

DEVIL DEAD DAWN II

WHEN THE CARDS FALL
THE QUEEN WILL PREVAIL

Overkill!

LOS DIABLOS SYNDICATE
BOOK FOUR
PART ONE

PREVAIL

los diablos syndicate

**THE QUEEN
HAS ARRIVED**



BEX DAWN

To my amazing readers. Thank you for waiting for this book while I worked through my mental and physical health. This last year's been rough but has been an incredible, humbling journey.

Much of the good is due to you all, my fantastic, loyal readers. You've celebrated my wins, mourned my losses, and stood by my side when I wanted to give up.

I love and appreciate you all.

That being said, please don't come for me when you get to the end of this.

It's not my fault.

I swear.



CONTENT WARNING: THIS BOOK contains material some readers might find offensive

Heavy trigger warnings across this entire series. Not all of these are significant. I just like readers to be prepared for topics that may come up, even if it's briefly or merely mentioned. Proceed with caution and remember to practice self-care before, during, and after reading this series.

Self-injurious behavior/self-harm

Masochistic behaviors on-page

Talk of past suicide attempts

Therapy/depression/anxiety

Gang violence, drugs/weapons

Sexual trauma and abuse of an adult in flashbacks

Sexual trauma and abuse of a minor recounted in nightmares, flashbacks, and memories, including grooming and gaslighting.

Human trafficking

Graphic language/slurs

Physical and mental abuse

Gaslighting

Kidnapping

Sexual kinks/BDSM including bondage, orgasm denial, degradation/praise, group sex

Death/murder

Drug/alcohol abuse talk

Mention of abortion and drug-related assault of a male

Graphic abuse of a child in flashback

If you have a specific trigger and you are unsure if it's in this book or one of my other books, please do not hesitate to reach out and ask. The best way is through email or Instagram.



Welcome to book four of the *Los Diablos Syndicate* series!

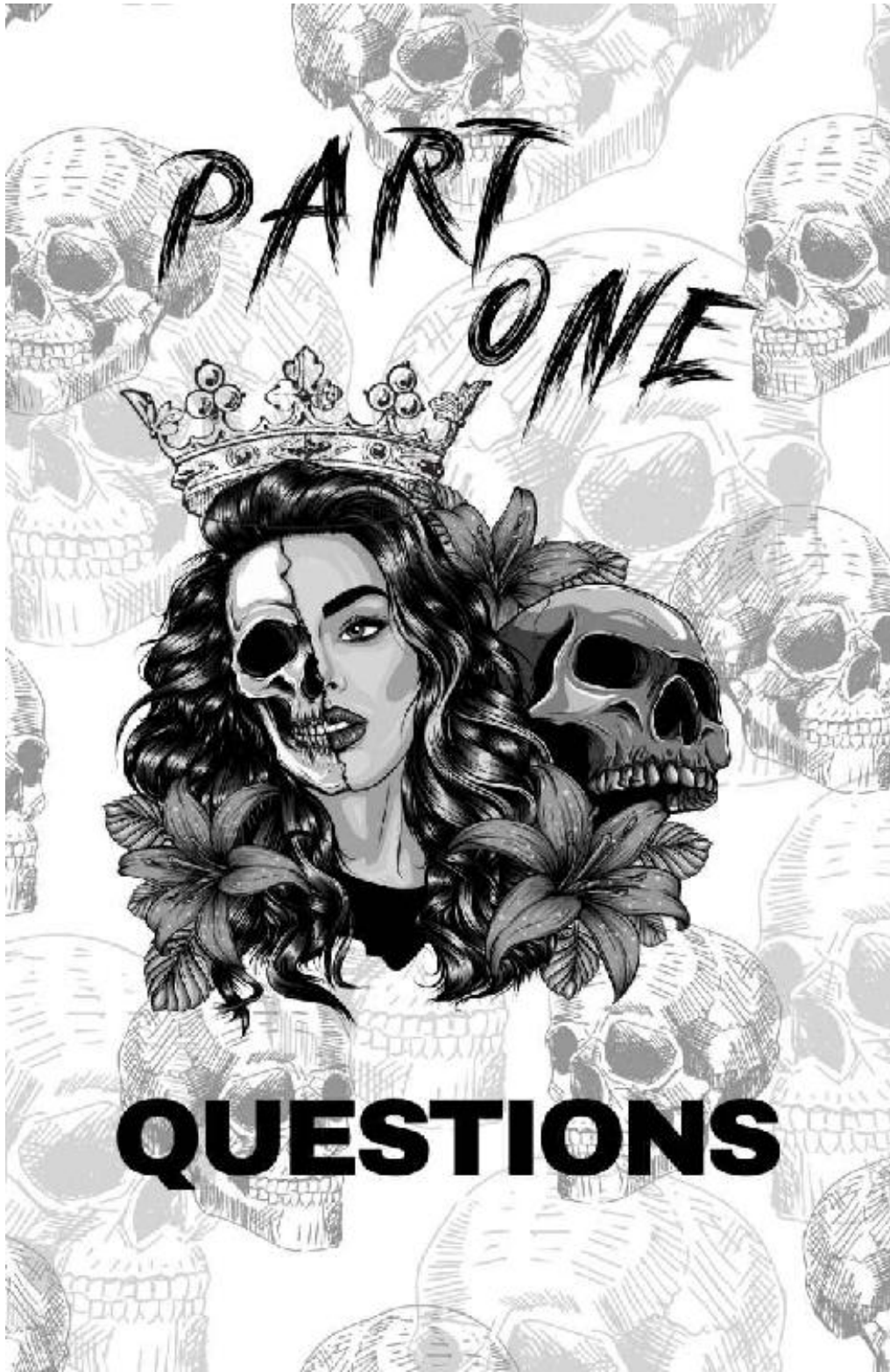
Please note that this is a Dark Reverse Harem Romance book with cliffhangers at the end of each book. Readers must begin with the Prequel Novella *Crash* and then read each subsequent book in order to fully understand the content of this series.

Though this book was originally going to be a series of four, it's now blossomed into five. (and a half?)

Ella and her men deserve time to really sink into their lives together, and our main girl has some....things to handle before that can happen.

Without any spoilers, just know this book, this series, has a very special place in my soul, and the things they go through and overcome in this book have only made me love them more.

Buckle up, the ride continues.





Prologue

10 Years Old

“COME BACK HERE,” MAMA calls. She’s sweet, but sometimes, she’s mean. She doesn’t let me go anywhere. She doesn’t let me leave the house or have friends. I can’t even go to school.

“I just want to play on the swings. Please, momma,” I cry, continuing to back away from her. She shakes her head, her chocolate brown hair drifting over her lean shoulder with the movement.

She steps forward, her eyes leaving mine and darting around the park. She looks nervous. “We can’t, honey. You know that. I shouldn’t have even brought you out here today. It’s not safe.”

I scream. So mad. So tired of being locked inside. Training. Learning. Fighting. The guns and the French lessons are fun, but I just want to be a kid. I just want to have a friend. One that doesn’t have to hide in a treehouse. A real one that can play with me and come over. I want my Alec to see my dolls and my toys. I want to be normal.

I get so mad that I turn and run away. I run so far and so fast; momma can’t catch me. I don’t know where to go. I don’t get to go anywhere but the park and home. I sneak to the treehouse to meet Alec, but that’s only a few houses down from mine. I don’t know how to get anywhere, so I just follow my feet. I run until I see the familiar house come into view.

And then, I cry some more. It’s big and pretty, but I hate it. I never get to leave it.

I shake my head and cross the street, sneaking through the side gate of our giant house so I can go to the treehouse. The only way to get there is through the broken fence board I found in our backyard. Maybe Alec will be there. If not, I'll just wait for him.

I pass by the house, sneaking in the shadows, so my aunt and uncle that we live with don't catch me. It's their house. They have money. We just live with them because we have nowhere else to go. My aunt and uncle are nice. They're really smart. They're the ones who train me on all the cool stuff.

I'm just passing the window to the big room I'm not allowed to go in that's next to Aunty Char's office when I hear it. A bang. It's loud. I run to the window, pressing my face to the glass so I can watch.

There's yelling. A bunch of grownups are around a table, screaming and shouting at each other. A large man jumps up, throwing something across the room. He's angry. He reaches for something, and then—he's holding a gun. I scream when I see it's pointed at Uncle Miles. I can't hear what they're saying through the glass, but then, the man fires his weapon, and Aunty Char jumps in the way, pushing Miles, so he doesn't get hit. Char falls to the ground, and I scream again.

Tears cover my freckled cheeks as I watch everyone jump up and start to fight. Miles is yelling, trying to get to Char. The mean man is shooting everyone. The small woman next to him is so scared. She's crying, and it looks like she's trying to make him stop. He lifts the gun and presses it to her head. He

says something, then shoots her. More guns come out, and so many people fall.

Miles runs for a door in the back, throwing it open and running inside. The angry man chases him, and then...a boom. It's loud. The room where Miles went is on fire. The other man yells and runs. Everyone runs. They leave the people who fell. They leave Char and Miles. The fire gets bigger.

The ground shakes. The window explodes, and I'm thrown back. I hit the ground. My skin burns and aches. My head is dizzy. I scream and scream, and then...

Everything goes black.



Chapter 1

S HE'S ACROSS THE HALL.
Naked.

Or dressed, maybe. Probably with one of the others.
Definitely being coddled. Touched. Adored.

Loved.

Grimacing at the thought, I finish buttoning my shirt so I can spend the last few minutes I have to check over my guns. Once I know they're perfect, I slip my leather chest holster on and strap in my Beretta 92, passed down from my dad, and my newer Glock.

Against my better judgment, I do a quick once-over in the mirror to make sure everything's right.

It doesn't matter what I look like or that the tux fits my body like a glove, showing off years of well-toned muscles. It doesn't matter that after Maddox's little stunt last night, I've shaved my beard for the first time since I was a teenager. Not even the fact that after doing so, I'd been inspired to actually visit a barber and get cleaned up as though tonight's a real date or some shit.

Objectively, I know I look good. But again, it doesn't fucking matter.

Nothing changes what I see reflected in the mirror.

A weak man.

A liar.

An asshole.

A spineless coward, too afraid to admit that he's in love with an incredible woman not even twenty feet away. So afraid that he'd rather hurt her in order to force her to keep the distance, knowing he's too weak to do it himself.

Me. I'm that man.

And I hate him.

Clearing my throat, I turn away from the ugly figure and snag my tux jacket from the closet, slipping it on without thought.

It doesn't matter what I see or who I hate. Tonight isn't about me. It's about them.

It's about Gage and all his fans, who are excited to welcome him back into the ring for his first public fighting appearance in years. It's about Maddox drawing up more business for The Den, which, while owned by all four of us equally, is his baby. It's about Stone, considering this entire thing was his idea.

But mostly...

Mostly, it's about her.

Isabella.

Thumbelina.

Mi Princesa.

And apparently, it's about Hunter fucking Morris. God, I hate that guy. Still, not as much as I hate myself, but fuck if he's not a close second.

I double-check that I have everything I'll need for the night. Wallet? Check. Phone? Check. Guns? Check. Shoes, jacket, cologne...

When I've gone through my list six times and am starting over for a seventh cycle, I realize I'm stalling.

"Fuck," I rasp, squeezing the handle to my bedroom door. I know I need to get downstairs. Know we can't be late.

But I also know what waits for me when I get there.

Isabella looking beyond gorgeous in a dress meant to break hearts and stop people in their tracks. One that will undoubtedly cause me to go into a murderous rage the first time some handsy, drunk motherfucker tries to tempt fate with his eyes or fingers.

One I stupidly bought her.

But, fuck, I couldn't help myself. The second I saw it on the mannequin in the window display downtown, I knew it was meant for her.

Ella deserves all the nice things the world can offer her, especially after what she's been through. She deserves diamonds and jewels, though I know she doesn't want them. She deserves a fucking crown for putting up with my shit alone.

The dress, though... it's perfect as if it was made with her in mind. The long sleeves and floor-length cut will cover a lot of her scars, not that I think they need to be covered, but I know

she's still not ready to show them off proudly the way she should.

She'll get there.

My cock hardens, pressing roughly against my zipper as I imagine how the black silk will look as it splits to reveal her chest and, again, all the way up her left thigh.

Dammit. She's stunning every day. Fresh from a shower or just rolling out of bed, her long, chocolatey hair a mess of tangles on her head, and her cheeks still creased from her pillows. When she's sweaty and throwing my big ass to the mat during our training sessions, I find her irresistible.

But like this...I just know she'll have me ready to fall to my knees for her and try as I might, I'm losing the will to resist it. I've been fighting my attraction to her, our connection—the one we made a few years ago on the bridge. I've been swallowing it down, knowing she deserves better than me.

To be honest, she deserves better than all of us.

Isabella deserves the world.

But I'm not blind. I see the way my brothers make her feel. I see the way they are with each other. I see how good she's made them. And I'd be even more of a coward if I didn't admit it makes me insanely jealous.

The ding of the elevator arriving snaps me from my thoughts, and with a quick exhale, I practically shove myself into the hall, tensing for whatever I might see.

My body deflates when Stone strolls from the metal car, his shoulders back, a cocky smile on his face. His hair is pulled up and into a tight bun at the back of his head, keeping his neck-length blonde hair out of his eyes.

Seeing how calm and happy he is, I find my shoulders relaxing.

“You ready for tonight?” He murmurs, his eyes darting to Ella’s door as though he can’t help himself. My stomach flips, knowing exactly how he feels, but I ignore the call to her. It’s not my place.

It’s his.

And Madd’s and Gages and fuck....

Probably Hunter’s, if the way they stare at each other is anything to go by.

Christ, she really is collecting an entire harem of men, isn’t she?

