've been reminded of what I did to him. I'll never forget. I cannot allow myself to forget what I did. The only nights I have that are nightmare free, are the nights I have Bear or Matt by my side, it's why Bear has spent at least one night a week with me for the last seven years. Matt tries to stay more, but I push him away. I can't allow myself to forget what I did.

I don't deserve to be able to forget, to be forgiven, or to move on.

"Amber, wake up, it's okay, it's not real," Matt says in a soothing voice and suddenly I'm being pulled out of my hell and shaken awake. The only problem is, it is real, it's not a nightmare, this really happened. Only this time it wasn't Dylan's face, it was *Rebel*.

I wake up cradled in Matt's arms as he brushes my hair from my face and wipes my tears away, but they continue to fall, and I can't stop them this time. Normally the tears stop soon after waking, but not tonight. Sobs rack through my body and I shake with the force of my cries.

When I've finally spilled all my tears, I dry my face, give Matty a hug and whisper, "I'm sorry."

"Never apologize for what that monster did to you," he whispers back.

If only he could see that I'm the true monster here.

When I look up, Rebel's standing in the doorway to my bedroom, and it's too much for him to be here now, for him to see me like this.

"Get. Out."

"I just want to help," he says quietly.

"You want to help? Help! You can help by fucking leaving, you have no right to be here. Get. The. Fuck. Out." I seethe through clenched teeth, the words come out harsh, but I can't contain my emotions any longer.

"Okay, I'll go. But Amber, I'm here if you need anything," he sighs and walks back down the hall.

"That was harsh Amber, even for you, he cares about you. He just wants to do something to help. You don't always have to attack the people that love you," Matty tells me. And I know he doesn't just mean Rebel.

"It was him, Matty," I whisper.

"I know, Honey, it's always him."

I shake my head, "No, Matt, it wasn't Dylan, it was Rebel. It was the same nightmare, but tonight I wasn't burying Dylan, I was burying Rebel. This is why he can't stay. If he stays, I'll just get him killed, or worse. Why does no one see that I'm pushing him away to save him? Why does no one understand I have to push you guys away. Do you think I like being alone? I don't. Do you think I like having to hide you and Bear? I don't. I wish I could tell everyone how much you both mean to me, but you know I can't, not while he is still alive."

"Maybe it's time to let someone else in, he could help you. He isn't a sixteen-year-old kid, Amber. He's twenty eight, and

he's grown up in the same world, he can take care of himself," Matty says as he hugs me.

I let out a humorless laugh. "His world is not the same as ours, Matty, and our fathers are not the same. Rebel has never even killed someone. I can't even remember how many people I've personally killed, how many I've tortured, how many kill orders I've given, or how many bodies I've gotten rid of. Hell, my only friends are murderers. He's actually innocent from this life despite the rumors, and what he's seen here so far, he doesn't know me and if he did, he wouldn't want me."

"Maybe you should show him the real you, and let him decide for himself."

With one last hug and a soft kiss, Matt tucks me back into bed and leaves me with my thoughts, while I struggle to go back to sleep.

I'll just cat nap on the plane in the morning, who actually needs sleep to survive?

I'm able to fall back asleep for a little while, so when I wake up it's seven thirty in the morning and I can smell fresh coffee, which I'm going to need about a gallon of in order to get through today. I toss the covers off my legs and get out of bed. After a quick shower, I braid my hair and get dressed in black cargo pants, combat boots, and crop top. I forgo any makeup, and my bruises are on full display. Maybe others would hide them, but I have no problem with anyone seeing me beat to shit, because even if I look like I just got back from hell I'm still working. It's my way of showing this world that nothing will keep me from doing my job.

I make my way into the kitchen, grab the biggest coffee mug we have which says *I'm here to fuck shit up* so it's perfect

for the day we're about to have. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket and fish it out to see Bear's number.

"We set to go?" I ask, it's shipment day, so I have zero patience for anything less than one hundred and ten percent professionalism on all fronts, even from those I'm sleeping with.

"Yeah, you're set to go, you guys need to head out within forty five minutes in order to make it to the airfield in time. I've got the route mapped out, and the surveillance system will track your movements. The local cops are paid off on the route and they won't stop the convoy. Cage and Jameson are already at Southside loading up the truck and they'll fall in line on the route. The control tower in Anderson is paid off for loyalty and today's shipment," Bear explains.

"What did that end up costing me?"

"Ten thousand each so you're out one hundred thousand dollars. There are a total of ten employees that run the tower in shifts. Since we got off on the cheap, I figured we might as well pay them all off and get ahead of the game."

"Good thinking, Bear. If everything runs smoothly, give yourself a bonus when this run is over," I tell him and hang up.

When I turn around Matt and Rebel are standing in the living room with our bags. "You coming?" I nod at Rebel.

"Uhh that was my plan," he replies.

"Fine, let's get going. And Rebel, don't get in my fucking way," I say, heading toward the door.

Last night I would have fought him on coming, I would have told Matt to drop him off somewhere along the highway and made him hitchhike back to civilization. Matt was right

though, Rebel needs to see for himself who I really am. And this is just the first piece of the Amber puzzle.

THE FLIGHT to Anderson Alaska is long and dull. Matt and Cage are going over maps of the terrain we'll be driving in. Jameson is making sure the rental vehicles are properly equipped to handle the cargo and the terrain, and that they'll be delivered to the airfield before we arrive. While Bear is back home running surveillance on every camera he can find from the airport to the compound, which isn't a ton since it's fucking Alaska. Rebel has been surprisingly silent for the flight, it seems like he's just taking it all in. I doubt he's ever flown in a cargo plane before, and they're not a fun ride.

I doubt he's ever been on a gun run before, it's strange to think that our worlds are similar yet so different. I've been going on gun runs for fifteen years, and running them solo for the last eight. How has he been surrounded by the chaos of this life and managed to remain so innocent? Oh, yeah, his father probably didn't shoot the love of his life in front of him and make him bury the body. That level of sadism has been reserved for *my* father.

We finally touch down at the airfield and the trucks are waiting for us, they have been equipped with tracking devices, and a camera system so Bear can keep watch. They have bed covers so people won't be able to spot the cargo crates on the drive. We've got half a dozen crates filled with Ak-47's, two crates per truck. Matt, Rebel and I are in one truck, Jameson leads the convoy, and Cage takes up the rear. We've got a two-hour drive before we get to the compound, and I pray Rebel just stays quiet.

“So, you guys don’t bring more people to these things?”

Wow, Rebel was quiet for a whole thirty seconds.

“We bring the appropriate amount of people for the delivery. If we’re supplying more merchandise, then we’d need to bring a couple of lackeys to drive additional trucks, but we like to keep these things as small as possible. The more people that are involved the greater the risk of shit getting fucked up,” Matt responds for me.

I decide to just ignore Rebel’s additional questions, and soon he gets the hint that I won’t be talking to him and he shuts up.

After a long, bumpy ride we’re finally pulling up to our destination. This place is even more ridiculous than my compounds. You would think these guys were preparing for the apocalypse, well I guess they kind of are.

Hmm, they wouldn’t be a bad group of people to have in my pocket in case shit goes down in the future. I’ll keep that in mind. These guys seem to be itching for a war. Maybe I’ll give them one.

“You can get out of the truck, but you need to stay at least ten feet behind me. Do not look around. Do not engage with any of them. Do not touch anything. Do not look at me too closely, and don’t fucking speak, got it? If you can’t handle simple instructions stay in the truck, or you’re going to get us killed,” I tell Rebel. We’ll see if he can follow instructions.

“Yeah, I got it,” he says and nods his head once.

I put my game face on and step out of the truck. Jameson and Cage already have one crate unloaded for inspection. Matt and Rebel step out behind me, I walk up to the crate on the ground and my guys step back — they know the drill here.

“Half a dozen crates of Ak-47’s, and I threw in half a dozen colt 45’s as a gift. I hope we can continue with our new relationship, and I expect this expedited delivery will buy some loyalty with your family,” I say as I hand over an AK and a Colt.

“As long as the product is up to par, then I see no reason why we cannot continue a long-standing relationship,” The leader responds as his men look over the guns.

“Looks like you had a disagreement with someone, should we be concerned that it was caused by a problem with your products?” Another man asks as he gestures to my still bruised body.

“Honey there’s never been a problem with what I deliver, and you know that. It’s why you contacted me in the first place instead of someone closer to you with a better price. Now, do us both a favor and refrain from further insinuating there could be a potential problem here,” I respond coldly because how dare he think my product is bad.

After the leader finishes looking over the rest of the crates, he hands Matt the rest of my money, and his guys unload the trucks.

“It’s been a real pleasure doing business with you, when can you get us another order?” the leader asks.

“When can you get me payment for another order?”

He nods to one of his men, who pulls out another duffle bag. “I trust this will be enough to cover half of another shipment?”

“Indeed, it will. We can come back in three weeks.”

He hands me another stack of hundreds. “I want additional colts as well.”

“That I can do,” we shake hands and head back to the trucks.

I’m surprised Rebel has been silent the whole time, and I suspect the peace will not remain.

13. SALVIA

Rebel

AFTER THE DEAL IS DONE, we head back into the tiny town that we passed through on our way to the meeting — I have no idea what this town is called, or even where we currently are geographically.