A clap to my shoulder jars me from my thoughts, and I look up, finding Stone’s penetrative gaze. His brow arches at my silence then dips as a look of understanding washes over him. Damn observant bastard.

Coughing into my fist, I bob my head. “Ready as always,” I murmur, pulling open my jacket to show him my weapons. “You?”

He squeezes my shoulder, then releases it with a scoff. “More ready than you, obviously.” Now, I’m the one looking

at him in question as he dips into his pocket and produces a small velvet box.

My face splits into the first real smile in what feels like days, fuck maybe longer, as I gesture to the floor. “Wow, I can’t say I never suspected, but today seems like as good of a time as any.” Chuckling, I cross my arms. “You’re all dressed up and dapper. Well, go on. I expect nothing but a full proposal.”

He shoves me away but laughs quietly at my idiocy. It makes something in my chest loosen. Things have been so serious and so painful around here lately. And I know I’ve caused just as much of that pain as I’ve tried to heal it, but tonight’s supposed to be a good thing.

As if the world is agreeing with me, Ella’s laughter permeates the hall, spilling through her cracked bedroom door. Stone and I both fall into silence as if to absorb the melodic sound. It’s cut off with some kind of quiet rumble from Gage, followed by a gasp.

I choke on my saliva as images of what exactly he did to cause the sound bleed through my brain like a plague, each one more imaginative than the last.

“Fucking hell,” Stone murmurs, rolling his eyes. “We’re going to be late if he starts that shit right now.”

Swallowing thickly, I say nothing.

“Here.” He reaches for my arms, and I watch as he silently attaches two cuff links that are monogrammed. I squint, seeing letters that have my heart clenching.

I.H.

Isabella Hudson.

“These are the trackers we discussed. They’re linked to a program I installed on each of our phones, as well as the hard drive here at home and the backup at The Den. Completely undetectable, unscannable, practically invisible. They can stand up to fifty pounds of pressure and are fully waterproof.”

“How far will they track?”

He grins, pride rightfully shining in his eyes. “Across the entire Bay, up north about twenty miles, same south and across the Valley to the west.”

I spin one around, studying it, as he slides the box back into his pocket. Such a tiny thing with so much intelligence. It’s like Stone in a golden trinket. I smirk. “And Ella?”

He nods, inching closer to her door. “In all of her jewelry.”

I grunt, my brows dipping. “Should have put the chip in her ass,” I murmur, turning my back towards the elevator as I step away from him. From them.

Stone laughs, his head falling back with the force of it. “Right. I’d like to see you try that shit on her.”

My eyes dart to her door again, unable to help myself. If I was one of them, in her good graces, in her heart, I would. I’d stop at nothing to make sure she’s okay and safe.

As it is, I’m doing all I can from the sidelines. Why else would I be forcing myself to stay away from her? She’s not

safe with us, with me, in our world. She never will be. But they've all decided, and now, there's nothing to do but our best.

"Nyxon," Stone calls as my back reaches the elevator. Christ, I keep doing shit without even realizing it. I need to get my head on straight before tonight. I jerk my chin at him. He hesitates, a stern mask slipping in place. "All you have to do is say the words, man. Just tell her."

A wave of pure terror washes over me. I know what he's insinuating. He thinks I need to tell Isabella about my past, my sister, and my mom. About the trafficking jobs I've been on. The horrors I've seen.

I see no point. All it'll do is hurt the both of us and likely make her hate me even more, especially after finally revealing her past.

Maybe I should do it after all. It'll make the decision to part ways easier.

Coward, my brain hisses. I internally scoff. Like I don't already know that.

I nod, giving him what I hope is a reassuring smile as I hit the button to go downstairs. "I will." I gesture toward her door, the one he's barely restraining himself from plowing through. "Go get your girl, brother."

As I step into the elevator, I catch his quiet parting words. "She's *ours*, Nyx. *All of ours*." I'm thankful for the door sliding closed so he doesn't see my face crumble.

If fucking only.

My head tips back, hitting the harsh steel with a thud, and I let my eyes fall shut. Images of Carolina and my mom flash through my brain with vivid intensity. My fists wrap around the handle along the back wall of the elevator, and I squeeze it so hard it creaks.

Blood, so much blood.

It takes two deep breaths before I can convince my face to even out and three before the rage and confusion battering around in my chest finally ebbs.

By the time the door opens, I've fully gathered myself. Maybe not for the entire night, but at least for now.

"Holy shit," a voice chokes, and my eyes lock on Hunter's just as Madd smacks the back of the kid's head. Hunter whirls on him, shooting Madd a death glare as he adjusts his tux. "What? Look at him. He's fucking hot," he hisses.

Maddox narrows his eyes and grunts in disapproval. "Dude, that's my family." He shivers in revulsion. "*Gross.*"

I step out of the car and join them in the living room while we wait for the rest of our group to arrive. My eyes flit back and forth, watching their oddly tense interaction unfold. Not odd because of the aggression. It's expected. The dynamics with Hunter now in the picture are...*off*, obviously.

But the tension between Hunter and Madd is different.

Charged.

Hunter's lip tips up, and he leans against the wall like a cocky fuck. "You're telling me you've never noticed that you're surrounded by insanely hot people all day?" He chuckles, licking his lower lip as his eyes slide down one of my best friends. "You're saying you haven't wanted to, I don't know, fuck around and find out?"

Madd sputters, then gags. He points an accusing finger at me, and my eyes widen.

When the hell did I get pulled into this shit?

"He is like my brother," Madd hisses again. "Has been since I was a kid." His finger snaps to the stairs. "Stone's the fucking same." He gags. "And Gage is my literal blood relative, so no, Rockstar, I haven't wanted to *fuck around and find out.*"

Hunter bites his lip and shrugs. "Your loss, prick. Guess I'll have to keep all the fantasies to myself."

"You can't do that," Maddox grunts, shifting awkwardly. My brows crash together, and my head cocks as I observe him. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's nervous.

That can't be right.

Hunter chuckles, and I don't miss the way he blatantly checks out Madd, not even attempting to keep his attraction under wraps. "Thing is," he murmurs. "I'm not related to a single person under this roof, so as far as I'm concerned, you're all fair game."

It's on the tip of my tongue to shout a loud, *not fucking me*, but I choke it back. I'm pretty sure they've completely forgotten they aren't alone.

Maddox's eyes go molten, and his body tenses. I see the rebuttal before he even says it, and I groan to myself, knowing shit's about to blow up. He steps forward, closing the distance between the two of them with predatory intent.

Hunter's smile wilts, and his Adam's apple bobs. The room goes from tense to downright thick with electricity. My jaw ticks, suddenly unsure of what I'm watching.

Feels like fucking mating season at the zoo.

"Oh, yeah?" Madd murmurs, forcing Hunter's back to flatter against the wall. "Fantasizing about my family, hmm?"

His eyes rake down Hunter's body, taking in the fitted tux that matches our own. His dirty blonde hair is down and wavy, hitting his shoulders, and Maddox, being the freak he is, wraps it around his fist like he does with Ella, jerking the rockstar's neck back painfully.

Hunter's eyes go huge, and a tiny pathetic sound slips past his lips, making Madd grin.

"Tell me," he purrs, tugging harder. "Is it all of us you picture in your pretty little head while you fuck yourself, or is just one of us?"

The other man sucks in a gasp and presses his body into Madd's as though he can't help himself.

Christ, I shouldn't be here for this. It feels like I'm eavesdropping on an overly private moment, but my feet stay rooted to the spot, and I find myself unable to look away. It's like a car accident. A confusingly hot car accident.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he murmurs, his eyes darting to the side.

Maddox huffs a laugh and trails his free hand from the wall to Hunter's jaw. He traces it slowly, tauntingly.

"Oh, you're such a fucking liar," he mutters, just barely loud enough for me to hear, so I lean forward like the voyeur I am. "I have one very important question for you, Rockstar, and this time, I need you to be brave for me. Can you do that? Not lie through your goddamn teeth for once."

The words are said in a soft coo, like he's trying to coax the confession from Hunter's mouth, but his meaning is clear. He's not one of us; after last night, he may never be.

Hunter's jaw ticks as he glares up at Madd. At some point, his hands, which were previously trying to push the larger man away, have tangled in his shirt like he can't decide if he wants him to fuck off or come closer.

"What?" He spits.

Madd watches his fingers continue their exploration over Hunter's face. His furrowed brows, his cheek, his jaw. If I didn't know any better, I'd say this is more than just a game to him right now. Finally, his grip lands on Hunter's chin and tightens painfully, making the other man wince.

“When you picture me naked, am I alone, or am I fucking my girl?” Hunter pales at Maddox’s words, and unfortunately, so do I. It feels like his question is meant for both of us. “Do you wrap your fist around your cock as you fantasize about the way her body feels, the way she tastes? Do you picture her splayed out before me with my tongue buried in her sweet cunt as she cries out *my name*? My brother’s?”

Hunter’s cheeks turn bright red, and his expression morphs to one of pure fury. The sight of it only makes Maddox more gleeful. Hunter shrugs and shoves off Madd’s touch with more strength than any of us have given him credit for.

“She’s not just your girl,” he snaps, righting his tux jacket as Madd casually steps away from him. “She shouldn’t be yours at all.”

“She sure as shit isn’t yours.” He slides his hands into his pants and leans against the couch, kicking one leg over the other like he has no worries in the world. Must be nice. “But you’re right,” he concedes, his lip tipping into a smirk. “Isabella belongs to my brothers and me, and she always will.”

Hunter rolls his head from side to side before cracking his neck. “We’ll fucking see,” he mutters.

“You know what, Hunter? You’re right. If you can get Ella to fall in love with your tortured ass after that shit you spilled last night, more power to you. I’ll convince the guys to let you in on the little fucking harem she’s collecting. I’ll even vouch for you.”

“Are you serious?” Hunter murmurs, hope lighting up his eyes. I feel sorry for the guy. He doesn’t know Maddox like I do. He has no idea that he’s being played right now.

Madd bobs his head. “Sure thing, Rockstar. If she falls in love with you, like real fucking love, the way she loves the rest of us, you have my blessing.” His shoulder bumps into mine, once again pulling me into something I want nothing to do with. “You have both of ours.”

“Jesus,” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. I cringe, remembering I’d put product in it tonight to keep the much shorter strands in place. “You two sound like you’re fighting over a toy on the playground. Grow the fuck up. Ella’s not an object to argue over. She’s a human and perfectly capable of making her own decisions.”

They both turn to stare at me with matching, confused expressions, but it’s Maddox who speaks first. He slaps my shoulder and barks out a laugh.

“Damn, if I woulda known all it’d take to get your head out of your ass was a swanky haircut, I would have fucked with you a long time ago.”

“Shut up,” I snap, shooting them both glares. “I’m not kidding. She can be with and love whoever the fuck she wants. Christ knows she deserves it after all she’s been through.”

Hunter scoffs. “Yeah, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you.” I swallow thickly. “You’ve made her life ten times worse, and what, now that you know where she came from and how bad it actually was, you feel guilty?”

“Yes,” I say, not missing a beat. “I do. But I’ve felt guilty from day one. Even when I was convincing her to get off that bridge, I felt guilty. She’s pure light, and there I was, the Devil’s right hand, offering her a second chance while also inflicting her with my poison.”

I choke out a humorless laugh as the past few years come tumbling down around me. Flashes of Carolina. Mom. Ella. Macabre clips of my brothers and I forcing women into the back of U-Hauls and big rigs. Crossing state lines and stealing them from their families.

Even if we were forced to do so, we still did it.

We may have ultimately saved them in the end, but we’re responsible for their trauma. For taking them from their homes and families. Bringing more guns into the city. More drugs.

We’re not good men. We try to be, yet at our cores, we’re as rotten as they come.

But then I think of Ella. I think of the way she’s changing our family, our dynamics. The way she’s healing every single one of us. How she knows our demons—our sins and embraces us anyway. I think of the way she smiles at them. At me. The way she loves.

I blink.

And blink again.

What I just told them, the way I defended her without pause—I meant those words. She’s an adult. She can make her own

choices. She's brave, strong, kind, and beautiful. She deserves the world, and I...

I want to be a part of hers.

Like a tsunami colliding with my body, clarity washes over me with a force that nearly knocks me to my knees.

I love her. I've known that from the beginning, but the realization that I love her with every fiber of my being, enough to let my walls down and show her how ugly I am inside, is crippling.

It makes me feel like I'm dying, but the knowledge that I'm ready to do it anyway startles me.

I want her by my side, even if she's next to theirs, as well.

More than that, I need her.

She can make her own choices, but first, I have to come clean.

About everything.



Chapter 2

BEFORE I HAVE TIME to respond to Nyx's ominous statement, the elevator dings. I feel more than see the three of us turn to face it as one, our spines straightening for appraisal: hers or ours, I'm not sure.

I try to focus on my gorgeous girl as she floats from the elevator like some kind of ethereal goddess, but I can't because I'm too busy fucking *reeling*.

I swallow thickly, and against my will, my eyes flick to Hunter. Unlike his usual leather and skin-tight jeans, he's wearing a tux that matches the rest of ours, and it pisses me off. Mostly because he looks damn good like this, and it's fucking with my head *and* my dick.

I shouldn't have noticed how good he looks.

I *can't* notice.

His shoulder-length dirty blonde hair is down and tossed to the side, and the sight of it makes me remember how it felt wrapped around my fist.

Why did I even do that?

I have no idea what came over me. But the sight of him, his cocky smile and arrogant face, makes me feel shit that confuses me.

I want to throttle him. Absolutely choke the life from his body. Maybe it's his arrogance. Maybe it's all the hurt he's caused Ella in the last few months. Maybe it's his involvement in her childhood abuse.