Amber gets a call from Bear informing her the jet can't make it up till tomorrow. So we're stuck here for the night unless we want to ride back in the cargo plane, and it seems like no one does. Bear rented us a large cabin just outside of town where we can stay for the night. Once we get there, Cage takes off for town to grab everyone dinner, he seems to be the youngest member of Amber's team, but it seems he's been here for a while, and he clearly respects and adores Amber, kind of like an older sister, or maybe I'm reading that wrong and she is also sleeping with him. At this point I can't keep up.

Jameson is the only other team member I've seen Amber with more than once. He's the oldest person here, but only by a few years, and he's ex-military, like Matt. It seems Amber keeps her circle tight with just Matt, Bear, Cage and Jameson as standard members, with actual jobs inside the organization. Everyone else is just a hired gun, lucky, or distributor.

It must be hard for her to trust anyone when it comes to keeping her shipments on track, but she couldn't possibly do it all on her own, so she's reluctantly given jobs to these guys.

When we arrive at the cabin Amber heads straight inside to shower, while the rest of us unload the bags.

Cage comes bursting in the front door, "Guys you'll never believe our luck!" he practically screams.

“What?” Jameson asks, clearly not interested in whatever Cage is so happy about.

“There is a music festival in town, tonight is the last night, and since we’re stuck here anyways, we can go have some fucking fun!”

“Amber is never going to go for that, Cage,” Matt mutters and turns back to flipping through channels on the TV.

“Oh no? Do you hear that?” Cage asks, pointing down the hall to the shower.

“Hear what?” I have no idea what he’s talking about. Other than the TV I can hear the shower running and music playing off Amber’s phone in the other room.

“She’s listening to her party playlist! She’s going to say yes, so you guys might as well go get ready!” he practically yells, it’s hard not to smile at how excited he is. His energy is contagious.

“How do you know she’s going to want to go out, maybe she’s just shuffling songs on her phone?” I ask, and Cage looks at me like I’m an idiot.

“Look dude, I know you’re new here, but you really need to take note, Amber doesn’t just shuffle songs. She has carefully crafted playlists for pretty much any occasion from party to torture. She even has a playlist specific to when she goes on a gun run. Didn’t you notice her headphones on the plane?”

“Uhh yeah I noticed I just didn’t think she would have a specific playlist for a gun run, how does one choose songs for that kind of event?” I wonder out loud.

“No clue, dude, all I know is she’s listening to her party playlist, which means were fucking going out!” Cage then

takes off down the hall to his room.

Amber comes out of her room with her hair falling in soft waves down her back, cut off denim shorts, a tight white crop top, and no bra and I can see her nipple piercings.

Fuck me.

Honestly, what I would do to put her nipples in my mouth just once.

She has a red flannel tied around her hips. Her makeup is perfect, not too heavy but enough to cover most of her fading bruises, and she's painted her lips a crimson red; her signature color other than black.

“What the fuck are you guys doing sitting around, go get ready, you have five minutes,” she says, and Cage walks out from down the hall and throws an arm around her shoulders.

“I told them to get ready, boss, but they didn't listen. When I was in town, I heard there is a music festival we can hit that,” he tells her.

“Sure, that sounds better than playing pool in some crappy dive bar that covers its walls in animal heads,” she shrugs, “for real guys, get moving, four minutes or Cage and I are going to leave your asses here.”

And suddenly Matt, Jameson and I are jumping up and heading to our rooms for speed showers, and to put on clean clothes. Looks like tonight I get to see a whole new side of Amber — I can' fucking wait.

IT's strange seeing the group dressed casually for a night out together. I mean as casual as a group like this gets.

Matt is dressed in black jeans, his standard combat boots and a black t-shirt — if he doesn't flex the sleeve should stay intact. Cage is in skinny jeans, a gray V-neck and a red flannel that matches Amber's. Jameson is wearing wrangler blue jeans, with a white shirt under a blue flannel. What's with the flannels? I must have missed the memo. I threw on some dark wash jeans, and a faded concert T-shirt — pretty much the only thing that I wear.

We head out of the large cabin to load into one of the trucks and head to the festival. On the drive, I take a moment to inspect the guys closest to Amber and notice something I never did before. All of them sport a similar tattoo somewhere on their body, different variations of a Queens crown, complete with blood dripping from it.

Interesting.

“What's that?” I ask Cage, and point to his tattoo covering his hand, he looks it over, then chances a glance at Amber and she nods.

“It's the Kali Queen's sign, we each have one,” he says and displays his hand proudly.

“Does everyone in the organization have to get it?”

“There are only five people privileged enough to be able to get it,” Amber says and points to her version of the tattoo on her left shoulder.

“Who's the five?” I ask, even though I figure they're Bear and the other people in this truck.

“Me, Matty, Bear, Cage and Jameson. And don't go running your mouth about them either,” she tells me, and each of the men in the truck give me a look that says if I tell anyone I'll be signing my death warrant.

We pull up to the festival, and file out of the truck, flanking Amber's sides as we walk. Jameson and Matt on her left, while Cage and I take up her right side to head into the gated off field where the festival is taking place. Cage throws an arm around Amber's shoulder and I try to stamp down the feeling of jealousy I get at the sight of him touching her.

As we make our way toward the main stage, I take note of all the stares we're getting. It seems there isn't a single man here that isn't checking out *our* girl. Most of the women are either eyeing one of the four guys in our group or giving Amber the evil eye. I chance a look at Amber and the smirk on her face tells me she knows exactly the kind of attention our group is getting.

Something tells me they're used to it by now.

As soon as the beer tents are in sight Matt and Jameson break off from the group and head in that direction. Cage is pulling Amber toward the main stage and I'm trailing behind them, eager to see what Amber will do next. Cage takes her hands and they start dancing to the music blasting through the speakers with practiced precision like they do this often. Amber's body moves to the beat with such fluid motion that if I didn't know any better, I would say she was a dancer instead of a crime lord. Cage isn't half bad himself, as he takes her hands, dips, spins, and tosses her in the air, he has a huge smile on his face.

As I'm watching the two of them laughing and dancing, a girl comes over to ask me to dance, so we make our way over to the space Amber and Cage have cleared around them. Amber looks my way with a genuine smile on her face, not a smirk but a smile.

She's happy here — in this moment she's actually having a good time. She's not thinking about whatever it is that usually weighs her down. Here she is just happy.

A guy in a cowboy hat, button down shirt, Wrangler jeans, and a ridiculously large belt buckle cuts in to dance with Amber. Instantly her body stiffens, she might be happy dancing with Cage but not with this guy. He roughly grabs and pulls her close to him as she pushes him away. Cage grabs his shoulder, but the guy is a mountain and pushes Cage away. This guy is clearly drunk, and if we don't get Amber away from him, she's likely to shoot him.

“Sorry, Darlin’ I gotta go,” I tell my dance partner and take off towards Amber, Cage, and the huge redneck.

Where the hell are Matt and Jameson?

“It seems the lady doesn't want to dance with you.”

“Mind your own business man, she ain't your girl. If I want to dance with her, then I can. Back off,” he's slurring his words, and practically pawing at Amber.

I look at Cage and he nods his head, this is going to get wild.

In a flash, Cage puts his arms around Amber's waist and pulls her out of this guy's grasp.

Seizing hold of his shoulder with my left hand, I deck him in the face with my right. Even though the music is blasting I can still hear bones break as my knuckles contact his jaw. I may not be an excellent marksman, or have much experience with drug runs, but there is a reason my father runs a fight ring in Vegas.

I can fight.

The guy stumbles back from the force of my punch, and out of the corner of my eye I see Matt and Jameson approaching. Matt goes to Amber, and Jameson stands by my side. Next, I see some of the drunk guy's friends approaching, things might go downhill from here.

"You need a hand, brother?" Jameson asks.

"Possibly. Two more coming in off your right, and a fourth is coming in from my left. Which ones you want?" I ask Jameson, who looks at me and smiles like this is his idea of a good time.

Crazy Fuck.

"I'll take the two brutes on the left," he says and takes off leaving me to deal with the new additions headed our way.

I rarely fight in the ring anymore, but I spent years making a name for myself and a name for my father's organization as undefeated. To this day, anytime I jump in the ring I'm determined to win the fight or die trying.

It isn't long before Matt is joining me, and I guess Cage is either with Amber or helping Jameson, but everything around us is a blur.

A few minutes go by and all four guys are laid out on their backs. The guy that tried to dance with Amber has a broken nose, and probably a fractured jaw, two more look like they have broken ribs, and the last one is knocked out cold. I immediately start scanning the crowd for Amber, and when I see her, I can't help but laugh. She's sitting on top of Cage's shoulders, drinking a beer and watching the fight in front of her with a grin on her face. I turn and make my way over to the two of them, feeling cocky as fuck for laying out those drunk rednecks, even though I shouldn't. It was an easy fight

and they wouldn't have even made it through the trial round in one of our organized fights.

“Enjoying the show?”

“Most definitely. Looks like you can fight with the best of them, I guess you're not completely useless after all,” she remarks.

I reach up and grab her beer out of her hand and down it, then I grab her around her waist and remove her from Cage's shoulders and place her on top of mine. “Now that's better, remember who your legs belong wrapped around,” I tell her, and she laughs.

“We should probably head out before security gets here,” she tells the guys, and we all make our way towards the exit, with Amber still on my shoulders.

After we leave the festival, we head towards the liquor store, apparently Matt has deemed Amber recovered enough to drink, because as soon as he gets back into the truck, he hands her a bottle of Blackberry Whiskey.