But, even I can understand he was forced just as much as she was. I see how badly he wishes he could change their past. I know what it's like to be nothing more than a product of your environment. My brothers and I may have tried to change our lives, but at the end of the day, we are what Augustus made us to be—cold-hearted killers who will stop at nothing to reach our goals.

We're ruthless, brutal men, just like Gus.

I bite my cheek and look away as the questions settle deep in my mind.

How different is Hunter from his childhood? Is he the same? Does he have it in him to repeat the cycle he was forced to be a part of? Is Ella safe?

A gasp pulls me from my thoughts, and I unclench my fists just in time to meet her eyes across the room. She's choking back a laugh, her tiny hand covering her mouth as her gaze slides to Nyxon.

I smirk, a chuckle building in my chest, and toss her a secret wink, just for us.

I'm glad I was able to give her something last night, even something so stupid and childish. I hadn't meant to get shitfaced with Nyx, but we were both struggling to choke back her story, her childhood, and everything she's been through. Adding on Hunter's part in that, and we both just kind of lost it.

I understand our reaction was justified. We love Ella, and no one wants to hear about the horrors of the person they love most in the world's past, but I wish I'd stayed sober long enough to hold her until she fell asleep.

Instead, I carted Nyx's passed-out ass to his room, filled a bucket full of craft glue and glitter left over from Ella's birthday decorations, and stole my girl from her bed. Hearing her cackle while destroying his ugly, overgrown beard was the highlight of my night, fuck, maybe my week. She needed it, and honestly, so did I.

But now, Nyx is rocking a nearly bald face and shorter hair than I think I've ever seen him with. As much as I hate to admit it, the asshole looks good this way. You can finally see the black ink crawling up his neck, and judging by the way Ella clenches her thighs, she likes his new look.

My eyes rake down her body, taking her in from head to toe.

Her long chocolate brown hair cascades down her back in curls, but part of the front's pulled to the side, showing off the pretty diamond earrings from my brother. They go perfectly with the necklace I got her. It stands out against her exposed neckline the long black dress creates.

She looks stunning, like an old Hollywood star but way damn better. I can just make out the pressure point cuffs from Stone, something he had custom-made to help her with her anxiety.

We all got together to get her a gift for tonight. Not only are all of her jewels outfitted with tracking software, but she's also

silently representing each of the men who love her on our first official outing as a couple...

Or thrupple.

Or *fuck*, with Nyx and *probably* Hunter, I guess we really are the harem I keep jokingly referring to.

I swallow back a growl when the man himself saunters toward her, a cocky grin on his annoyingly cute face. The growl slips free when Hunter grabs Ella's jaw and presses a kiss to her forehead, murmuring words too low for me to hear.

My brain screams at me to shove him out of the way. To deck him in his smug face, but against my will, my feet stay rooted to the spot as I watch *him* touch *her*. Watch my girl smile up at him with heat and adoration in her blue-green eyes.

My cock throbs at the sight of them together, and I snap my head to the side, cracking my neck to relieve the tension.

Nyx spots my rapidly rising confusion and mistakes it for anger. He steps forward, shoving Hunter away from Ella a bit too hard. The kid goes stumbling into the elevator. Right before he hits the wall, Stone reaches out and catches him. Something passes between them, Stone's brows pinching together before he quickly looks away.

As the seconds tick by, my need to be with Ella wins out, and I finally step forward, just in time to see Nyx palm the back of her neck and in a move way smoother than I'd think

the big fucker capable of, he forces Ella's neck back and brushes his lips over her jaw.

"Te ves muy guapa, Princesa," he murmurs. "I know I have a lot to make up for. Make no mistake. I'm aware I need to earn you, Isabella. In every way. But, I hope you allow me to begin with my mouth buried deep in your sweet pussy because I can already tell," he pauses and does something to make her whine in need, and I bristle like the jealous fuck I am. "That you'll be the best thing I've ever eaten."

My mouth gapes open the same time her's does, and the prick simply smirks and saunters away. I shake my head and chuckle, rubbing my jaw.

Smooth fucker.

Before she catches her breath, I dive in, my fingers aching to have her to myself. I snag her by the hips and tug her into my body. My heart gets stuck in my throat when she looks up at me, those wide, mossy-ocean eyes full of so much love, it makes me dizzy.

Fuck. She's perfect.

So. Damn. Perfect.

"You look fucking hot," I grunt, licking my lower lip. I bite down on the hoop, tugging it into my mouth as I slide my palm across her body and under her dress.

I may want to punch Nyx half the time, but this dress earned him a spot in my good graces for at least a week, maybe two.

The slit is borderline indecent. It's everything I've ever needed in a piece of fabric.

And then, I feel the leather holster wrapped around her thigh. It's another gift from Gage, and I immediately decide he wins the top spot for best brother ever.

Leaning forward, I coast my lips over Ella's cheek, breathing her in as I sneak a finger beneath the leather strap. My cock pulses in my slacks, and it's taking everything inside me not to shove her against the wall and fill her with my cum.

"Madd," she breathes. Her tiny fingers dig indents into my biceps as I release the strap, letting it collide with her skin.

She *moans*.

"Fucking hell," I groan, shaking my head as I guide her backward into the elevator. Her back hits the wall, and I blindly smack the button for the garage, never breaking her eye contact.

My dick is trying to punch a hole through my zipper to get to her.

"Let's get this shit over with so I can come home and fuck her," I say to no one in particular.

Hunter shifts next to me, his eyes riveted to where my fingers are still buried under her dress. I swallow thickly, wondering what he'd do if I made Ella cum right now while I forced him to watch.

"Couldn't agree more, man," Gage grunts, his gaze nearly feral.

The elevator ride is short but tense, each of us feeling a mixture of emotions and desire that quickly becomes stifling in the little box. I'm thankful we decided to buy a much larger SUV now that our makeshift family is growing. I need the room right now. Not because I want space but because I feel like I can't *breathe*.

We all quickly pile in. Ella, Hunter, and Stone climb into the back row. I dive into the middle, regretting every second of my life that led to me being so damn tall compared to them. Otherwise, I'd be able to pile into the cuddle puddle, preferably with her ass planted firmly on my erection.

I may or may not pout at Ella when she wraps her hand around Stone's knee. The fucker locks eyes with me and slowly picks her hand up before sucking her thumb into his mouth in a slow, ridiculous taunt that makes me murderous.

But it's not until Ella giggles and bundles Hunter's hand into hers on her lap that I really consider going for my guns.

Before I can do anything, the SUV jolts forward, and I realize Nyx and Gage are in the front seat, murmuring about logistics for the night.

With a sigh, I turn to face the window, my mind a total mess.

Anything could happen tonight.

Gage's debut fight could tank when he inevitably panics.

Then, I'd be distracted and worried, making me lose my own fight. I intentionally scoff. *Right. Like I'd ever let that shit*

happen.

Someone could touch Ella.

Be mean to Ella.

Harass Ella.

Hurt Ella.

My fingers dig little indents into my palms as every concern morphs until all I see is *her* bleeding and screaming. *Her* missing. *Her* dying.

I choke on my next breath when it gets stuck in my lungs and spear my fingers through my hair, fucking it up again.

Christ, so many things could go wrong.

It would devastate me if any of my brothers got hurt, but the idea of Ella even remotely *bothered* makes me want to blow shit up. Add that in with the pre-fight jitters I always get, the lethality that eventually settles in, the anger I let consume me, replacing my humanity just before I step into the octagon, and I'm a ticking time bomb.

I steal another peek at her over my shoulder. She's murmuring softly with Stone, a bright smile on her rosy cheeks, as he brushes her curls from her eyes. And just like that, everything in me quiets.

But it's the man on her other side that makes me stiffen.

Hunter is staring at his hand wrapped around her knee. The way her fingers blanket his, keeping him in place with her tiny,

soft grip. It's not what he's looking at that gives me pause, though. It's *how* he's looking at it.

Like he's about to lose everything he's ever loved.

There's a bleakness in his gaze. A deep sadness in his blue-grey eyes that guts me. My mouth drops open. To say what? I have no idea. But before I can ultimately make a fool of myself, Gage interrupts me.

"So, we all know the plan?" he asks, his stern gaze flicking toward us as though he truly is the pseudo-father he's had to be so many times over the years.

I turn toward the front and bob my head. We've been over this shit a million times.

"Yes, Daddy." Ignoring his responding snarl, I tap my fingers on my thigh and recite his rules in a mocking voice. "*Stay together. If something feels off, it is off, so get somewhere safe. Keep your eye on the exits and your drinks. Don't go anywhere alone. Use your weapons. Keep your phones on you. Remember your trackers.*" I smirk and glance at my girl. "And *definitely* fuck Ella in the bathroom the second I'm done with my fight."

Her eyes go wide, her blush deepening. "But—" she starts, swallowing thickly. "But...you...you'll..." Her hands flail. "You'll be bloody!" She finally blurts.

I chuckle and shove my arm over the seat, running my finger across her burning face and down, *down, down* her body. "Do you remember what I said about this pretty blush the first time

I met you?" I murmur, tracing her clavicle, her chest, the curve of her breast.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Hunter trail the path of my finger. I can't help myself from diving beneath her dress and circling her taut nipple. I groan at the heat in his eyes and the way she shivers.

That'll make him forget to be sad.

Fuck, I'm seriously playing with fire tonight.

Ella swallows roughly, her eyes darting between mine as she leans forward. "You wondered how red the rest of my body gets when I blush," she says, her voice husky.

I nod, barely resisting the urge to climb over the seat and see where else she's red. I could peel that decadent dress from her sinful body. Lick every inch of her until she's nothing but a begging, whimpering mess. And then—

"*Maddox!*" Gage barks, making me jump.

With a disgruntled sound, I flip him off over my shoulder and wink at Ella, mouthing *later*.

Her blush deepens impossibly, but before I can say anything, we're pulling up to The Den. I sigh and rake my hand through my hair.

I'm not ready for this shit. As much as I love fighting, and I do, I'd be stupid to ignore the warning signs.

Everything that's happened in the last few months has been one insane tragedy after enough, and in the passing weeks, it's

all come to a head.

Ella getting attacked and raped by her psycho ex right after we met her. Us pushing to have her stay in our home until she healed—then *keeping* her in our house. Our relationships all evolving. Dolores, her daughter, and what Gus did to them. The deaths of Ella's roommate, Alyssa, Raptor, and the techs. Ella being kidnapped by her ex *again*. Ella killing her ex. Her house getting blown up. Hunter being attacked and blackout, ninja-killing the dudes.

And then...

And then they both opened up and shared the depth of their devastation, their trauma.

And I...

I don't think I can take anything else happening. I don't think any of us can. It's all been so much, *too* much. We're riding the edge of sanity here, barely holding on by a thread. Ella is too precious to us to possibly fathom losing her.

I know I wouldn't survive it.

I glance up, seeing the way both Gage and Nyxon stare at her as she giggles between Hunter and Stone, her head tipped back, her face brighter and healthier than I've ever seen. I see the love in all four of their faces. And I know, I just know, she's it for us. She's our only chance at happiness.

I'll be damned if I let anyone take her from us.

Never fucking again.



Chapter 3

EVERYONE IS SILENTLY FALLING apart.
E They won't say it, admit to it, but I see it in their eyes.

It's in the way Maddox won't stop flicking his pocket knife, the blade opening and snapping shut again loud in the otherwise oppressive parking lot.

It's in the way Nyx's arms are crossed over his chest, his tux bunched and taut from how hard he's balling his fists. His jaw is pulsing, his eyes incessantly scanning our dim surroundings.

It's in the way Stone is staring at the side of the black SUV as though he can see right through the thick explosive-proof metal and blacked-out windows. The furrow in his blonde brows, the dark circles under his blue eyes.

But mostly, it's in the way every single cell in my body is primed and ready for a fight.

I don't know what or why, but it's *there*, burning and writhing deep in my soul, threatening to shred me to bits. Part of me thinks it's just because tonight means so much. Me reentering the fighting circuit for the first time in years. Me doing something I swore I'd never do again, not unless I was being forced to.

But I'm not being forced.

In fact, I agreed to this shit show willingly, all because my tiny spitfire of a woman batted her blue-green eyes up at me and rolled her thick lip out in the sweetest pout I'd ever seen. I

folded like a shitty house of cards and now...now I'm about to step into the ring again.

I swallow roughly and run my fingers over my guns as if to remind myself I'm safe, we're all safe.

But who will keep them safe from you?

“So,” Madd grunts, jarring me from my thoughts. I blink slowly at him, my eyes adjusting in the dark. I cock a brow and he scoffs, leaning against the car. “Are we gonna talk about it or what?”

Stone stiffens but says nothing, his gaze still riveted to the window, seeing nothing.

“About?” I drawl, my head tilting to keep them both in my sight.

Maddox bites his lip, tugging the ring between his teeth as his throat bobs. “Hunter,” he murmurs. “Obviously.”

Stone stiffens again, this time, he rolls his shoulders and shakes out his hands. Though it looks like it kills him, he turns to face us, giving the SUV his back.

“What about him, Madd?” I sigh, adjusting my tux. I don't want to talk about Hunter, not really. Everything Ella revealed to us last night still feels too heavy, too much.

Nyx turns next, a slow smirk spreading across his mostly-shaven face. “I know what he wants to talk about,” he chuckles.

Madd's head snaps to the side as he shoves to his full height. Nyx doesn't balk. The big fucker barely even blinks. Instead, his chuckle turns to a full-belly laugh.

“Madd's thinking about how hot his ass looks in those tight jeans, isn't that right? How badly he wants to rail the little fucker.”

Maddox gapes, and I choke on the air in my lungs.

“Wh-what?” He shakes his head rapidly and punches Nyx in the gut when the big guy continues to laugh his ass off. “Fuck off! I do *not* want to fuck Hunter, no matter how hot his ass is!”

My eyes narrow as Nyx's widen. He bats Maddox away like he's nothing more than an annoying gnat, even though they aren't that far off in height.

“So you think his ass is hot,” he points out, grinning when Madd turns red. “Knew it.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “You want him.”

Madd throws his hands in the air. “I don't want him, for fucks sake! Ella does!” He shoots an accusatory finger at the car. “Or isn't it obvious? They're probably in there fucking right now!”

Nyx lets out an exhausted sound and glances away. Stone says nothing. He doesn't move or show any sign he's listening beyond the tick of his jaw. And me?

I'm staring at my brother like he has three heads.

It's not like I haven't seen the way Hunter and Isabella interact. The way they ebb and flow around each other, showing how deep their friendship really is. I haven't missed how he looks at her, his eyes filled with so much longing and love, he wears it like a second skin.

And I *really* haven't missed the same expression on her face whenever he's around. Except for with Ella, it's tinged with something else, something buried deep inside where she thinks no one can see it.

I see it, though.

Maybe because I'm always looking, always wanting to anticipate her next move, her next thought, before she makes it. Wanting, no *needing*, to give her everything she could ever desire and so much more.

Maybe that's why I see how scared she is.

But I don't think it's Hunter she's afraid of. I think it's *us*. The way we'll react to her feelings for him. Her love.

To how badly she wants him.

I've seen it since the day he stumbled into our lives, screaming for her, begging us to let him see Ella. The pain in his eyes, the love written on his face. And last night, when she bared her soul to us, told us her deepest, darkest, and most painful secrets, ones that involved him, *I knew*.

Knew she'd never let him go, pain and fear be damned.

So, maybe that's why I answer the way I do instead of how Maddox expects me to.

Swallowing down the wave of jealous possession that rises in my chest, I look him dead in the eyes and murmur, “I love her enough to let him love her, too.”

Madd blinks at me in shock but it’s Nyx who surprisingly responds, his head bobbing. “I know I have a lot to fix where Isabella is concerned.”

I scoff, but he goes on.

“I’m not giving up on whatever exists between us. I am beyond in love with that girl, and we all know it, but I won’t stop until she does. I won’t stop trying to heal the hurt I’ve caused, to fix what I broke. And that starts with accepting the fact that if, by some miracle, she can find it in her big heart to love me back, I won’t be the only man she loves.”

“So,” my brother drawls, fucking up his hair for the tenth time. “You’re allowing her relationship with Hunter just so you can get in her pants?” He shoots him a disgusted look. “I know you can be an ass, but that’s low, even for—”

He doesn’t get the sentence out before Nyx rounds on him, shoving him into the SUV with a forearm to his throat. I step up, my hands outstretched between us just in case I need to intervene. Stone presses his body against Ella’s door as if to silently keep her safe from a threat that’ll never touch her.

“Let me stop you right fucking there,” Nyx rumbles, his voice low and lethal.

He presses his arm harder against Madd, making his cheeks turn pink, but my brother doesn’t fight back. If anything, I

think he needs this—the steady, if not forceful, reassurance from his best friends that everything will be okay. That we aren't going to lose her.

Maybe we all need it.

“I do not *allow* her to do a damn thing. If she wants to be with Hunter, it's her fucking choice, just like I told you at the house. You need to stop this shit, Madd. She's a person, first and foremost. She deserves her freedom—”

“I know that,” Maddox hisses, but Nyx continues on, ignoring him.

“If she loves him, needs him, wants to fuck him right in front of us, that's her goddamned prerogative. Doesn't mean you have to like it or accept it or *fuck*, even be okay with it. You can get up and leave and then have an adult conversation about your boundaries with your girlfriend. But at the end of the day, it's her body, her life, her choice. If she wants you in it, be happy. And if all of a sudden, you can't, if you no longer want to share her the way you promised you would all those months ago, then you need to *bow the fuck out*.”

Maddox's Adam's apple bobs as he stares up at Nyx, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say his eyes are glossing over from our friend's words. I swallow against a similar burn in my throat.

He's right.

We can't say she deserves the world and then be selective about what that world looks like.

It's hers, and we're just lucky to exist in it.

Months ago, we promised we were fine with sharing her and being in a complex relationship with Ella. We can't pick and choose who's in the dynamic, not really. If we're with her, we're *with* her. Who else she chooses to give her giant heart to isn't for us to decide.

"I'm not going anywhere," Madd murmurs, his voice rough. Nyx releases his hold on his throat but doesn't step away, letting the threat remain. Maddox rubs his neck. "I'm not leaving her, not now, not ever. She's my life. My future. My happily ever after, something I never thought I deserved. I just —" He looks away, his shoulders sagging. "What if she picks him over us?"

The words are so quiet I can almost pretend I imagined them. But I know I didn't because the pain in his eyes makes it all clear.

Being abandoned, being deemed unworthy, is Maddox's biggest fear. Probably because of what our father's done to him since he was a kid. The abuse, the games, the constant reminder that he wasn't wanted. The cruel words he spits about Madd not being *enough*.

It's not true.

None of it.

But that doesn't stop the scars from burning.

Nyx sighs and cups the back of Madd's neck, forcing him to pay attention. "If for some reason, that wonderful woman in

there...” He juts his chin to the car. “If she decides she no longer wants us, wants *you*, it’ll fucking hurt. It’ll kill you.” Madd tries to pull away, but Nyx doesn’t let him. “But she *won’t*. I know she won’t. She loves you with every inhale she takes and needs you with every exhale. And if she loves and needs him the same way, it’s because he’s already found a way into her heart. Not instead of you, but next to you.”

He steps back, his jaw tensing and releasing repeatedly. “All of you.”

“And you,” I murmur, because I know that, too.

Ella may hate the big prick most of the time, but you can’t hate with so much fire, so much passion, and not love just as deeply.

Nyx shrugs off my words, but the tension from his body seems to fade. The air around us is thick, and I haven’t missed Stone’s silence. But he seems miles away, and I know that means he needs space to process.

“Besides,” Nyx grunts, his cruel smirk returning as he slaps Madd’s shoulder. “If she lets him into her little harem, you’ll get to see him naked eventually.” He waggles his brows as Madd pales. “Get to finally see that *hot ass* you’ve been fantasizing about.”

“I—I—” Madd stutters, his eyes going frantic like he’s looking for an escape. “It’s not like that.”

“Sure,” Nyx chuckles. “You can—”

“It’s okay if you like him,” I interrupt when I notice how much Nyx’s taunting is getting to my baby brother. The last thing I want is for him to be stifled in any way, including his sexuality. He’s already been through too much. I just want him to be happy. “Even if it’s as more than a friend.” I glance at Nyx and Stone. “The same applies to both of you.”

For some reason, it’s that particular statement that drags Stone from wherever he’d been lost to. He whirls on me, his already light skin paling even further. His head’s shaking so quickly, his hair slips from its top-knot.

“*Abso-fucking-lutely not,*” he hisses with a gag.

My brows furrow. “Never took you for homophobic, Stone,” I grit out, my stomach souring.

He jerks back. “What the fuck?” Our eyes stay locked, his wide and confused, mine narrowed in...I don’t even know what. Disappointment? “That’s not what I meant. Christ, Madd, you can like or fuck or love whoever you want. I don’t care. I support you, all of you, in all ways. You know that. *I* just don’t want to sleep with him.”

Maddox bristles, and I see this entire conversation rapidly swirling down the drain.

He steps up to Stone, posturing as irritation rolls off him in palpable waves. “Why not?” He grits out. “He not good enough for you, or what?”

“Well, that sounded oddly possessive,” Nyx murmurs. “Definitely defensive.”

Groaning, I roll my eyes heavenward.

Madd gets like this before every fight.

A little wild, a little feral, and a lot stupid.

“No,” Stone scoffs. “That’s not what I’m saying. For one, you all know I’m pansexual, so you can fuck right off with your accusations. But regardless, I wouldn’t fuck Hunter, and that has nothing to do with you.” He shoves Madd away, making him stumble into me. “And everything to do with my father.”

He swallows, his eyes pleading.

“Hunter is my brother.”



Chapter 4

THE PARKING LOT IS packed with cars for tonight's event. The Den's walls rattle with noise from guests and the loud beat of music. The bass matches the tempo of my racing heart, heavy and painful, reverberating in my ears.

I open my mouth to say more, to elaborate on that statement, but before I can, Madd's phone buzzes in his pocket.

He doesn't move to stop it; he just stares at me, his face drawn in confusion. The same look mirrored on my brother's faces.

Not my real brothers, my mind hisses.

No. They aren't my real brothers. Not by blood, anyway. They are by everything else that counts. But the man in the car behind me, the one probably wrapped around my girl, Mi Cielo, he is.

Brother.

Brother.

Half-brother if the DNA tests are to be believed, and they are. I trust the source. It's outside of our world, has nothing to do with us, and nothing to gain from lying.

But even without the tests, I'd know the truth.

Hunter and I look eerily similar. At first glance, one might think it's our hair. Hair that falls to our shoulders in waves. Both in varied shades of blonde, his darker than mine, probably from his mom.

Our father, though, was blonde.

My mother was, too. She was also medium height, curvy, and had more plastic in her body than a grocery store, until she didn't.

And according to the report I received early this morning, Hunter's mother was a brunette with a tall, willowy frame. Originally from Stockton, she moved to Oakland as a teen to escape a life lived in the foster system. Her rap sheet reads like a dictionary, every misdemeanor and petty crime telling a tale of heartbreak.

What the paperwork can't tell me, unfortunately, is how foster care led to homelessness or homelessness led to her finding her way into my father's demented claws, into his bed.

How it led to him having a child with another woman when he'd already been married to my mother for years.

"Uh," Madd starts, clearing his throat and pulling me from my thoughts. He rubs the back of his neck, looking like he wishes the ground would swallow him whole. "As much as I want to talk about that, and I *do*, I really fucking do—"

"We all do," Gage interjects, his throat working like he's swallowing rocks.

Nyx says nothing, his eyes locked on me with a rage I've never seen pointed in my direction, but I know him well enough to know it has nothing to do with me. He's furious for me.

I bite my lip.

He hasn't even heard the worst of it yet.

"Yeah," Madd agrees, his head bobbing. "But it's go time, and I have to..." he trails off, pointing to the SUV I'm using to hold me up.

Clearing my throat, I wave them away and toss them a smile that feels every bit as fake as it is. "It's fine. No big deal." I straighten my tux, shoving away from the car. "Let's go."

Maddox hesitates but wraps his hand around the door handle. With a deep breath, he swings it open, plastering a massive grin on his face.

"We gotta go, kids. It's showtime." He stiffens and, seconds later, releases a loud, menacing growl.

I shoot the other guys a look, a silent conversation passing between us. Something definitely happened in the back of that fucking SUV.

I shake my hands out, watching as Hunter guides Ella into Maddox's waiting arms. She looks up at him and smiles softly as Madd grips her hips, steadying her.

I watch her straighten out her gorgeous black gown with trembling fingers, and my head cocks as I take her in. Her cheeks are flushed, her mascara and liner slightly smudged. But her smile is genuine, and there's a lightness in her eyes that wasn't there before.

At least her lipstick's still intact.

Hunter climbs out behind her, meeting my gaze, and I quickly look away. Inside The Den, the MC announces us over

the loudspeakers. The crowd roars when he calls out, amping them up for Gage's return to the ring.

Ella smiles and wraps her hand around Hunter's. "Let's do this."

For a second, just one second, I wish I could freeze time. She's so happy, so carefree. With her hand in his, Madd wrapped around her other side, his eyes full of love—she looks like she truly feels every bit as cherished as she is.

"Everyone good?" I murmur, my voice thick with emotion. I shake it off and quickly check over my weapons.

Nyx and Gage do the same before grunting that they're good. In an unspoken gesture, the four of us circle Ella, keeping her between us as we move through the parking lot. I'm surprised when Hunter rolls his shoulders back and presses a hand to her spine, his eyes methodically taking in our surroundings as though he was trained to be one of us all along.

My mind is racing with questions and theories about the past and how it'll affect our future when I feel it. The air around us changes, growing thick with tension. My body goes taut, my spine tingling with a sense of knowing.

Something's wrong.

Then, I hear it.

"Come out, come out, little doll. I knew I'd find you here," a raspy, creepy voice purrs from the darkness. I whirl on the voice, my hand already on my gun.

Little doll.

It takes less than a second for the sick nickname to penetrate through my thoughts. Clarity washes over me, drowning everything else out.

I step forward, feeling my brothers do the same, putting Ella and Hunter behind us. A snarl rips from my lips as the man weaves his way through the cars, and I'm suddenly thankful for being the emotionless person my parents raised me to be. My gun feels like a familiar weight between my fingers, and like always, I'm steady.

I could kill him here and now and feel nothing.

I wouldn't even think twice about it because if this smiling prick is who I think he is, he deserves nothing less than a bullet to his demented brains.

"It was you," I snarl, the words like acid on my tongue.

Even though I loathe to say his name, I can see the confusion on my brothers' faces in my peripheral vision, and I need them to understand the severity of the situation. I swallow the bile pooling on my tongue as I look the love of my life's rapist in his cold, dead eyes.

"You're Eric Keaton."

That does it. Nyx, Gage, and Maddox all catch up, understanding washing over them. The sound of safeties clicking off fills the quiet lot, and I'm honestly surprised when he's not instantly peppered with bullet holes, but I'm thankful for it. He can't die. Not yet.

Eric gives us a maniacal grin as he steps into the dim parking lot lights. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

My jaw ticks, but I don’t lower my gun as I track his every move. I feel the guys shift at my sides, but I never take my eyes off Eric. I can’t. Every breath he takes, every muscle he moves, I grow closer and closer to the edge.

The only thing keeping me from killing him here and now are the questions racing through me.