“Oh, Matty you shouldn't have, but I'm so glad you did!” she exclaims and throws her arms around his neck to give him a hug and plant a kiss on his lips. He reaches a hand up to grip the side of her face, she opens her mouth and a blaze of fiery jealousy runs through me when their tongues intertwine.

When she pulls back, she quickly opens the bottle and gulps down a quarter of the bottle. When she pulls back, she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. I don't realize my jaw has popped open until Cage reaches over and taps my chin, “Pull it together man you're either drooling over her or pissed someone else is touching her,” he laughs.

“And she ain’t yours to be doing either over,” Jameson remarks.

By the time we pull up to the cabin everyone is riding their buzz. Amber and Cage sang every song on the radio and tried to get Matt, Jameson and myself to join them in their version of carpool karaoke.

Amber grabs my hand as we file up to the cabin and leans into my arm, I wrap it around her shoulder without dropping her hand. She leans into my side and looks up at me, I can’t help but smile at her, there are so many pieces to the Amber puzzle and I want to find them all.

“You can fight,” she says, and I laugh.

“Yeah, it’s why my dad started the fight nights. I got into trouble in school after my mom was diagnosed with cancer, it hit me hard and I acted out. I got into too many fights, kept getting suspended from school, and pretty soon I was arranging underground fights in abandoned buildings just to give me a chance to bleed, or make someone else bleed. When my father found out, he decided to start arranging the fights and taking bets. It just grew from there,” I say with a shrug.

“Hmm, I see,” she seems to ponder what I just told her, I wonder if she’ll share a part of her story with me if I share part of mine with her.

We make our way back into the cabin, Cage, Jameson and Matt all find places to sit in the living room, drinking their poison of choice and start arguing about what to watch.

“Come on guys, you know the rules, if we can’t decide then Amber gets to pick and she’s going to torture us with Friends or Jane the Virgin, I can’t live through the reruns again guys, I just can’t!” Cage pleads with Matt and Jameson, and

Amber laughs. We're still standing off to the side and she's still wrapped in my arm.

"Looks like she's not down for movie night," Jameson nods towards us.

"Sorry Cage, you're on your own. Come on Reb," she says and starts to pull me down the hall.

I hear a choir of hollering and cheering from the guys as we head down the hall to her room.

I don't know what is about to happen. I try not to expect anything but murder from Amber, but if I were in the guy's position watching her walk down the hall with someone else I know I wouldn't be as enthused as they are. I don't get it, I try to understand, but it's hard. How are they so calm about this, not just calm but cheering us on like she isn't theirs at all. Maybe one day I'll get it but today isn't that day.

Once inside she drops my hand, and slips out from under my arm, she starts to search through her bag on the bed until she produces a joint and a lighter. She heads to the window, opens it then lights the joint set between her lips. I walk over to join her, and she passes me the joint.

"How's your hand?"

"Little swollen, but I'm sure I'll survive," I say as I flex my hand.

She reaches out and pulls my hand to her mouth to place a kiss on my knuckles and I suck in a breath, she looks at me and smiles, because she knows exactly how she affects me. I run my knuckles along the side of her face, where her bruises are fading but still clearly visible.

"How about you? You okay?"

She shrugs, "I'll survive, always do."

I reach out and rest my hand on her waist, moving my other to cup her face. "You're so beautiful Amber," I whisper, she takes a small step towards me and looks up.

She's so close that if I just tilt my head our lips would touch. But she's been drinking, we both have, and as much as I want her, I need to know that she wants me when she's sober as much as she does after half a bottle of whiskey.

"I want you, Amber, but you've been drinking, it isn't right," I whisper.

She stands on her tippy toes and places a soft kiss on my lips, and it takes every ounce of power and self-control I have to not give in and kiss her back.

"Nothing in my life has ever been right, but being with you is the first time in ten years that I think there's still good people in the world," she whispers against my lips.

"I won't lie to you, Reb, I want you, in the morning no matter what happens here tonight, things have to go back to the way they have always been. There is no happily ever after at the end of this story. So, we can make the most of tonight and forget who we are outside of this room for a little while. Or we can say good night, and you can walk out that door. The choice is yours," she says and pulls back to look at my face.

I swallow the lump in my throat, my heart is pounding. I'm torn between being a gentleman, and giving into the sexy as sin little pixie that has been dominating my every thought for the last few months. She takes another step back and I instantly miss her warmth, even though she says this won't change anything, and the chances of her breaking my heart are

high, I'm willing to take the leap if it means I get another piece of Amber.

I pull her back towards me, and kiss her, she moans slightly into my mouth and parts her lips, I sweep my tongue inside her mouth and my dick twitches inside my pants. Amber wraps her hands around my neck, while I run my hands down her body, I grab her thighs and lift her up. She immediately wraps her legs around my waist, and I push her against the wall, moving my hands to cup her perfectly round ass.

Her body fits perfectly against mine like she was made just for me. Amber moans and moves her hands to the hem of my shirt and lifts it, we break our kiss just long enough for her to pull my shirt over my head. She throws it to the ground and her lips are instantly back to mine. I press her to the wall with my hips so she can feel just how badly I want her, she grinds her hot pussy against my dick, forcing me to growl into her mouth and nip at her bottom lip. She gasps, as I suck her bottom lip between my teeth, and it lets out an audible pop when I release it.

“Amber?” I ask when we finally break apart.

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you one thing?” I ask running my hands over her body.

“You can ask, I might not answer.”

“What's the deal with you and all those guys in the other room, plus Bear?” I ask the question that has been on the tip of my tongue for a week.

She laughs lightly and rests her head on the wall behind her, “Honestly? I don't have a fucking clue.”

“But you sleep with all of them?” I ask, running my hands up and down her arms.

“Yeah, is that an issue for you?” she quirks an eyebrow.

“Just trying to figure out how this works is all,” I say, moving my hand across her abdomen.

“How this works is we get tonight and in the morning we pretend like this never happened, because I can’t afford to get close to you, and you don’t know when to quit. So you get me tonight, or not at all,” she says with determination. Still ready to keep me at arm’s length even while her legs are wrapped around me.

I run my hands up her middle and reach under her top, she moans when I twist her hard nipples between my thumb and forefinger. I pull her top up and off of her, the sight of her bare breasts and pierced nipples make my dick hurt with how hard I’m straining in my pants. I lean down and suck her left nipple into my mouth, while still twisting the right. The sound of Amber moaning is almost enough to make me come right now. I kiss a trail up her breasts, across her collar bone, and nip at her neck. Then I grip her ass and remove her from the wall, to carry her over to the bed.

I gently lay her down on the mattress and settle between her thighs, I start kissing my way down her body, making sure to stop at her breasts giving them the attention they deserve. When I make my way down her stomach, I stop to trail kisses along the top of her shorts, she lets out another soft moan. I reach over and undo the button of her shorts, hook my fingers into the waistband and gently pull them down her thighs. She’s wearing a black lace thong, and there is a small tattoo on her left hip.

VI.XII.MMVII

I wonder what it means, what it stands for? Maybe one day I'll get the chance to ask her.

I kiss over her tattoo, and she threads her fingers through my hair. I lick and suck her hot pussy over the lace of her thong, and she wiggles under me. She's already dripping wet. I hook my fingers through the band of her thong and remove it from her hips, then I settle my face between her legs. I lick up her wet slit and suck her clit between my teeth, and gently tug.

She moans and wiggles her hips, I grip her hips roughly with one hand to keep her in place. Then I go back to licking and sucking on her clit. Her breathing increases, and I thrust two fingers deep inside her wet pussy as she lets out a soft yell. She's gripping the bed sheets in her hands, and I curl my finger inside of her making her cry out in pleasure. Her breath quickens as the walls of her pussy start to clench around my finger, and a hot flush spreads across her torso.

"Let go, baby, come for me," I whisper against her pussy, and she does. She comes apart on my fingers, and screams my name. I continue lapping up her arousal. I don't think I could ever get tired of the taste of her on my tongue.

I reach down and unbutton my pants, hooking my fingers in the waistband and removing them with my boxers. I stand and let them drop to the floor. Amber runs her eyes down my body and bites her lip. I climb up her body and settle myself between her thighs. I bend down and take her bottom lip between my teeth, causing her to moan. Then I kiss her. I sweep my tongue inside her mouth and let her taste herself until our kisses are a mixture of whiskey and her own pleasure.

She runs her hands down my abs and I suck in a breath at the feel of her featherlight touches against my skin. She grabs

my rock-hard cock and runs her hand up. When she reaches the throbbing head, she brushes her thumb over the top, spreading a drop of precum. When she removes her hand, she brings it to her mouth and licks away the evidence of my arousal.

This girl is going to be the death of me.

I bend down and kiss her again, I reach down to steady myself at her entrance, using the head of my cock to spread her wetness around.

“Are you sure?” I whisper, giving her one more out.

“Are you?” she challenges.

In response, I thrust my cock deep inside her, causing her to cry out. I still for a moment, giving her body a chance to adjust to my size. When she starts to buck her hips again, I pull out, and thrust back inside her, going deeper than before. She reaches up and pulls me down to kiss her, and then we’re both moving our hips in sync with one another. Her body molded perfectly to mine, and her tongue sweeping inside my mouth. I moan into our kiss and Amber grabs a chunk of my hair, roughly bringing me even closer to her.

I can feel Amber’s body heating up, and the walls of her pussy tighten around my cock. I reach between us and apply pressure to her clit while rubbing small circles and thrusting deep inside her.