Why is he here?

What does he want with Ella? With Hunter?

Where has he been all this time? Where is Cynthia, his wife, and Hunter’s aunt?

But the biggest question of all, the one I’m not sure I’ll be able to get out, is why? Why her? Why them?

“And why is that?” Nyx snaps, drawing my attention back to the present. I blink. “I could kill you in less time than it would take you to blink, you old fuck.

“Because I have the information you want,” Eric laughs as his eyes take Ella in. They heat with interest, and his tongue darts out, licking his lips.

I consider killing him then.

Saying fuck everything, fuck the questions, and getting answers. I step forward, lifting my gun and lining up my shot with the eyes currently staring at our woman as though he has any right to.

Fuck him.

“What does that mean, Eric?” Ella asks slowly, her voice calm and cool, as though she hasn’t got a care in the world. I smile to myself, beyond proud of Mi Cielo.

The overweight, ruddy man falls into a fit of cackles, and Nyx makes a sound of surprise next to me. I don’t know why he’d be surprised. The man before us is insane. It’s clearly written all over every inch of his manic face.

“You’re all fools. You don’t even know what’s been happening right before your eyes.”

I stiffen, my ears perking up as my heart begins to race.

“Do enlighten us then, you vile prick,” Gage murmurs, and finally, my attention slides from Eric. He smirks at me and widens his legs, crossing his arms over his chest.

My brows furrow, but I reluctantly drop my gun, following his lead. I trust the men around me. Trust them to keep Ella safe. Every one of us would rather die than to see her hurt. Never again.

The old fuck huffs a humorless laugh. “You have no idea who she is, do you? You have no idea who you protect or what you’re even protecting her from.”

I swallow down rocks at that.

We don’t know who she is, but I have an idea, and with every word, that thing in the back of my mind grows, telling me I’m right.

My fists clench, one around my gun, the other digs deep grooves into my palm, and I let the pain ground me.

“Get to the fucking point,” Nyx snarls. I feel him shift at my back, moving closer to Ella.

“For ten years, I’ve been banished from this city. My home. My career,” Eric barks. “I lost everything because of you.”

I bristle. Who the fuck does he think he is?

“What are you talking about, Eric? You abused me. You raped me. You are a sick man and always have been. You abused and raped Hunter.”

My head snaps to the side, watching as our brave girl rolls her shoulders back and takes a step forward. Love and unyielding adoration fills me alongside pride like I’ve never felt before.

I want to reach out, want to hold her, worship her.

“You’re the reason Cora killed herself. It was all your fault. Every single thing that happened to us was on you.”

I see her hand slowly move toward her gun as she subtly steps in front of Hunter, as though she needs to protect him.

My eyes flit to him, my *brother*, and what I see there has a surprising amount of rage filling me alongside the pride I feel for Isabella. He’s terrified. Utterly *terrified*. His face is the face of a person confronting their abuser for the first time, the force of it ripping the old scars wide open for everyone to see.

It’s a pain I know well.

I felt it every time I had to wake up and look my parents in the eyes.

“No,” Eric grits out, forcing my attention from Hunter. I slide my gaze slowly from him, my heart lodged in my throat. “It wasn’t.”

Eric’s hand moves to his back, something every one of us clocks but doesn’t react to. We’re all ready and confident that we can take this prick out faster than he can breathe.

“Spit it out,” Ella sighs, making my lip twitch. “Whatever you came here to do or say, get on with it. We have a party to get to.”

We certainly do, though I doubt we’ll be going to it now. The second we get the information we need, one of us will be killing the sick fucker, then calling in whatever favors we need to take care of him.

After that...after that, we’ll want to be home, with her, with them. Not at a party with hundreds of strangers.

Eric scoffs. “You really don’t know anything, do you? You’re not going anywhere tonight except a body bag. I was hired to take you in, little doll. I was hired to hurt you. To ruin you. I was hired to make sure your memories never came back.” He shakes his head, and the hand not behind his back runs through his greasy grey hair. “And then you had to go and open your mouth. You had to go and get yourself taken from me.”

Nausea swirls in my gut. Of all my theories, that never once came up as a possibility. Why would someone hire him to mess with a child's mind? Who would do that, and to what end? It makes no sense.

“Who hired you?” Gage asks, echoing my own thoughts. “Who hired you to hurt her? The same men who have been after her and Hunter?”

“That was me!” Eric shouts, his wrinkled face turning a frightening shade of red. “I hired the men to get her and kill the extra.”

A growl slips free from my throat as he jerks his chin to Hunter.

Extra?

Fuck. No.

“I knew he was coming for you today. I had to get you first. The ultimate revenge. Taking out the object of his obsession before he claims you. All he's ever wanted was you,” he throws an accusing finger at Ella. “You opened your mouth and got the cops involved. You got sent away, and he wouldn't protect me anymore. We made a deal. I got to have you, play with you, and anyone else I wanted as long as I kept you in my house. As long as I made sure you didn't leave. Twisted you up enough that you never remembered where you came from. I did my part. Then you left, and that little bitch killed herself —”

Synapses fire in my brain, desperately trying to connect the dots.

Who would want Ella enough to set this entire thing up?

The Remingtons? Her real family, whoever they are?

Are they in The Circle? Higher than them?

Fuck. I run a hand through my hair, confusion and anxiety making me dizzy.

Who's higher than The Circle locally? No one.

Higher...

Diaz?

“Cora!” Ella screams. “Say her *fucking name*, you coward. She killed herself because you *destroyed* her!”

He tosses a hand in the air, uncaring. “I don’t give a fuck who she was. She didn’t matter. But without protection, I couldn’t cover up her death. We had to leave the city. Spent the last ten years on the run. Lost everything. Had to hire those worthless idiots to come get you. Even paid the governor’s psycho kid to bring you to me.”

Ella gasps, and I jolt. Nyx rumbles a deep growl, and Gage sucks in a breath, but it’s Maddox I’m worried about. He’s eerily still, and I’m not sure he’s even breathing.

Am I?

“Didn’t know that, did you? Andrew Remington was paid a lot of money by someone to keep tabs on you, little doll. He

wasn't supposed to fuck with you so much, but what can you do? Kid was crazy.”

“I'm going to kill him,” Gage murmurs, and I nod, my fingers flexing around my gun.

“I don't understand,” Ella whispers, breaking my heart. “You paid Drew to keep tabs on *me*? Why?”

Why fucking exactly.

“I didn't put him in your life, but you'd be surprised at the lengths people have gone to for information about the infamous Princess of the Bay.” His smirk drops, and this time, I really do stop breathing. “But when these guys started looking for him, he tucked his tail and ran. Spent all his daddy's money and needed more to keep up his drug habit.”

Just like that, the dots finally connect.

The Princess of the motherfucking Bay.

“So, you showed up and paid him to bring Ella to you,” I surmise.

“You need her for whatever sick plan you've concocted. Revenge or whatever it may be. You hired Drew, and when he failed, you put a hit out on Hunter and a kidnapping order on Isabella. Did I miss anything?”

Come on, fucker. Spit it out. Say it. I need to hear it.

Eric barks an ugly laugh, sending shivers across my arms. His eyes flit between me and Hunter, making my blood turn to ice.

His smile is feline. “Always knew you were a smart kid. Just like your daddy.”

My gaze slides to Hunters, and our eyes connect, a silent question passing between us.

Who the fuck is this guy?



Chapter 5

WHY IS HE LOOKING at me like that?

It's the first thought that swirls into my mind as I watch Stone watch me with a desperation I've never seen in his eyes. But before I can say anything, Eric speaks again, and my world spins.

“Did you like my calling card? It was just for you.”

Calling card.

My mother.

“Opal Morris,” I choke out, my voice raspy from disuse or pain; I'm unsure. All I know is that the organ in my chest is currently trying to beat its way through my skin.

“Who the fuck are you?” Nyx barks.

He's much closer now, having inched his way toward Ella at some point. Her fingers are clammy in mine, or maybe she's strong and steady, and I'm the one falling apart.

I have no idea.

All I know is that I can't let go of her. Even the small distance between us feels like too much. Every step she takes toward Eric feels like an ocean too far.

“How do you know Stone's father?”

Eric's practically dancing with laughter, and I'm momentarily taken back to that time and place when he was so much bigger, so much more terrifying than he is now. A time when he could hurt me, bend me, break me, just for his sick enjoyment. A time when I had no choice but to let him.

I have a choice now, though.

I'm bigger than him. I'm stronger than him. With Ella and these men, this family she's created for herself, surrounding us, I no longer feel like the weak little boy I once was.

"I'm in the Circle, of course." Eric grits his teeth. "I was in the Circle." He points an accusing finger at Ella and me. "You ruined everything, you worthless pieces of shit."

I flinch, and Ella rubs her thumb over my palm. I should be the one comforting her, protecting her. I should be the one shoving her behind me so I can turn him to bloody ribbons.

But I can't fucking move.

Why can't I move?

"Who is Isabella?" Stone murmurs, his voice cool and calm. For some reason, his confidence soothes my frayed nerves.

Eric smiles, his hand sliding from behind his back. Everyone moves at once, and I tighten my hand around Ella's, instinct screaming at me to take her and run. But she doesn't let me run.

Doesn't let me.

Doesn't let me.

Instead, she lets go of my hand and steps forward, leaving her line of men at her back like the willing soldiers they are.

We are.

"Wait," she says softly, holding her hand out to stop them as a chorus of clicks fills the air. "I need to know."

They all make sounds of irritation, but I say nothing, do nothing.

Why can't I do anything?

Gage steps forward, and my eyes track him as he slides in behind Ella and bends down. I hear him murmur softly in Spanish, words I can't make out against the erratic beat of my heart whooshing in my ears.

He places his hands on her shoulders and squeezes. For some reason, seeing them together, him supporting her, not stifling her or holding her back, has my feet finally shuffling forward. Ella stands taller, like she truly knows she's not alone in this world. Like she'll never be alone again.

Her fingers wrap around mine, and I realize I'm not alone either.

They're a unit. A team. A family.

And maybe, just maybe, I can finally be a part of that, too.

Ella takes a deep breath, steadying herself, and I squeeze her hand in mine. "Do you know who I am?"

My heart picks up to a painful pace as he smiles and nods. His gaze lazily slides over the empty parking lot, but his body is tense, his grey beard ticking along with his jaw.

"I do." He flicks his eyes back to her, then to me. "He's always wanted your blood, little doll." His head tilts, brows furrowing, and I shiver at the sick name and words. Who is he? Why does Eric keep referring to some elusive man? "From the moment I met him, it was always about your blood. Your

mother first, and then you.” He shakes his head, his smile dropping. “He thinks you’re the key. He needs your name, your blood. He played the long game. Kept you alive but broken until you turned twenty-three.”

Stone sucks in a sharp breath, and I feel Gage stiffen next to me.

Her hand shakes in mine, and just like she had before, I smooth my thumb over her skin, reminding her we’re here. Whatever he says, whatever he does, we’re here.

“I’m not twenty-three, though,” Ella rasps.

Even though I know she’s right, I also know she could be wrong. We don’t know when she was born or where. Don’t know who her family is, or fuck, who she is.

It’s never mattered to me. Not for a single second. But I know how badly her blank past bothers her. Know how much she wants those lost memories. Wishes the darkness was bathed in light.

Eric’s smile is slow and tortuous. “How do you know? Do you know your birthday? You don’t know anything.” His eyes flick between the men surrounding me. “You don’t even know who stands next to you.”

“I do,” she snaps. “They are Los Diablos. I know them.”

But does she? Do any of us really know each other? It’s been a whirlwind the last few months, and though I’ve worked for them for years, I hardly know the men who surround us.

That’s not true, my mind whispers.

Eric shakes his head. “You really don’t. None of you know anything, but we’re running out of time, so, unfortunately for you, little doll—” Eric breaks off. I see it before he’s even made the decision to move, and finally, finally, my body knows what to do. His hand flies up, the gun cocked and ready, as he cackles his final words. “You won’t be alive to find out.”

Everything happens so fast, but my soul has made the decision to react before my mind can even comprehend it.

Eric’s gun goes off, but I barely hear it as I jolt forward and wrap my body around Ella’s.

Ella.

The only woman I’ve ever loved.

The only person I’ve ever truly cared for.

The only one who’s ever mattered.

I don’t see the world spin as I cocoon her in my embrace and twist my body to take the brunt of the fall when we hit the ground, or I try to, at least.

I don’t see the lights swirling around us or the chaos that breaks out in the parking lot.

I have no idea where the guys are or if Eric’s alive.

All I know is that Ella is wrapped in my arms, and she’s safe.

She’s safe.

She’s safe.

My eyes burn, my head throbs, but my arms tighten around her.

She's safe.

She's safe. I think my eyes are closed, but I'm not sure anymore. All I know is that I can't see the stars or the flecks of blue and green I love so much—the never-ending depths of the ocean meeting vibrant green hills of rolling grass.

Life. She's always been life. Even when I didn't want to live mine anymore, she embodied it. I smile to myself. Ella is life, and she has no idea.

I open my mouth to tell her, but nothing comes out.

She's safe.

She's safe.

But then, there's screaming. Or maybe it's me. Maybe it's me crying out for her because I don't see her anymore. My Ella. My world. My beginning and ending.

Something collides with my gut as the screams grow. I try to move, try to respond, but everything is so heavy here in the darkness. Everything is hazy and blurry. There's a swirling in my gut and a pain in my chest that I don't understand.

None of it matters, though, because she's safe. She's—

“Get off me!” a soft voice cries, pushing me harder with a delicate fist.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, alarm bells are going off. I know it's her. My Ella. I know she's crying, begging,

pleading, but I can't make my brain work with my body. And then, she whimpers in pain.