“More. Harder,” she whispers, and I do as I’m told, bringing her to the edge of her pleasure until she’s gasping, running her nails roughly down my back and screaming my name. My name sounds like a prayer and a curse coming out of her mouth and it’s my undoing, I lose myself inside her,

thrusting hard and deep, until I'm at the edge of my own pleasure.

When we're both sated. I collapse on the bed, rolling with Amber still in my arms so she's on top of me, and hug her to my chest. There is no way after that we're going back to how things were before, I'm never going to let her go even, if that means sharing.

It's in that moment that I finally understand the men that are sitting in the other room, having a piece of her is worth all the heartache. Having her for a moment in time is worth sharing her.

After cleaning ourselves up, we crawl naked into Amber's bed. I reach over, putting an arm around her middle and pulling her into my chest. She fills the space like the missing piece to a puzzle, *perfectly*, Amber was made for this space.

"Tell me why you decided to run the organization," I whisper into her hair, and when she stiffens in my arms, I worry I've ruined our night.

Then she relaxes, but instead of answering me she lets out a deep breath and says, "Good night, Rebel."

It doesn't take long for her to drift off into a deep sleep. I hold her close to my chest all night and hope I can keep whatever her nightmares are away.

14. HEROIN

Amber

IT'S BEEN a week since we came back from Alaska, and Rebel is still staying in the apartment, only now he's moved into my room and so has Matt. It's been surprisingly easy to get used to having him here with us, and a week free of nightmares is just one of the perks of sharing my bed with them. Each night when we crawl under the covers, Rebel and Matt worship every inch of my body until I'm thoroughly fucked and exhausted enough to go to bed at a decent time. I'm questioning why Matt and I haven't been doing this for the last five years, he of course just rolls his eyes and says because I'm a stubborn brat.

Sunlight is streaming in through the windows in my bedroom, and Rebel is wrapped around my body. We're a tangled mess of limbs, but something doesn't feel right. There is a heaviness to the air that hasn't been here all week. Then I hear a phone ring down the hall. I detangle myself from Rebel and slide out of bed without waking him up. I make my way down the hall, and see Matt standing in the kitchen with my phone to his ear and his jaw clenched.

“Yeah I'll ask her.”

“Ask me what?”

He turns to face me, and the grim expression on his face does nothing to soothe the weight in the air. “It's Bear. The dance event is at The Red Room tonight, we have to go. You're supposed to be meeting with the new set of San Francisco distributors,” he explains.

“Huh, I could have sworn that event wasn't for another month,” I question more to myself than to Matt.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Okay, well, if the guys from San Francisco are going, then we have to go. But I want Bear working double time on surveillance.”

“Okay, you got that, Bear? Good.” He hangs up the phone.

“Matt?”

“Yeah.”

“Prepare for a battle. Something doesn’t feel right about this, but we can’t back down. Actually, call Bear back and have him get in touch with the SF guys and confirm with them if they’re in on the meeting.”

“You think someone’s using their connection to drag you into the club?”

“I don’t know, but something’s wrong, I can feel it in my bones. But even if someone is using them, it’s for a reason. They want me in that club tonight, and I’m not backing down. I would just like all the info before I go on a suicide mission.”

“Who’s going on a suicide mission?” Rebel asks from the hallway.

“It’s nothing, don’t worry about it,” I say with a forced smile.

“Yeah, that’s not cutting it babe. What’s going on?”

I look to Matt for backup, but he doesn’t make any move to help me out, he just picks up my phone and calls Bear back.

“Babe? What’s happening?” Rebel asks again.

“It’s probably nothing. It’s just we have to attend a club event tonight, that Matt and I could have sworn wasn’t for another month. My new SF distributors are set to attend and

have a meeting there, but again I thought we weren't meeting again for another month. Matt is having Bear contact them directly to see if they did set this meeting for tonight or not. He's going to be running the club surveillance throughout the day to keep an eye on everyone that comes in and out. So, nothing to worry about," I pat his chest and turn back into the kitchen, but he grabs my arm and yanks me back into his chest. When he wraps his arms around my middle, and leans down to press his forehead to mine, I sigh and melt into his chest.

"Now, that I have you where you can't run away, finish telling me why this is a suicide mission," he whispers and kisses my lips.

"It's not, I was overexaggerating," I sigh.

He trails kisses down my neck and runs his hands down my back. "Tell me."

"Ugh, fine. It's really nothing, it's just something doesn't feel right. When I woke up this morning, it felt like something bad was going to happen. I just don't know if it has to do with tonight or not," I attempt to explain my reservations.

"See, was that so hard?" he laughs.

"You're a pain in my ass, you know that, Spencer?"

He slaps my ass and I let out a startled yelp, "Yeah but you like it," he smiles.

THE SURVEILLANCE for The Red Room shows all the proper vendors for the dance competition. Bear confirmed with the SF distributors that they're not scheduled for our meeting for

another month, which means tonight is a set up. One that we have no choice but to attend.

“Is it really the best idea to go tonight if you know it’s a setup?” Rebel asks as we’re getting ready for the club.

“No Reb, it’s a pretty stupid idea, but we have to go anyway. If we don’t, then we appear weak, and I can’t appear weak. So, we go, but we’re not there to party, we’re to keep our eyes out for who arranged this set up in the first place. With any luck, we’ll figure it out before we get killed.”

“You really know how to make a guy feel better, don’t you?” Rebel asks as he pulls me close to his chest for a kiss.

“If you keep doing that, we’ll never leave this room.” I smile.

“That was kind of my intention. If you don’t leave this room, then I can keep you safe... and very happy,” he whispers and kisses me again. “You know we can get the other guys to just come here and we can spend all night making sure you’re *safe* and *happy*,” he says before bringing me in for another kiss.

He really knows my weaknesses, which all involve thick cocks and sex.

I quickly pull away from him, because as much as I want to crawl into bed with Rebel and the rest of the guys, I have work to do — and the job comes first, it has to.

“Go get dressed, or you’re not coming,” I state, then turn and walk into my closet and shut the door so I can get ready without a very delicious looking distraction.

I decide on a blue off the shoulder dress, with a red lace bra underneath — that I’m hoping gets ripped off me later tonight. The dress is short enough that I can run in if needed,

but long enough that I look like the club owner and not another club slut.

I slip my gun holster onto my hip and add two .9mm. I slip into my double shoulder holster and put in two .40's. I put a knife in each boot, apply some of my signature crimson red lipstick. After a glance in my full-length mirror, I ruffle yesterday's curls and decide it will have to do.

Rebel is looking practically edible in combat boots, black jeans, and a white button up shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows.

"That's what you're wearing?" he ask me when I step out of the closet.

I look down at my outfit. "Uh, yeah, what's wrong with my outfit?" I ask and cross my arms defensively.

"I thought this was a suicide mission, not a fashion show," he says, crossing his arms too.

I smile. "Your point is?"

"Can you fight in that if we need to?"

"I can fight in anything,"

"You're mine," he practically growls, going all alpha male on me. "And I want you to be safe," he adds, releasing his arms from his chest and stepping up to me.

"She's ours," Matt chimes in from the doorway. He's wearing combat boots, dress slacks, and a red button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, he looks good enough to eat.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure you're both *mine*, and I'm also a crime lord, so I'm going to wear what I want," I shrug and kiss Rebel's lips, then twist around before he can get ahold of me and keep me in this room.

I turn and walk out of my room planting a kiss on Matt's lips as I pass him. Bear is staying at the safe house to continue to run surveillance and facial recognition on everyone that enters the club. Cage and Jameson are meeting us at The Red Room for backup.

"Let's get this over with," I say and head for the door, with both Matt and Rebel grumbling their objections to both my outfit and attending this event.

We pull up to the back alley of the club where Cage and Jameson are waiting for us, before we head inside the back door. We're immediately escorted to the VIP lounge on the upper level of the club, and the waitresses that are sporting little more than lingerie start bringing out thousand dollar bottles of champagne that no one in our party will drink.

Bear has been texting Matt, Cage and Jameson keeping them updated on club patrons that we may need to watch out for.

It doesn't take long before the dance competition is underway. We can hide out in the VIP area until it's over, then I'll head to the main stage to announce the winner. That will be when we need to be the most alert, when I'll be out in the open and a prime target. We still don't know who set this up or why, and I really wish I could narrow down the list.

As I'm getting ready to head onto the main stage to announce the winner, all of my guys are on edge, but this is one of those stupid prideful things I have to do in order to show whoever set this up that I will not be intimidated.

The placement announcement goes off without a hitch, and the prizes are handed out. Rebel meets me off to the side of the stage as I make my way into the crowd, he pulls me onto the dance floor.

“Do you think this was just set up to watch you? To see what you would do?” he yells just above the music.

“Maybe, it might have also just been an error in the dance scheduling,” I shrug, and turn to grind my ass against his front, as his hands wrap around my waist and pulls me closer to him. I feel my phone go off and pull it to check my messages.

BEAR: MM-SSE-PC45

The text from Bear immediately has me on edge, it’s a coded message informing me that one of the hitmen who accepted the contract for me just entered through the south exit, and he’s carrying.

I turn around and pull Rebel down to talk into his ear. “Are you packing?”

“What?” he asks, confused.

“A gun, Reb, are you armed?”

He looks at me and his eyes widen when he sees this isn’t a drill. “No.”

I grab his hand and move it into my jacket, while we keep moving to the beat, when his hand is resting on the .40 in my holster, I look at him and nod. I move closer to his chest. He grabs the gun and moves it to his pants. I turn around and look up to our VIP seating area to see Matt, Cage and Jameson looking at us. I nod letting them know I got the message, and I see Matt tilt his head slightly letting me know the hitman is on the move towards us. We start to make our way off the dancefloor, while the guys make their way out of the VIP lounge to meet us at the back door. With any luck, we can all get out of here unharmed, and without having to light up the club.

Once we're all together again, we head for the rear entrance where our SUVs are parked, but we're not fast enough.

Before I can register what's happening, Matt is moving to block my back, Cage raises his .40 and shoots, but he's too late. Matt takes the bullet meant for me and falls to the ground. Jameson and Cage are picking Matt up and pulling him outside while Rebel scoops me up and heads for the car. Jameson and Cage get Matt into one of the waiting SUVs and immediately take off while Rebel and I get into the other and head out of the alleyway and towards my apartment.

I can't think.

Matt.

Matty took a bullet meant for me.

My Matty.

Once again I ruined another life.

I'm numb as Rebel pulls into my underground parking at my apartment. He opens my door and takes my hand to lead me to the private elevator that will take us to my penthouse apartment. The apartment I shared with Matty. My Matty who took a bullet.

A bullet meant for me.

We make it into my apartment, and I feel numb and cold. Like the air surrounding me is that of the arctic winds. I can't think straight. All I can think about is Matt taking a bullet that was meant for me. I haven't heard from anyone since we took off. That's the rule though, go dark, no contact. I just need to know if Matt is okay. I pull out my phone and dial Bear's number, but I can't press send, I can't break my own rules.

I've already broken enough of my rules in the last few weeks and look what happened. I can't keep doing this.

I delete Bear's number off my screen, and pull up flight information as Rebel sits on the other couch staring at me. I book the first flight to Vegas for tomorrow morning, then I head into my bedroom to pack his things, leaving him sitting on the couch in the living room alone.

He doesn't follow me in here, he senses that I need space but the truth is I want him close. I want him, Matt, Bear, Cage, and Jameson all here with me tonight. I want to take them all and run away with them, never looking back here. Dragging them away from this life and the dangers for good.

But the problem is, I am the danger.

IT'S seven in the morning when Rebel comes out of the bedroom and sees the suitcases piled by the door.

"Are we going somewhere?" he asks on a yawn.

"You are," I tell him. He freezes in the hallway looking between the suitcases and me.

"You better get dressed, your flight leaves in two hours, and the car will be here to get you within the hour."

"Look, Amber, I know last night was tough, but that doesn't mean you have to kick me out. I can help you," he tries to reason with me, but it's too late.

"That's the thing, Rebel, I don't want your help. You *will* be getting in the car when it comes here, and you *will* be going back to Vegas. After today you *will* stay away from me. This,"

I gesture between us, “whatever this was, isn’t anymore, okay? So just go home.”

“No, not ‘okay’, you can’t pretend you don’t feel the same way I do. Amber, I love you,” he pleads, moving across the room to get closer to me. I take a few steps back keeping the distance between us.

“No, you don’t, Rebel, you love the idea of me, I’m just your chance to get all the crazy out of your system before you leave the game, I know you want out. I know the only reason you’ve stayed this long is to help your mother. When she’s gone you will be too. It’s better that you leave me now before I get you killed. This isn’t a negotiation, Rebel, this is an order. Don’t make me repeat it.”

“Amber, I love you, what can’t you accept about that? Why do you push everyone away from you?”

“Well, I don’t love you. I told you nothing was going to change, but I let you stay longer than I should have. You can go now, there is nothing left between us. It was purely physical anyway,” I tell him, as there’s a knock at the door, I walk over and it’s the driver of the car service I ordered Rebel.

“These are the bags that need to go,” I tell him and hand him a fifty dollar bill from my side table by the door.

“Go get dressed, Rebel, your ride is here,” I order Rebel before turning back to the driver, “He will be down in just a moment.”

“Amber...”

“Now, Rebel, or I will shoot both your legs and have someone carry you down to the car,” I tell him and head down the hall.

I go straight for the bathroom and lock the door. Stripping out of my clothes I climb into a scalding hot shower, and I cry. I cry for Matt and Rebel, in one night I lost them both.

15. HALLUCINOGENS

Rebel

FOUR WEEKS Later

Vegas

You can be prepared for loss in every sense of the word, but when it comes it'll still hit you like a train in the center of your chest. I knew this day would come, and that we didn't have much time, but that does nothing to calm me. I rub at my chest as if I can remove the aching in my heart, but I know it's no use. I pick up my phone, and stare mindlessly at the screen, I know I shouldn't call her. She's made it perfectly clear that she wants nothing to do with me, she hasn't responded to a single text or call since the morning after the club shooting.

She sent me packing, but right now that doesn't matter; I need her. I need her here by my side, I need her blunt attitude. I need one person to tell me how it is, without sugar coating it. If she was here, she'd probably tell me to quit whining like a little bitch and get back to work. She just has a way with words.

I dial her number expecting her to send me to her voicemail, so when she answers on the second ring, I don't know what to say.

"Rebel? Reb, are you there?" she asks, but it comes out breathy like she's running.

"Yeah, I'm here... Amber, Amber she's..." I can't say it. I can't get the words out, they're stuck in my throat like thick honey.

"I know, Reb, I'm on my way," she replies softly, her voice is almost a whisper, or I can't hear her clearly through the blood rushing in my ears. Did she just say she was on her way? On her way where? She couldn't possibly be coming here, not to see me.

“Are you coming here?” I question not understanding what she’s telling me.

“Yes, Reb. I’m coming to you, I’ll be there in an hour. Stay where you are,” she demands, and I smile at the orders coming from the women I love. Yeah, I love this tiny demanding crime lord that doesn’t ask, but demands for shit she wants. That’s exactly who I need right now.

I sit in a chair in the hallway outside the room my mother just died in, waiting for the woman I love to come rescue me from myself. The longer it takes her to get here the more I feel myself wanting to slip into the darkness.

Then she’s here, in front of me, a flash of tattoos, dark hair, and bright green eyes.

“Reb? Reb, snap the fuck out of it!” I can’t help but smile, there’s my demanding little pixie.

“Amber? You came. Why did you come? How did you know?” I pause. “You knew before I even called, didn’t you? How? Amber, how did you know?” A million questions fly out of my mouth before I can even take another breath.

She reaches her small hands out to cup my face. She bends and rests her forehead to mine, and I take what feels like my first breath, the air burning my lungs.

“Shh, Reb, I’m here. I’m here for you. What do you need?” she purrs in my ear, and I can’t help it, I reach out for her like she’s my anchor in a storm, grounding me to the here and now.

I grab her waist and pull her down to sit in my lap. I wrap my large arms around her tiny frame and hold onto her, worried that if I’m not touching her, she won’t really be here. “Baby, I just need you.”

After a few moments like that I finally take a moment to look around and I'm surprised when I don't see any of the guys lurking in a corner, lucky bastards are never too far away from my girl.

My girl? Yeah, my girl, cause even if she never admits it, she's mine.

She's been mine since the moment she shot me.

"They're waiting at the hotel." She always seems to know exactly what I'm thinking.

I look back at her and laugh. "I knew they wouldn't stay away from you."

"When was the last time you ate?"

"I don't know, but I'm not very hungry."

"Yeah, that wasn't what I asked. Come on, let's go get some food and head to the hotel. Do you need to sign any paperwork, or anything?"

"I'm not sure, the nurses haven't said anything to me since the doctor called time of death. Amber my dad hasn't even shown his fucking face here," I growl, growing angrier by the second.

"Stay here. I'll be right back."

Reluctantly I release her, and she gets off my lap, and makes her way over to the nurse's station. I can see her speaking to them, but can't tell what they're saying. A nurse hands her a clipboard and a pen, and she starts reading over the forms and signing them. Then she hands everything back to the nurse and walks over to me. She grabs my hand and pulls me from my chair. Once I'm up she doesn't make a move to let go of my hand, she just leads me down the hall to the

bank of elevators. Despite our vast differences in size I lean into her as we walk, stealing a little bit of her strength and power with every touch.

Once we're outside the hospital she still doesn't let go of my hand, she just gives me a gentle squeeze and leads me over to a black SUV, she opens the back door and gestures for me to get inside, I'm not strong enough to refuse so I do as I'm told. She climbs in with me, and that's when I look up to see Jameson in the driver's seat.

"Take us to the hotel, Jameson, then I'll need you to run some errands," she tells him softly.

"Yes ma'am," he responds.

It amazes me they can work for Amber and take her orders like they mean nothing to her, but also share her bed. They each love her. I can see it in the way they steal small glances. I know how they feel because I feel the same way. Maybe they just realized the same thing I did, having her anyway you can will always be better than not having her at all.

We drive in silence to her hotel, and I lean my head on her shoulder for the whole drive. Once Jameson drops us off at the front and we get out, he promptly leaves to go fill the errands Amber gave him. She once again grabs my hand to lead me to her room. I don't think I'll ever get tired of the feel of her hand in mine.

Once in her hotel room, I note one large king size bed in the center of the room, and a single backpack off to the corner.

"How long are you staying?" I ask her, she looks at the backpack and sighs.

"Not long, we have to get back."

"I see," I say quietly.

“I’m here now. Jameson is going to get you clothes, supplies, and dinner so we don’t have to leave. You’re staying here. With me,” she says.

I let out a heavy sigh and sit down on the bed. I rest my elbows on my knees and hang my head in my hands. I’m just so damn tired.