With a heavy breath, I tighten my arms around her and try to move. The world spins again, and I groan, panting hard. Why's it so difficult to breathe?

"Elle," I grunt, my voice pained and raspy. Why do I sound like that? "I've got you."

"Hunt," she whimpers, her body going still in my arms. "Please."

Her voice is so sweet, and somehow, it soothes the burn deep in my chest. The ache that's beginning to grow with every erratic beat of my heart. And then, we were moving. Or maybe the world was. The sensation of falling lasted long after my back slammed into the harsh concrete beneath me.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Will she catch me?

"Hunter, say hello to your new sister. This is Ella. Ella, this is Hunter," Eric snaps, making me bristle.

I say nothing. I can't. How can I speak when this is all so wrong? Why did he bring another kid here when he can't even take care of me? Why did he bring someone so sweet, so

innocent, into this house when he already hates having me here?

He's going to break her.

And I can't do anything about it.

"Hunter!" Eric shouts, and I watch as the new girl jumps, her tiny blue-green eyes going wide, and something in me snaps.

He wants her to be my sister, my family, but if that happens, it means she'll stay, and if she stays...

She smiles softly at me.

Too soft.

She's too good, too sweet.

Too weak.

Too small.

No. She can't stay.

"She's not my damn sister!" I shout, my fist smashing against the table.

Eric sighs loudly. "We've been going over this for weeks, Hunter. As long as you live here, we're a family. Ella lives here now, so get used to it. Be polite or else."

Ella? She doesn't look like an Ella.

She looks...

Nice.

Too nice for this house.

She can't stay.

But then, her tiny smile grows, and somehow, her face lights up like the first ray of sunshine this bleak home has ever seen, and the ugly heart buried deep in my chest finally feels something.

Hope.

So, I swallow back my anger and whisper words that I know will change my life.

“Hi, Ella.”

I blink at the memory, trying to focus on the here and now, but it's so damn hard when all I want to do is sleep. To succumb to the memories that twist and writhe in my soul. Some of the best moments of my life took place in that house, and they were all because of her.

The first time, someone smiled at me and meant it.

The first time, someone hugged me and meant it.

The first time, someone said they loved me and meant it.

Ella *meant* it. Everything she did, everything she said. She was pure light in a world of darkness.

The ache in my chest grows, and I force my eyes open just as my teeth begin to chatter. My brows dip. When did it get so cold? I swallow the bitter taste filling my mouth. I just need her. Need to see her, touch her, hold her.

I need to remind her how much I love her.

She's blurry, but I can make out her hunched-over form as she frantically searches, searches, searches. Is she searching for me or for them?

My hand feels like it weighs a million pounds between us, but I finally gather her fingers with mine, tangling them together. Ella's head snaps in my direction, and the second those perfect, wide eyes connect with mine, I know I'm done for.

I'm gonna marry this girl someday.

She's just so beautiful, so sweet and kind. Even back then, when we were kids in that rotting house, I knew she was mine. Back then, our love was different. My feelings were different. I knew I couldn't live without her. I knew she was my best friend. My favorite mornings and warmest evenings. The only time I ever felt whole, felt seen, felt safe.

Since then, that feeling has only grown.

I swallow, and my mouth is dry. I suck in a breath to cough, and it's then that I realize the ache in my heart isn't just because I love Ella so much but because it hurts, actually hurts.

It's burning like someone stuck a flaming hot poker beneath my skin and twisted it until all that was left was my acrid ash, and yet, it also feels like *nothing*.

That can't be good.

My finger slides up her hand, finding her bare wrist beneath her dress, and I weakly tug her forward, gritting my teeth with

the movement. Ella snuffles and shuffles forward, her eyes wet with tears as she takes me in.

Fuck. It really is bad, isn't it?

Her soft hands squeeze my cheeks as she frantically searches my body for injury. I try to say it's my heart that hurts, but nothing comes out.

Ella cries out, her head whipping back and forth. The pain is red-hot as she shoves her hands down onto my shoulder, pressing it into the gravel.

"Stop," I grunt, but the sound is weak and empty like my body's too busy spending all of its waning energy on loving her.

With every beat of my burning heart, I love her, and every twist of my stained soul, I need her.

Does she need me, too?

God, I hope so.

Will she love me even when I'm gone?

Elle," I try again. "I'm so tired."

She presses down harder, her hands trembling.

"You idiot," she cries.

Her hands slip, and her eyes go wide, even as her light skin pales. Bad sign. That's a really bad sign. I don't say that, though; instead, I smile as she rambles. My pretty girl. My perfect, sweet girl. Too good for this world.

“You jumped in front of a bullet for me. Why, Hunter? Why?”

How could I not?

I’d jump in front of anything for her. A bus, a train, a plane, a car...

Fuck. I’m losing it.

I have to touch her. Just this one more time. I have to promise her things I should have promised her a long time ago.

No, don’t hurt her.

Internally, I scoff. I would never hurt her on purpose.

She’s my life.

I reach a shaky hand up and cup her cheek, my pathetic smile never dropping. Ella sucks in a breath and leans forward when my lips part, and a raspy sound escapes.

“It’s the least I could do,” I whisper. I think my brows dip. I meant to say that louder, more sure, more confident. “He took so much from you. We both did.”

A ragged sob pours from my baby’s lips, and I try to silence it, but nothing comes out.

“No,” she chokes out, her head shaking frantically. “No. That’s not—you didn’t—I—”

“Shh,” I breathe. I don’t want to see her so upset. Not now. Not ever. “I’m okay. Calm down.” My eyes drift closed as

everything goes hazy, goes dark. “I’m just tired. I just need to rest for a minute.”

In the darkness, the world slowly starts to trickle in, and I finally hear something other than her. There’s screaming and shouting, bullets ricocheting off metal, and guns being fired. It’s a war, and in the morning, I’ll be nothing more than its first casualty.

She won’t be, though. Never her. Not while I still breathe.

“You need to hide, Elle.”

“I’m not leaving you,” she shouts, pressing harder to staunch the wound. “Never.”

I want to smile at her adamant promise, but everything’s just so heavy, so dark, so quiet.

The warning bells get quieter, too, and I know that’s a bad sign.

Bad. So bad.

“Forgive me, Elle. Okay? Say it, please.”

She chokes on another sob, this one keening and born from deep inside her soul. I get it. I feel it, too. “There’s nothing to forgive. Nothing. There never was. I love you, Hunter. I do. I love you. I promise.”

“It was always you,” I rasp.

She shakes me, but I can’t look at her. Not yet.

Nap first. Love her later.

Love her always.

Ella starts to scream, but I barely hear the jumbled mess of words spilling from her lips.

In the darkness, I see her. I see her smile, her eyes playful as she holds out her hand. I see her wrap her fingers around mine and grin up at me. I see her lips move with the words, the promise we've made to each other again and again since we were kids. A promise born in the darkness.

“You fall, I fall—” I whisper as Ella starts to pull me back into the black abyss. I'll go anywhere she wants me to. Anywhere.

I think I hear a scream. I think I feel my body being moved. Think I feel my soul fracture along with hers, but I ignore it because I've got my girl in my arms, and she's smiling at me like she means it.

She always meant it.



Chapter 6

EVERYTHING IS MUDDLED AROUND me and I can't make sense of my world, my life, my mind. I don't know what's real. Can't tell the difference between soul-wrenching nightmares and long-forgotten dreams.

My mother. My family. My only family.

Skylar Moreau.

They're gone.

Princess of the Bay.

He died in my arms.

Daniel and Evelyn were there. They killed my men. They took them from me, and then they took me.

Blood. So much blood. So many bodies scattered on the ground.

Dead.

The parking lot was chaotic. There were people running everywhere.

Dead.

My mother.

Dead.

I remember.

Dead.

"You fall, I fall—"

Hunter's dead.

“Where are they?” I scream.

The person holding me, stealing me, pauses and tightens their arms around my body as they murmur, “They’re gone.”

Stone is dead.

Maddox is dead.

Gage is dead.

Nyx is dead.

They’re all dead, and I...I’m in the darkness.

I want to stay here forever. Because my life without them is nothing. Without them, I am nothing.

My heart cleaves in two, and I let it. My surroundings go black, and I let them. My mind turns to ash and flames and pain, and I let it. The numbness claws at my insides, and I let it.

I welcome it.

But when the room spins, and my eyes drift shut, it’s not the darkness that greets me, embracing me like an old, familiar friend.

It’s the memories. It’s my past. Everything I’ve long since forgotten. Things that were once tucked away for safekeeping—held until this exact moment as if my mind knew this was coming.

And as the first vision flickers to life and dread coils in my gut, I realize that the memories I’d wished and prayed would return for all those years were better left dead.



Chapter 7

5 Years Old

“TRY AGAIN, SKYE,” UNCLE Milo says softly, guiding me toward the gun range.

My head shakes, and I sniffle, wiping my face with the back of my hand. “I don’t want to.” I’m tired and hungry. I don’t want to do this anymore.

He sighs and turns me around to face him before dropping to his knees. His rough hands cup my cheeks softly. “I know, sweetheart. Can you tell me why, though?”

I look from him to the row of guns laid out on a table. They’re so scary. So loud. I hate it. They make my hands hurt and my body sore. But I don’t want to tell him that. He loves teaching me things, and I love learning. If I tell him, he might stop.

So, I just shake my head as more tears spill free.

His bright green eyes look between mine before his face goes soft, and his thumb brushes my tears away. “Okay,” he murmurs, his thickly bearded, tan face kicking up in a wide smile. “What do you say we end class for the day and go find Auntie Charlotte for some pizza.”

“And Mommy?” I smile as I ask, but he swallows hard and looks away. “It’s ok—”

For just a second, he looks so sad, but he shakes it away and smiles at me as he stands to his full height. He’s so tall, so big. Mommy is tall, too, but me and Char are small.

“Of course, she can. She’s part of our family.” He reaches out a hand and gives me a playful smile. He waits for me to

reach out and accept his offer. He doesn't push, doesn't force me to touch him. He's just so...nice.

So, I reach out and grab his hand, letting him guide me from the indoor shooting range under our house to upstairs. This place is huge. It's bigger than any of the other houses on our street, but it's so warm and comfortable. I love it here.

Our hands swing as he guides me through the long hallways toward Char's office. Miles takes a corner, sharp and fast, and he starts to run. I gasp, but it turns into a squeal as he spins me around, his laughter booming off the walls. I look up, seeing his bright smile and kind eyes just before he picks me up and tosses me in the air, making me giggle.

"So, chipmunk." He plops me on his shoulders, and I wave my hands in the air, marveling that I can almost touch the top of the hall ceiling. "¿Qué tipo de pizza quieres?"

I tap my chin, pretending to think about it. "Piña!" I shout just as we arrive at our destination. Aunty Char looks up from a stack of papers, and a huge smile spreads across her face.

"There are my favorites," she calls, sliding her reading glasses from her nose as she jumps to her feet.

Miles laughs and bends down so I don't hit my head on the doorframe. "We decided to end class a bit early today in favor of pizza."

They share a look, and her smile wavers for a second before coming right back. She heads toward us and wraps her arms

around his waist. Char's so small Miles has to bend his knees to give her a kiss, and I fake gag. "Gross."

They both chuckle as he drops into a chair and sets me on my feet, kissing my cheek before shoving me into Char's waiting arms. She sits down in the chair next to him and tugs me into a hug that I immediately sink into.

Her eyes are the prettiest blue I've ever seen, and her face is covered in freckles like mine. I hope to grow up and look just like her someday. Char smells like flowers. She reminds me of home and safety. Mommy does, too, but it's different with Char. She's my best friend.

"So," she murmurs, brushing my hair from my face. "Not that I'm not really happy to see you, but wanna tell me why you two ended class early?"

When I don't say anything, she gives me a sad look and holds her arms open. I crawl into her lap, and she snuggles me, her fingers threading through my short, black hair. "Almost time for a touch-up," she murmurs, tracing the lighter strands of hair at my scalp. Every month, Mommy dyes and cuts my hair. I don't know why, but I'm used to it.

Miles chuckles. "You're almost as high-maintenance as your aunt." I know he's trying to make me laugh, but I don't.

Char sighs and cups my face. "Come on, Mi Cielo," she murmurs, her accent thick. My lips twitch like they always do when she calls me that. Her Skye. "What's wrong?" I bite my cheek. Her brows lift. "We can't help you if you don't talk to us."

“You know we just want you to be happy, right?” Miles asks, tapping my nose. I nod slowly, and he smiles reassuringly.

My eyes water. “I’m sorry!” I blurt, covering my face. “I hate guns! They’re loud and scary, and they make my arms hurt.” I sniffle. “And—” I fall into a fit of tears, unable to finish my sentence.

Char lets out a long breath and cradles me to her chest, rocking me back and forth. She never judges me for crying or being sad; she just reminds me that I’m safe and loved.

Miles drops to his knees next to us and bundles us both in his arms, keeping us close until I finally stop crying. Then, he wipes my tears away.

“And what?” he presses.

I shrug, my fingers tangling with Char’s pretty pink dress. “I didn’t want you to be mad at me.”

“How much do I love you?” he asks, his voice soft.

I sniffle, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. “More than all the stars in the sky.”

“And how much do *I* love you?” Char murmurs, kissing my face before blowing a raspberry on my cheek.

I giggle, and it turns into a loud laugh when she starts to tickle me. “Stop!” I cry, feeling so loved and happy between them. “Aunty, stop!”

“Well,” she laughs. “Say it! How much?”

“More than all the fishies in the sea!” I yell, panting for breath.

She stops and bobs her head, smiling wide. “That’s right, Mi Cielo.”

“And if we love you both that much, why in the world would we ever be mad at you for telling us the truth, hmm?” Miles asks, his bushy brows lifting. I shrug, and he sighs, his face going serious. “Skylar, I need you to promise me something.”