Amber comes over and stands between my legs. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close while resting my head on her stomach.

She places her arms around my neck and I barely hear her whisper, “Tell me what you need, Reb.”

“I need you to make the pain go away. Can you do that, baby? Can you make it go away?”

She lets out a breath that tells me the weight on her shoulders is greater than I ever imagined. “No, Reb I can’t make the pain go away. You don’t really want it to go away, pain means you’re alive. You survived, Reb, and you’re here. I know right now it doesn’t seem like a good thing, it hurts to breathe, and it’ll hurt to get out of bed. It’ll hurt to move on, guilt will weigh you down, because you survived, and she didn’t. But you need to honor her memories by living your life. Live your life for yourself and become the person you want to be. Don’t block out the pain, Reb, embrace it,” she tries to hide her own pain in her voice but it’s unmistakable.

“Who did you lose, baby? I can hear it when you talk, you lost someone important, was it Dylan? Will you tell me about him?” she instantly stills in my arms, and her spine goes rigid, and when she sucks in a deep breath I look into her bright green eyes and see the pain she carries inside herself. She has a faraway look, like she’s remembering a trauma that’s ingrained in her soul.

“Another time, Reb. Another time,” after the words leave her plump lips she bends down to whisper in my ear. “I can’t make the pain go away, but I can make you forget for a little while,” then she nips at my lobe and kisses a trail down my neck.

I pull her into my lap so she’s straddling my thighs. I slowly run my hands down her back and grip her ass to pull her closer to my chest. I want her so much. I want her to make me forget about the pain in my chest. I want her to make me forget that my father is a piece of shit who couldn’t even say goodbye to his dying wife. I want her to make me forget that after this is over, she’s leaving again. I want to hold her in my arms and lose myself inside her. I want to pull from her strength and power. I want to forget for a second that she’s the Kali Queen. For a little while I just want her to be my girl, my love, my world.

Tonight isn’t perfect. Tonight I lost my mother, the one woman who’s always been a constant well of strength in my life. I lost one strong woman to gain another. I lost my mother, but now I have Amber. Even if it’s just for tonight, I’m going to make the most of my time with her, because I know in the morning, I’m going to have to let her go, *again*.

I tilt my head up and kiss Amber. She parts her lips and I sweep my tongue into her mouth until she lets out a soft moan; I’ve missed that sound. I grip her hips and slide her up my lap so her pussy grinds on my dick, and she can feel exactly what I need from her.

Moaning into my mouth, she threads her fingers through my hair and pulls my head back, breaking our kiss and exposing my neck to her. She trails kisses down my neck, nipping and sucking her way down.

I reach for the hem of her shirt and pull it over her head, exposing her breasts in a lace bra, before unhooking and slipping it off her shoulders. I lean forward and run my tongue up the valley of her breast, making her shudder with pleasure.

She tugs at the hem of my shirt and pulls it off. I grab her waist and flip her so she's laying on her back on the mattress. I roughly yank her pants down her thighs, taking her underwear with them. She loosens the button of my pants, and I pull them down, kicking them to the side before climbing on top of her and settling between her thighs. I lean forward and roughly kiss her mouth. I need her like I need air.

Without warning, I shove deep inside her and hold her tightly as I thrust in and out of her tight pussy. She's slick with her arousal, and moaning as I roughly fuck her.

"Yes," she moans, and I steal another kiss from her mouth.

I roughly fuck her, punishing her for leaving me, for causing me so much pain. I need to punish her for the ache in my chest. I want her to take away my pain, but I also want her to know how badly she hurt me.

She bites my lower lip so hard I can taste my own blood, but I don't care, I need her. Before I realize it, she's coming and moaning my name into our kiss, and I let go, moaning her name and gripping her hips tightly. I collapse on top of her, breathing heavily. I'm sexually sated, but feel like a complete asshole for using Amber.

"I'm sorry," I whisper and kiss her softly, regretting that that is the way I decide to take her after we have been apart for so long. I should have worshiped her body like she deserves, instead I punished her for doing what she thought would protect me.

“Don’t be,” she replies with a smile.

I hug her close to me and drift off to sleep with Amber resting in my arms.

WHEN I WAKE, I hear the shower running, and take in the room. There’s take out containers on the table in the corner, and a couple of bags with clothing store logos on them. I get up and inspect the bags pulling out a pair of boxers. I guess Jameson stopped by with dinner and supplies while I was asleep.

I hear the shower turn off while I’m inspecting the contents of our dinner, sushi, like what we had at her apartment. That feels like a lifetime ago, so much has happened since then.

When I turn around, Amber is standing in the doorway with a large white towel wrapped around her body, and another wrapped around her hair. She has a lazy smile on her face that I wish I could see more of.

“Hey, you, sleep ok?” she asks.

“Yeah you?”

She shrugs, “I didn’t sleep much.”

She makes her way over to her back pack, pulling out a pair of underwear and an oversized t-shirt. She strips the towel from her body, and I feel my breath leave my lungs like I was just hit in the center of my chest. *Bruises*. She has dark purple bruises on her hips, thighs, and ass from where I gripped her. I did that to her, I caused that. She slips on her underwear, but

before she can put her shirt on, I walk over and run my hand across the darkest bruise.

“I’m so sorry, Amber, I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I whisper.

She grabs my hand, and brings it to her lips to place a light kiss on the inside of my wrist. “You didn’t.” She glances at my chest. “What’s this?” she asks as she traces her fingers across the new tattoo over my heart, a queen’s crown with blood dripping from it. Her mark, over my heart.

I smile. “I got it after you kicked me out of your borders and forced me to come home.”

“I kicked you out for your own good, and if I hadn’t you wouldn’t have been here for your mom, so don’t start with me.”

For the rest of the night we eat sushi and watch TV in bed. I hold Amber in my arms and kiss every inch of her. I worship her body like she deserves and make her moan and scream my name three more times.

When we finally fall asleep, she’s tucked safely in my arms.

When I wake up in the morning she’s *gone*.

16. GHB

Amber

IT'S five thirty in the morning when I meet Matt and Jameson in the hotel lobby. Leaving Rebel was one of the hardest things I've had to do, but I know I can't stay. I'm still a danger to him, and it's my job to protect him, even if he doesn't like it.

"Bear has intel you need to see," Matt tells me.

"Okay, is the jet ready? We can go over everything on the flight back," I reply, fighting a yawn.

"Yeah, we're all set, but we should get going," Matt tells me, "are you sure you want to leave him?"

"You know I have to."

"You don't have to do anything, Amber, you can do whatever you want to do. You are choosing to leave him behind."

"Drop it, Matt. This conversation is over, and this is the last I want to hear about Rebel Spencer. We're done." He clenches his jaw closed and I can see that he is itching to tell me off, but he doesn't.

By the time we make it to the airfield and board the jet Bear is video calling. "What's the new intel, Bear?"

"You know how I'm still tracking the Spencer operation?" he asks.

"Yeah, you can back off of them. They're not going to do anything else stupid," I say.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, doll face."

"What do you mean?"

“Well last night while you were at the hospital with Rebel, your father was meeting with his father. I’m guessing that’s why he didn’t make it to say goodbye to his wife.”

“Wait. *What?* You mean to tell me that my father was meeting with Mr. Spencer? About what? Where did they meet, Vegas or California?”

“The meeting was at the Spencer fight arena in Vegas, your dad is still in Vegas”

“Stay on him, Bear, I don’t want him to as so much as light a cigar without me knowing about it. And keep eyes on Mr. Spencer, and anyone he employs. I want to know everyone’s moves at all times.”

“There is one more thing,” he says, sounding wary to tell me the newest piece of intel.

“What,” I sigh.

“I traced the hit order back to the original IP address.”

“Spit it out, Bear, who do I have to kill?” I growl.

“It came back to the server at The Kali Lounge,” he says.

He put a hit on me — that I really didn’t see coming — it makes sense though. I’ve been pushing him out, and pushing his buttons at every turn. He can’t kill me himself, that would cause an uproar with all my connections. But a semi untraceable hit on me, could have come from anyone, if he played his cards right, he could have recovered the whole organization for himself.

I still don’t understand what any of this has to do with meeting Mr. Spencer, unless...

“Matty, you don’t think...” I can’t even finish my thought. Is Rebel in on this? Have they been planning this since the

start? Since LA? Did my father plan this whole thing, right down to Rebel getting close to me?

“Amber, stop, he wouldn’t do that. He’s one of the good guys,” Matt whispers, because he knows exactly where my mind is going. “He loves you, that’s clear to everyone but you.”

Everything felt real, but that’s what makes my father a master manipulator, you never quite know where you stand or what’s real. Could Rebel be the same way? Could he have fooled me this whole time? Could he have fooled all of us?

“Amber...” Matt whispers and reaches to grab my hand.

“Doll, I doubt he had anything to do with this,” Bear says on the other line of the video call.

“How do you guys know that for sure? Does no one else see this as suspicions? I shoot him, and threaten his life in Oregon, but he just happens to call me for entry into California days after my father nearly beats me to death? Then comes to see that I’m okay? Would you guys check in on the bitch that shot you? The only reason I’m paying someone a visit who put a bullet through me is to put them to ground, but he comes to make sure I’m okay? He doesn’t even fucking know me. If anything, he should have been happy to hear that I was blacked out after a beating, but he comes and acts like he fucking cares?”

“Amber, you need to stop,” Matt commands.

“No, I fucking don’t!” I yell, my chest heaving as all the different ways my father could have had a hand in this runs through my mind.

“Amber,” Jameson starts, moving across the jet to kneel in front of me. He rests his hands on my thighs and calmly runs

soothing circles over my pants.

That's the thing about Jameson, he has a way of calming me down when I can't seem to turn everything off.

"I'm going to be real here because you can't shoot me on the plane," he starts and I sink further into the couch, "I don't think Rebel had anything to do with whatever your father is doing. But Babe? I will remove his head from his body, and box it up for you like a fucking Christmas present if we find out he is involved. I don't care if all he did was loan your father a pen. Got it?" he asks and I slowly nod my head, "Amber you don't need to say it back, I have never needed that from you, but I need you to know that I love you with everything I have to give, and I will always put you first. Do you get that, Babe?"

"Yeah, I get it," I sigh, and wish I could say it back to him. He deserves it, they all do, but I don't know that I will ever have it in me to give them what they deserve. One day they will all get sick of me, and one by one they will leave and I will be alone again, then maybe I will finally get what I deserve.

"Good," he smirks before planting a kiss on my lips and moving back to the other side of the jet.

We're silent for the rest of the flight back, but I can't turn my brain off. Matt and Jameson keep staring at me, trying to find a way to convince me that Rebel isn't involved in this, but I can't help where my brain is taking me. I can't get the idea of him using and manipulating me out of my head

DESPITE A WEEK of Bear running surveillance on the Spencer operation, we're still no closer to uncovering the purpose of Mr. Spencer and my father's meeting, or any evidence of Rebel's involvement, or lack of.

The guys have spent every moment countering my thoughts on Rebel being a part of the manipulation, but I can't get the thoughts out of my head. He called me non-stop the days following us leaving Vegas. When he realized I wouldn't be answering the phone, he started calling the guys.

"You have to stop calling man, she just needs some time," I hear Cage whisper into the phone.

"Hang up," I order.

"Boss I was just—"

"I said hang the fuck up, Cage."

"I gotta go, man, just give her time,"

"No, don't give her time, fucking stop calling!" I yell before he can hang up.

"Boss, I really think he didn't have anything to do with whatever is going on, dude wouldn't keep calling if he did. They would move onto whatever their next step is," Cage tries to explain.

"At this point Cage, whether he's involved or not doesn't really matter. If he's involved I'll kill him. If he's not, then he has to stay away in order to stay alive." I counter.

17. DMT

Amber

THE CALL COMES in at six in the morning, two weeks after we left Rebel in Vegas. Two weeks of surveillance tracking. Two weeks of looking for any possible connection my father has with John Spencer. Two weeks of not finding a single fucking lead.

“He’s missing.”

Two little words holding more power than I realized was possible. Two little words and my world is tipped upside down.

“What are you talking about, Bear?”

“Rebel is missing, Amber. One minute I was watching the camera system inside their club, the next thing I know the system goes dark, and when it comes back on he’s just gone. The place was a mess. Tables turned over, broken chairs, something went down. His phone is off or smashed so I can’t trace it. His car low jack still places him at the club, so he didn’t leave in his own car.”

“What about his father? Where is *my* father?” I ask.

“John Spencer is at his home in Vegas. He hasn’t gone to the club since Rebel was taken, and I’m not sure if he knows he’s missing yet or not. Your father’s gone dark, which isn’t unusual for him.”

“Charter the jet, Bear. It’s time I have a chat with John Spencer, I want wheels up within the hour no exceptions,” I growl.

“Matt, lets fucking move. We’re going back to motherfucking Vegas,” I yell as I hang up the phone.

Matt and I waste no time grabbing our go bags and heading towards the airfield. He calls Cage and Jameson to let them know they're to handle any issues regarding our regular dealings.

On the plane, my brain is going a million miles an hour, but the question at the front of my brain is, is this another set up? And if it is, do I really care?

No, I really fucking don't. I was always meant to go down in a hail storm of bullets anyway.

When we arrive in Vegas, Bear informs us John Spencer is still at his estate and we head straight there. His security is seriously lacking, and we walk right onto his property. I nod at Matt and he wastes no time kicking down this asshole's front door, I'm fucking done playing nice here.

"Oh, Mr. Spencer I think it's time we have another chat..." I holler loudly down his hallway, and I see him peek his head out of a doorway.

"Uhh, Amber, nice to see you again? What can I do for you today?"

I walk down the hallway with Matt at my back, and without warning land a perfect right hook to his jaw.

"My fucking name is, Kali Queen, and if you want to make it out of this room alive you will show me the respect I have earned. And you will answer all my questions without hesitation. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, ma'am, Kali Queen I understand," he stutters and nods his head.

"Good, now, first fucking question. What were you doing meeting with my father when your wife was dying in the hospital and your son was a wreck?"

“I, uhh, I wasn’t meeting with your father. I’ve never met him,” he lies.

I pull out my gun and shoot his right knee cap causing him to collapse to the ground, “Fucking try again,” I say as he screams in pain and I smile. It’s been too long since I shot a Spencer.

“He...he came to me. He wanted to know about you and my son. I told him I didn’t know anything. I had no idea that Rebel had been in California with you. Sometimes he just takes off for a while, he’s always done that, and never tells me where he is. He tells his mother, but she always kept his secrets for him,” he cries.

“Why was my father asking about us?”

“I have no idea! He didn’t say. After he asked me what I knew and realized I didn’t know a damn thing, he paid me to keep the information of our meeting a secret, even from Rebel. So, I never told him, how did you find out?”

“I’ve had you under surveillance for months,” I say with a shrug. “Do you know where your son is now?”

“I don’t know, probably at his apartment. He hasn’t spoken to me since his mother died.”

“You don’t know that he’s missing?” I say with a false calm tone.

“What? Missing? No, he’s not missing, he’s probably just binge drinking, he’ll snap out of it and rejoin the land of the living soon. He is just upset about his mother’s passing.”

“No, mother fucker, he was taken from your club last night. And now he’s fucking missing!” I yell, then shoot him in the foot.

“What the fuck was that for?! I’ve answered everything!”
he yells between cries.

“That was for being a piece of shit father! What kind of parent doesn’t know when their child is missing, you ignorant twat!” I yell, then turn around and storm out.

“We just going to leave him here?” Matt asks, nodding to the Spencer on the ground crying out in pain like a little bitch.

“Yeah, if the fucker can crawl to a phone, he can call for help, and if he can’t then he can lay there and bleed until someone finds him or he dies. I don’t give a shit.”

“Okay. What’s next?”

“We fucking find Rebel,”

Rebel

When I wake up, I'm tied to a chair, in what looks to be a back room of a club. There is blood dripping from my nose, and my right eye is swollen shut. I'm not sure where I am exactly, or how long I've been out. Back at the club in Vegas, someone cut the power and a group of guys jumped me in the dark. I fought back until someone hit me over the head and I blacked out.

"Oh, good you're awake. The boys really did a number on you, but you held your own for some time so there's that," comes a voice and I take a minute to look around the room. There is a man to my right pouring himself a drink. Something's familiar about him, but I can't quite place where I know him from, or if he just reminds me of someone.

"Why am I here?" I croak out, my voice is hoarse and my throat is raw from disuse.

"Because I need to teach my daughter a lesson, it seems she forgot the first one," he says and smiles.

Daughter? Oh, fuck, Amber? This must be Andrew Kane.

"Your daughter wants nothing to do with me, so you're wasting your time with whatever you have planned."

He shrugs, "Oh, come on now, son, we both know that isn't true. If it was, she wouldn't have gone looking for you as soon as I had my men take you."

Amber went looking for me?

"Now, you see here's the thing, my daughter is very good at what she does, but she also has a fucking attitude that I need to correct. Beating her senseless only seems to worsen her

attitude. While she still seems to be able to get her job done, she doesn't like to listen to me, and I just can't have that. I mean my own daughter not respecting me is just asking for my men to do the same and well, respect equals power in this business. Amber has taken my power and I want it back."

"So, then what's your plan? Going to send Amber a picture or video of me here, going to kill me first?" I ask.

"No need son, Amber found out you were here as soon as I had you brought in. Her little friend Bear is very good at informing her of, well everything. So, I rarely have to do much more then show the fuck up," he smirks.

I hear a commotion out in the hall, and pray it isn't Amber walking into this sick trap. I hear the door open behind me and I don't even have to turn to see who it is, I can sense it's her.

"Now, father, we talked about you learning to play nice with others, but it looks like you forgot how to do that. Shall I teach you again? Lesson one: don't tie people up, unless they ask for it, but that is a whole other topic," she says in a melodic singsong voice.

I see her, out of the corner of my eye, walk over to the wet bar in the corner and pour a drink. I don't hear anything out in the hall, and I wonder what she did to clear the building so quickly.

"What is this all about, father? I really don't have the time for your games."

"No games, Amber, just a lesson that I think you need to *relearn*. After the first time you did so well, I mean look where you are now. You're the Queen, but unfortunately it seems you have forgotten who your King is," he says.

“I have no use for any Kings,” she says with a bored wave of her hand.

“Then why are you here my dear?” he asks.

She walks over to his desk, leans into his face and whispers, “To end you of course,” then smirks and stands, she turns to place her glass down on the bar.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart,” her father says, and I see him reach for his gun, but Amber is anticipating the move and is quicker.