I bite my lip and nod, my stomach flipping at his stern voice. “Okay.”

“If there ever comes a time where someone, anyone, does anything that makes you uncomfortable, I need you to promise to speak up. Okay? Don’t worry about their feelings or making them upset. If you don’t feel right, you say so.”

“How will I know?”

Char taps my head. “Your mind will know if something is wrong. Trust it.”

“But,” I start, my face scrunching up. “My mind said there were monsters under the bed, and Mommy said it was just my imagination and not to believe it.”

Miles clicks his tongue. “That’s different.” His head tilts. “Do you trust Aunty Charlotte and me?”

“Yes,” I say right away. “I do.”

“Do you feel safe with us?” she asks.

“Yes,” I agree again.

“And how do you know? What part of your body says that you’re safe?” Miles prods, his expression soft and patient.

I think about it for a long moment. “My stomach is calm when you’re around. It doesn’t twist or get nervous like it does at the dentist.” He nods, his smile growing. “And my heart doesn’t race like it does when I have to do weapons training.” His smile falters. “And my brain doesn’t tell me to run away like it does sometimes.”

“What times?” he asks right away, sitting up straighter.

I try to hide in Char’s hair, knowing I’m going to be in trouble. I shouldn’t have said that.

“Skylar,” she says, her voice harder than it had been before. It’s her business voice. The one she uses when she works.

I don’t know what Char and Miles do, but I know she’s in charge and bosses men around. And they listen. I want to be her when I grow up.

With a huff, I pull away and look at the floor. “Sometimes,” I whisper, “When you’re working and I’m supposed to be in my room, I sneak out.” Her body goes tense under mine, and Miles curses. My eyes go wide. “That’s a dollar in the jar, Uncle Miles.”

He pulls his wallet from his pocket and drops it on the desk. “I have a feeling I’ll be needing more than a dollar before we’re done here.”

Char pokes my belly softly. “On with it, missy.”

“I like watching you work,” I say, smiling at her, hoping she’s not too mad. She just tilts her head, waiting for me to go on. “I really do. You’re so smart and brave and—”

“Skylar,” Miles says again. “What did you see?”

“Not much!” I blurt. “Just you saying hi to a bunch of people at the front door.”

“And?”

“And I followed you to the meeting room,” I say it all in one word, then take a deep breath before turning wide eyes to Char. “You have really mean friends.”

She hisses, and Miles curses three more times in a row. I give him a look, and he jumps to his feet and gently tosses me his wallet. “Take it all, chipmunk.”

I grin, my fingers tearing it open, but Char tugs it from my hands and throws it back on the desk, giving me a stern look. “Why did you follow us?”

I shrug. “I really like to watch you work.”

She stares at me for a long moment, but she doesn’t look mad. “What part do you like to watch?”

Smiling, I tap her cheek. “I love watching you make all the big, mean men sit down and shut up.”

“Oh, mon Dieu!” she gasps before tossing her head back with a laugh. “Enfant méchant.”

My face scrunches. “What’s that one mean?” She’s been teaching me French for the last few months while Miles is

working on Spanish, but I'm still having a hard time with a lot of the words.

She lets out a long breath, her cheeks pink, making her freckles and eyes pop. "Rotten, naughty child." Char slides me from her lap and stands up, moving behind her desk. "So, Mi Cielo. Let's make a bargain."

I drop down into the chair across from her and bundle my hands on my lap like this is a real business meeting. "Yes, ma'am."

She chuckles, and Miles comes to stand next to her. "I understand that you don't like weapons training, but, unfortunately, it's a requirement." I bite my lip, and she gives me a soft look. "We need you to know how to protect yourself, Skye. The world is a big, scary place, but it's also beautiful. We want you to be able to explore, to have the biggest, most incredible life imaginable, but we need you to be safe while you do it. Does that make sense?"

"Do all kids learn this stuff?" I wonder.

They shoot each other a look before Miles responds. "We promised we'd always be honest with you unless it makes you unsafe to know certain things." I nod. They did promise that. "Most children, hell, most adults, will never learn the things that you will. But that's not a bad thing."

"Why do I have to then?"

"Because you're special." I give him a look, and he chuckles. "You're also too smart for your own good. Tell me,

would you rather learn how to protect yourself and others while speaking three languages and kicking boys' butts or play in the mud?"

I shrug. "Both."

Charlotte laughs. "Okay, then. Let's make that deal. You keep learning what you're learning, trusting that we're teaching you so you'll always be safe. And I'll also start teaching you the things you want to learn."

"That's a lot of learning," I point out.

"You're right," she murmurs, tapping her desk. "In exchange, you'll get nights and weekends off, just like in real school. You can play in the mud all you like."

"And make friends?" I ask. "Can I go places and have sleepovers?" I saw one in a movie once. I want one.

She gives me a long, sad look. "Would you be okay with us coming back to that one, Mi Cielo? Your uncle and I need to discuss that with Madeline."

I huff, leaning back in my chair. "Fine." I look up at them. "What other things will you teach me?"

"What do you want to know?" she asks.

I don't even have to think about it. "How to be like you when I grow up."

Char looks at me for a long moment and sniffs, wiping her eyes. "Okay," she rasps.

“Can we eat now?” I ask, jumping to my feet. “I’m so hungry, I could eat a cow.”

“Or a bottle of Ranch,” she chuckles, also standing.

Miles laughs and rounds the desk. “One more thing,” he says, his hands on his hips as he looks down at me. “Who makes you feel like you should run away?”

My heart sinks, remembering the cold, scary man I’d seen that day before the meeting. I shiver.

“Mr. Luna.”



Chapter 8

“FUCK,” I RASP, MY mouth dry. I swallow and choke on nothing.

Cold seeps into my bones, sharp and unforgiving. My eyes flutter open, but all that greets me is a haze of confusion. My head throbs with a pulsing ache, and my breath comes in ragged, uneven bursts that only worsen my panic.

Where am I?

The question hangs heavy and unanswered. The space is tight. Suffocating. Four walls, glaringly bright, press in on me from all sides. It's as if they're closing in, a relentless grip on my barely-there sanity.

I try to steady my trembling hands, but they just won't stop shaking. My fingers brush against the soft walls, the texture foreign and unsettling.

This isn't right.

This isn't normal.

Everything's blurry, and I bend over, catching myself on my hands and knees as the room spins again. Everything is so bright, so painful, so *blank*.

It's blank.

Blank.

Why's it blank?

My stomach lurches, and I scramble sloppily to a corner. With my eyes squeezed shut, I ram my head right into the wall and groan. My fingers claw at the floor as I vomit up the

meager contents of my stomach. Again and again, until nothing is left but acrid bile.

Once I'm sure I'm done, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and crawl the short distance to the opposite wall. I drop onto my ass and lean my head against the wall. I breathe deeply, letting the room come back into focus.

A cell.

My head rolls side to side, finding the surface under me soft.

No. Not just a cell.

A padded room.

Solitary confinement.

What the hell happened?

I blink once, twice, my brows pinching. My eyes scan the room, and sure enough, the walls are padded, but they aren't white. Not really. Not anymore. They're yellowed and tinged with dirt and decay. I run my fingers over the ground, finding deep nail marks gouged into the floor, and my heart rate kicks up.

“No. No. *Fuck no.*”

Panic clings to me like a second skin, a relentless shadow, as I scramble to my feet. The world spins in a disorienting whirlpool, and I clutch at my head, trying to hold onto the fraying threads of reality. My shoulder hits a wall, and I stumble over my feet.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

No more cells. No more prisons. No more cages.

I promised myself. I *swore* I'd never be held again, not like this.

Blackness dots the edges of my vision, and I try to shake it off, but I can't.

I can't.

I can't.

There's a growing sense of dread, an undeniable truth that wraps its icy fingers around my heart—I can't get out. Every surface, every inch of this cell is cushioned with madness, a cruel mockery of comfort. My fingers scrape across the padded walls as I beat my fists against them. I suck in a sharp breath, my eyes burning against my will.

“Let me out! Please, someone, anyone! Let me out!” I shout, my words reverberating in the oppressive silence, bouncing off the walls like desperate echoes. I haven't begged since I was a child, but I'm begging now, already inherently knowing it's useless. “*Please!*”

But there's no response, no comforting voice, no soothing touch. I'm alone in another nightmare.

Memories surge forward without my permission like a torrential flood, threatening to drown me.

“No!” I shout, my voice cracking. I shake my head, panting, gasping desperately. “Never again,” I choke out.

I hunch over, clawing at my throat, forcing my breaths to come, but they won't. With every second that passes, the familiar feeling of a panic attack forces me deeper into darkness.

Against my will, I start to see it all over. The fucked up time of my life, better known as my childhood, or lack thereof. I never got to be a kid, not really, only in brief, fleeting moments with a family that was chosen, not designed.

I remember being locked away in a small, dark room as a kid, the stifling confinement suffocating my very soul. The walls had seemed to close in on me then, too, crushing my spirit while my cries for salvation fell on deaf ears.

Again and again.

I cried. I screamed. I begged.

And just like now, no one came.

Until one day, they did. The two people who were supposed to love me above all else came and took me away. I'd been so fucking happy. I'd smiled at my dad. Clung to my mom.

And then...

Tears sting my eyes as I crumple to the padded floor, my breaths coming in ragged gasps of desperation. The room continues to spin, a maddening carousel of torment. I clutch at the memories, unable to escape their grip. The past and present blur together, the lines between reality and nightmare tangling into a chaotic mess of pain and heartache.

The cage.

Faces from my past loom before me, distorted and grotesque, their voices echoing with laughter and taunts. I curl into a ball, my eyes squeezed shut, trying to shut out the madness, the relentless assault on my sanity.

In this padded cell, trapped within the confines of my own mind, I get lost to the merciless cycle of reality and despair. The room closes in on me, and I'm adrift in a sea of torment, praying for release. For the elusive savior that never comes.

“Mama!” I cry, banging on my bedroom door. My hands and arms hurt, but I can't stop. I'm so cold, so hungry. I want to sleep, but the floor hurts, and the room is starting to smell bad. I claw at the wood. “Daddy! Please!”

No one comes.

No one ever comes.

I fall onto the floor and curl into a ball. My body shakes from crying, but no tears come, either. Maybe they're all gone.

Just like my parents.

I think I fell asleep because suddenly, my bedroom door is opening, and my mom is picking me up. Her hands are soft, but she's not. She's rough and squeezes me too hard. I don't care. I'm happy she's here. I'm happy she saved me.

“I'm so hungry,” I cry, shaking in her arms. “Where have you been?”

“Shut up,” she hisses, squeezing me tighter when I start to slip. I’m seven, and even though I’m small for my age, she is too. She’s smaller now than she used to be. She looks older. Tired. Her voice is deeper and angrier.

She scares me.

I swallow back another sob as she turns away toward the hall. Over her shoulder, my eyes catch on my empty, dark room, and my heart hurts. I used to have things. I used to have a soft bed and toys and books. I used to have clean clothes, but now the only time I get to wear them is when I go see my friends.

It’s been days, maybe longer, since I’ve seen them.

I blink, and then my room is gone, and my dad is yelling. Mom drops me, and I fall to my knees, crying out.

“He’s too big for that shit,” he snaps. “You’re so fucking ridiculous, Mia!”

“Shut up—” Her mouth closes, and I see her eyes go big as she swallows. I bite my cheek, ignoring the pain as I climb to my feet and stand in front of Mom when he stomps over. His face is red, and somehow, he looks older, too.

He looks scary, too.

I love my dad in the way all kids love their parents, but mostly, mostly I think I hate him.

Because Mama is mean and scary, but my dad hurts.

He stops in front of me, and his eyes narrow. Slowly, his lips lift in a cruel smirk. They flick between me and Mom. I'm so small in front of him, and the longer we stand here, the more tired I become. I can't remember the last time I ate. Still, I don't cower. My arms cross over my chest, and he laughs.

"Gonna protect that bitch, huh?" He smiles.

I step forward, and I think I hear Mama laugh, too, but that doesn't make any sense. "You're not going to hurt my mother anymore."

Then, she does laugh.

It's loud and confuses me. My arms fall, and I turn to look back at her. Her long blonde hair isn't blonde anymore. It's grey and dingy with grease streaked throughout. Her clothes used to be perfect...always perfect, but now they're old and dirty. She's dirty.

She doesn't even smell like my mother anymore.

"Oh, you think you can protect me?" she huffs, rolling her eyes before glancing at my father over my head. Her face changes into something I haven't seen before—not from her. "Show him, Lucas."

I never even see his fist coming.

When he finally stops, Mama scoops me off the floor again, and I think, just for a moment, that maybe she's sorry. Maybe she's going to take care of me. Maybe she's going to make the pain go away.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she carries me to a big closet. Dad opens the door, and metal clangs, making my stomach twist.

“Wh-what is that?”

No one answers as she shoves me into something that’s hard against my skin my bones, and slams the metal door shut.

With tears in my eyes, I wrap my tiny fingers around the bars and cry out. My gaze stays locked on their cold ones until the closet door slowly slides shut.

Leaving me alone.

Again.

In the dark.

In a cage.



Chapter 9

MY BODY BOLTS UPRIGHT, and I'm disoriented, surrounded by soft blue walls in an unfamiliar office. Panic grips my chest as a flood of memories rushes back, mingling my past with my present into a chaotic mess. My heart hammers in my chest, and I frantically scan the room, my breaths coming in short, ragged gasps.

Then, I see them—Daniel and Evelyn, the only parents I've ever known. Their worried faces replace the masked figures I had feared moments ago. They're no longer dressed in ominous black, and the ski masks are nowhere in sight.

They look different.

Scared.

Sad.