Amber quickly pulls a gun from her holster, lifts it and fires, sending a bullet through her father’s hand. He drops his gun and clutches the bloody hole in his hand. She casually walks over, kicks his gun away and plucks the other from his holster. Then she raises her gun and levels with his head.

“Learn a new trick, Father, that one is tired,” she says, as if he pulled a coin from behind her ear.

“You finally going to be able to pull the trigger?” he asks through clenched teeth.

“Yes.”

“You know, it took you longer than I thought it would, but I always knew you’d be the one to put me to ground, are you going to bury me next to him, Amber?” he asks with a sadistic smile, and Amber flushes with anger.

“You don’t even deserve a grave, you’re going to be shark food.”

“You know, Amber, I did you a favor, he would have left you eventually. Once he saw what a monster you really are.”

“I’m a monster because of what you did! You took him from me! You made me into this!” she yells.

“No, sweetheart, you were a monster long before I forced your hand. You’ve spent too many years blaming me for your actions. It’s time you step up. You, Amber Kane, are a monster, and you always will be, no matter what you tell yourself to sleep at night, at the end of the day the lives you have taken are because you choose to take them. I stopped ordering you around a long time ago and it’s time you face the truth. You are evil at your core, Amber, and this one?” he nods towards me, “in the end he’ll leave you too. Right now, he has this illusion that under all the bravado you’re a good person, that he can *save* you. He thinks you’re worth saving, but you’re not. No one can save you, there is nothing good left to save. When I told you that you could never leave, I wasn’t saying that because I was going to keep you, I told you that because it’s the truth. You can’t leave this life; it’s who you are at the core of your being, Amber, a cold-blooded killer and you can never be anything else.”

“That may be true, father, but you’re wrong about one thing. I accepted myself a long time ago, I feel nothing anymore. No remorse. No fear. No love. No pain. Not even hate. I should hate you for what you did, but I feel nothing. And after tonight I will still feel nothing.”

She pulls the trigger, and shoots her father in the head.

His chair rocks back and crashes to the ground. She tosses the gun on top of his still warm body as the blood pools around him and walks out of the room.

“Release, Rebel, and take father to the docks,” she commands, as two men I’ve never seen before enter the room, they cut me loose, then they lift Mr. Kane’s body and walk out like this is just another day.

We load into Amber's waiting SUV and drive in silence to the docks. When we pull into a parking spot, I reach for Amber's hand, but she pulls hers away and exits the car. There is nothing to do but follow her. I see the two men from the club carrying her father's body down to a boat at the end of the dock.

"This is who I am, Rebel."

"You're so much more than this, baby," I whisper, and she lets out an exasperated sigh.

"Rebel, I know you want to see the good in me, but the truth is there is so little good left that I'm not sure even God himself could find it. My father did a lot of awful things in his life, but I've done more. It might have been his actions that pushed me into who I am, but I choose to remain that person. I like who I am. I don't show mercy when I could, simply because I don't care to. I'm not ruthless because this is a competitive business, I'm ruthless because I like to be. I'm not worth saving, Reb, so if that's why you're here, because you think you can save me? I need you to walk away now, because you can't save someone that doesn't want to be saved."

"I want to stay, Amber, and not because I want to save you — I just want you. If that means you're going to continue with this path then I will stand by you. All I ask is that you allow me to decide who I want to become. I won't promise that I can take a life outside of a life or death situation, I don't know if I can do that. But I promise to love you as long as you let me, no matter what you do. I will love every side of you." I tell her.

She stands there for a moment, looking out at the dark waters, then starts to walk down to the waiting boat.

“Come on, Rebel, we’re not done,” she calls to me, and I follow my girl, because I would follow her into hell and pull her back out.

We load into the boat, and take off out of the marina, deep into the Pacific ocean. We must drive in silence for two hours. I can’t speak because I don’t know what to say. I’m not sure what she needs to hear right now.

When she stops the boat, she makes her way to the back where her father’s weighted body is and pushes him into the ocean. She sits down on the back of the boat and stares out into the dark water. I walk over and sit beside her, just waiting for her to speak.

“I don’t feel anything, Rebel. I think I should feel something, shouldn’t I? Even after everything he was still my father,” she says into the dark night.

“I don’t think there is any right or wrong way to feel,” I whisper.

She gets up and grabs a bucket filled with water and dumps it onto the deck boards to wash away the blood. I watch as the water that’s now tinged red, flows over the side of the boat and into the ocean.

“I’m going to shower below deck, and then we can talk,” she says and leaves me alone with nothing but the stars, and thoughts of my Queen.

WHEN AMBER finally emerges from below deck, she’s freshly showered and has changed her clothes. She walks over to the bench seat, opens it and pulls out a few blankets. She gestures

for me to sit, when I do, I reach my hand out for her and she takes it. I pull her down into my lap and drape a blanket around us. She wiggles deeper into my embrace, and for a moment we're both silent while I hold her. I know whatever she's about to tell me, could break us. This could be our last night together, and I'm not ready to lose her yet.

So, I stay silent.

When she lets out a deep breath, I kiss the top of her head, "I'm ready whenever you are, baby, but we don't have to do this right now if you don't want to," I say softly.

"I'll never be ready, but this has to be said," she whispers.

"When I was little, I thought my dad ran the world. He was my idol and I always wanted to be just like him. Until I realized who he really was. When I was six, I saw him murder a man, and when I was ten I was helping him bury bodies in the woods behind The Kali Club. Every night I would go to bed and dream of being a normal kid, with friends that I went to the movies with, but I didn't have any friends. Until Dylan's family moved in next door when we were fourteen. From the first day we were always together," she smiles remembering Dylan, and I squeeze her gently.

"When we were fifteen, we lost our virginity together on a night after I helped slaughter a couple who had reported '*suspicious activity*'. We weren't even going to get pinned with anything, the cop that took their report was on our payroll. They weren't my first kills, but they were the first people I killed that I felt hadn't actually done anything to deserve dying for. They weren't junkies that couldn't pay, or distributors that were skimming money, or even a rival group. They were just innocent people that saw some shadows in the

woods behind their house one night. They didn't deserve what we did to them."

I reach under the blanket to hold her hand and run my thumb across the back of her hand, trying to sooth her.

"That night I climbed into Dylan's window and he was so scared when he saw all the blood, but it was because he thought I was hurt. Even when he found out what I had done he wasn't scared of me, he comforted me. Here I was a murderer, and he was trying to make me feel better. That was our first night being together, and I told him everything. After that he was determined to get me out of this life. He had it all worked out, we'd leave after graduation and never come back. We would change our names, and we could be together. Then my father found out. I still don't know how, but it doesn't really matter, knowing how wouldn't change what happened," I reach my hand out to lift her chin to face me, and kiss her softly on the lips.

"When we were fifteen, Dylan swore he was going to marry me one day. Sometimes I still think about what could have been. Would we have been able to leave? Would we have gotten married and had a house full of babies?" she sighs and shakes away the thoughts from her mind, "Anyway, my father had found out and brought him to the club one night, I was coming back from a job and stopped at the club. At first, I didn't know why Dylan was there, I thought maybe he had come looking for me. I wasn't sure how much my father knew about us, so when he started asking me about how my job had done, I tried to ignore Dylan being there and vaguely answer my father. Looking back, I should have known what was going on, I should have gotten Dylan out of that room as soon as I saw him, but I didn't think even my father was capable of that level of evil."

A tear slips down her cheek and I bend my head to kiss it away before it can fall.

She's silent for a long moment, and I can see in her eyes she's reliving the pain of whatever happened that night.

"What happened, baby? What did he do," I ask quietly.

"He shot him in front of me."

I suck in a deep breath. So that's what he had planned for me tonight, Dylan was the lesson he was referring to.

"He shot him and made me bury him behind the club. That's why I went into the business. Without Dylan I couldn't get out on my own. I wouldn't have survived alone, but the problem is I've been surviving alone for the last ten years. That's why I don't have friends or relationships. That's why the only evidence of loyalty Matty, Bear, Cage and Jameson display are their queen tattoos. That's why each tattoo is unique, crowns aren't uncommon as a tattoo, and we figured as long as they were different enough no one would tie them back to me. It's why I pushed you to stay away, I couldn't let him take you from me the way he took Dylan," she whispers and hugs me close to her.

I hug her back. "It's all over now, baby, we don't have to worry anymore. He was keeping you here but now he's gone, and you can leave, we can start our own life together, all of us."

She lets out a humorless laugh, "I can't leave, Reb. Even with him gone, this isn't the type of life I can just walk out on. The cartels, the Irish, the customers, they would all hunt us down. I'm stuck in this life, because I didn't leave when I could have, when no one knew my name. But now? Now, I'll die in this life, but it's my choice whether I die in sixty years,

or six months. Personally, I would rather have sixty more years with you guys, running guns and coke, then six months running for our lives. That is if you still want me?"

I smile, she doesn't realize I could never let her go, "I will spend the rest of my life, no matter how long that is making you happy. I will run from drug lords and gun runners for six months and die holding your hands in a storm of bullets, or I will die holding your hand in sixty years on our front porch rocking chairs. I just want you."

When she looks into my eyes I smile, cause I know I would do anything for her. Our lips meet, and I draw her nearer, deepening our kiss.

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Bo Reid is a mother of two, and owns three large dogs. She lives under the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California, where she was born and raised. With a background in construction aggregate, and a passion for reading, Bo spends her days operating a rock quarry and writing books when she can. Addicted to coffee and true crime, her passions present in her writings with often stabby obsessed characters and those that cannot live without a caffeine rush.



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