Evelyn, with her greyish-blond hair pulled back into a small ponytail, wears jeans and a thick purple sweater. Her aging face is etched with grief and worry, and I quickly avert my gaze, swallowing thickly. My stomach twists when I see Daniel wrap his arms tightly around her. Instead of the black tac-gear he'd hidden behind earlier, he's now dressed in a long-sleeved red shirt and jeans, but his usually warm and comforting presence is absent.

They both look shattered, and the sight is nearly unbearable.

But so is the betrayal that writhes between us, twisting and turning until it's nothing but mangled memories of love and lies.

Turning away from them, my burning eyes land on an elegant, feminine desk adorned with a vase of flowers. Behind it sits a woman, and it hits me then that for the first time in over ten years, I'm seeing *her*. Really seeing her.

Though it kills me inside, I force myself to look into the eyes of Madeline Vega...my real mom.

She abandoned me.

Dead.

I thought she was dead.

I choke on the words swirling through my brain, forcing them down, down, down until I can finally breathe again. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Evelyn sway as if she wants to come to me, comfort me, but Daniel holds her back, and for that, I'm grateful.

I focus back on Madeline, who bears a striking resemblance to me. One that hits so hard and so deep it makes me gasp again, and my hand instinctively presses against my chest to soften the pain.

She smiles softly, but it lacks the warmth I used to know and love. I swallow hard, my gaze traveling down her figure, partially hidden behind the desk. She's petite, thin, yet strong. She wears a black sleeveless dress, revealing her golden tan skin, her biceps firm and taut as her hands clasp together on the desk.

She doesn't speak, doesn't move, as if she knows I need this moment to reorient myself with her. To come to terms with her

sudden presence in my life after so long.

To come to terms with reality.

She's not dead.

I scrutinize her face, and a sense of bittersweet recognition washes over me. Her once-chocolate brown hair, so much like my own, is now threaded with silver, a testament to the years that have passed since our separation. It's neatly pulled up into a tight chignon that makes her look sharp and almost harsh, but it's softened by the pearl studs in her ears and the makeup covering her face.

Her brows, just as thin as they've always been, rest gracefully above her eyes, giving her a dignified look. Her lips, coated in a shade of red lipstick that seems to scream confidence, hold a subtle smile that's missing the warmth I once knew and cherished. The edges of her lips bear the faintest lines, barely there wrinkles that tell the story of the years she's lived and the experiences she's had. It's hard not to feel bitter at the sight of them.

For me, they're a reminder of the life she lived without me.

I thought she was dead.

Her eyes, still vibrant but now softened with the passage of time, are lined with mascara that's slightly smudged, a hint of vulnerability in her carefully crafted appearance.

Madeline's skin, while showing the faintest signs of age, bears a testimony to a life fully lived. There are sunspots, those tiny imperfections scattered like constellations on her

face, each a reminder of days spent beneath the sun's warm embrace while I was busy drowning in the darkness.

I grit my teeth and breathe through the pain slowly. My fingers trace the pressure point cuff on my right wrist, and I let it ground me but force out the reminder of who it's from before it can cripple me all over.

The overall impression she gives is one of grace and poise, a woman who's lived a hard but full life. Who's *commanded* life. I want to hate her for it. Her lips tighten like she's trying to keep her secrets tucked away from me, and it only serves to piss me off.

For a moment, just one moment, I felt happiness to have her back. Joy and vulnerability at being in her presence. But now that anger is slowly taking over, mingling with frustration and devastation, I find myself looking at her differently. Noticing things I hadn't noticed before.

Her lips are similar to mine, though not as thick. Her mouth isn't as wide as mine. Her cheekbones differ slightly, more narrow than my own rounded face, devoid of freckles. Her eyes are bright green, resembling rolling hills, familiar yet distant. They look similar to mine, but not. Mine are blue-green, like seafoam and the sky.

I wonder if my father's eyes were blue, and the thought sends me sharply into a memory.

"Where is my daddy?" I ask, sniffing hard as I curl into Mama's lap.

She sighs and runs her fingers through my hair. “He’s gone.”

“But—” I start, blinking up at her. She makes a clicking sound and shakes her head.

“Wipe away your tears, my sweet Skye. No more of that. He’s gone, but your family is here. We love you. Don’t worry about what you don’t have. Love what’s right in front of you with your whole heart.”

My mother’s smile flickers as if she senses where my thoughts have gone.

She rises from her chair gracefully, like a queen commanding her subjects. Raising her hand, she gestures to a chair opposite her desk and says coolly, “I think we need to talk.”

I bite my cheek, my heart hammering, and barely swallow down the words, *no shit, Sherlock*.

Daniel takes a hesitant step forward, his eyes locked onto mine with a mixture of concern and uncertainty. “I don’t think this is a good—” He starts, his voice filled with a trembling reluctance, but before he can finish, Madeline cuts him off with a hiss of impatience.

“It’s time, Daniel,” she insists, her voice laced with a raw urgency that sends shivers down my spine.

She inhales deeply, her chest rising and falling with the weight of what’s about to transpire. I watch them, my fingers

digging into my thighs, feeling the tension build in the room like a gathering storm.

“We cannot keep putting this off,” she continues, her tone unwavering, her eyes shimmering with something I can’t understand. Daniel’s jaw tightens, and his gaze narrows on her before he reluctantly retreats, seeking solace in the comforting presence of Evelyn, his nod barely perceptible.

The room grows thick with unspoken emotions, and I find myself on the verge of dizziness, the weight of what’s about to happen threatening to consume me. I swallow hard, my gaze never leaving Madeline, who now looks at me with an expectant intensity.

With a slow and deliberate movement, I rise to my feet, the long black gown that Nyx had lovingly chosen for me cascading to my bare feet. My toes sink into the plush, white rug beneath me as I take unsteady steps toward my mother’s desk. Every inch of my body aches, but it’s the pain deep within my chest that threatens to shatter me.

This moment, one I’ve both dreaded and yearned for, is finally here, and the emotions that dredge up are almost unbearable.

But it’s the ache for *them* that keeps me moving.

I release my dress, and my fingers instinctively find their way to the armrests of the chair. As I lower myself into its comforting cushion, a profound emptiness engulfs me, and it’s not just the physical sensation of the chair beneath me. It’s the

gaping hole in my heart, the missing pieces of my soul that will never be restored.

Nyx.

Gage.

Maddox.

Stone.

I bite my lip until I taste blood as his name ghosts through my mind like a whisper.

Hunter.

Each breath I take feels like an effort, each heartbeat a reminder of the void left by years of unanswered questions, confusion, and the relentless devastation of not knowing who I truly am, combined with the loss of my new family—my future.

Madeline's eyes, though worn and aged, fix on me with a depth of emotion I can barely comprehend. She blinks rapidly, as if trying to force away a lifetime of sorrow and secrets. Her presence alone is a storm of emotions, a hurricane I can't escape. She settles into her own chair, her movements graceful yet filled with a heaviness that hangs in the air like a suffocating blanket.

She clears her throat, and I watch as her thin, bony fingers tangle on top of a stack of papers. "Would you like Daniel and Evelyn to stay for this or...?" Her voice trails off, giving me a chance to decide on my own.

I inhale a sharp, trembling breath, feeling the tension grip my chest like a vice. My fists clench the chair's arms, my knuckles turning bone-white as I grapple with an avalanche of feelings I can barely process.

It's so much, nearly *too* much.

Daniel and Evelyn have been my unwavering constants, the parents who have loved and protected me for as long as I can remember. They've given me a home, a sense of belonging, and the love I've yearned for. They helped me heal after...

I shake away his name.

They've been there for me as much as they could be, as much as I'd allow them to be. But now, in this surreal moment, as I sit in this unfamiliar office, gazing into the eyes of the woman who gave birth to me, I'm engulfed by a wave of doubt.

Can I trust them with the secrets that have been buried for so long when they've clearly been a part of it? For the years they listened to me cry, listened to me beg for just one flicker of my past, all the while knowing exactly who I was.

Were they in on it?

My throat clogs at the thought, but then, something deeper, darker, surges forward.

Did they know about Eric?

My eyes flit to Madeline.

Did she?

The weight of my decision bears down on me, and the room seems to close in, squeezing me in its vise-like grip as I struggle to make any decision at all when I can't even bring myself to speak. My entire body is trembling, my heart fracturing, and I'm trying, *trying* so hard to keep it all together.

I clench my eyes shut, blocking out the overwhelming rush of memories and emotions. My heart thunders in my chest, a rapid, erratic rhythm echoing my fear. Each breath feels like a struggle, coming in shallow, uneven gasps that betray the turmoil inside me.

In the depths of my mind, I conjure images of Madd's goofy smile, Nyx's unwavering strength, Gage's protective embrace, Hunter's soothing words, and Stone's quiet reassurance. I see them, their faces filled with love and warmth, kissing away my fears, and showering me with a sense of belonging I've longed for my entire life.

But then, the darkness sweeps over me, and I'm transported back to last night in the desolate parking lot, where lifeless bodies littered the ground like discarded trash.

My men.

My life.

My world.

Gone.

My eyes snap open as I inhale a sharp, shuddering breath, my body visibly trembling with fear and heartache. My chest

aches with the weight of unanswered questions, my eyes welling up with tears that threaten to spill over.

I slide my eyes to theirs. Instead of Evelyn's tear-stained eyes and wrinkled face, all I see is a black ski mask. Instead of Daniel's thin, tall frame draped in street clothes, I see him decked out in tactical gear while he wields a gun he should know nothing about.

They were there in that fucking parking lot. They saw everything

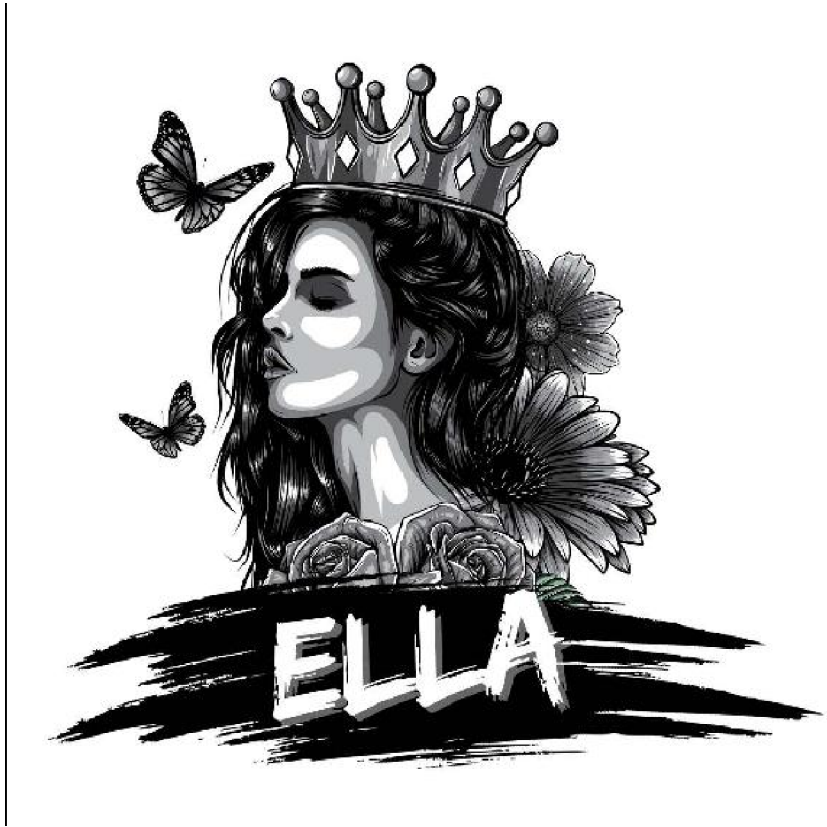
They broke *everything*.

I need answers.

"I need them here," I finally manage to say, my voice stronger than I feel.

The pain and fear that course through me are etched into every line of my body, every strained breath, as I cling to the hope that my family holds the key to unlocking the secrets that have tormented me for far too long.

I turn to Madeline and straighten my shoulders. "You're right." I fold my hands over my crossed legs, hoping she can't see how badly I'm shaking. "We do need to talk." *Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.* "Staring with you telling me where the hell you've been for the last decade, *Mother.*"



Chapter 10

“*G*OOD GIRL, PRINCESA. DON'T stop fighting for what you deserve.”

Out of everything, I don't know why it's Nyx's voice I hear, but he is the calm, deep rumble permeating my veins as I sit stoically across from my mother in painful silence.

Madeline continues to fix her gaze on me, and with each passing moment, the tension in the office becomes palpable, like an invisible force pressing down on my skin, making it itch. Her scrutiny is relentless, and I can feel her trying to unravel the complex web of emotions that must be written across my face.

Her eyes travel over me, lingering on the form-fitting black dress with long sleeves that plunges between my cleavage, revealing a hint of skin, and then up my leg, parting where my legs are crossed. Madeline's brows furrow and her jaw tenses as she pauses, her gaze locking onto one of the many scars that crisscross my body.

It's a stark reminder of the battles I've fought, both internal and external.

After she abandoned you, my brain chimes in. I try to shake it away, I really do. I try to tell myself that she probably had a good reason for abandoning me, but then Evelyn snuffles, and I'm back to being mad all over again.

The knowledge that my mother is seeing my scars for the first time should make me upset. Months or years ago, I would have instinctively hidden them, tears welling up in my eyes as

shame and insecurity washed over me. But now, I think of the men I love so much and how they've taught me to embrace my battle wounds, wear them like badges of honor.

I sit up taller, my posture unyielding, silently challenging Madeline to say something negative. It's as if I'm daring her to criticize the marks that tell the story of my resilience and the strength I've found within myself. The room remains heavy with unspoken words, and after a moment, she swallows thickly and looks away, her silence speaking volumes.

"Nothing to say?" I hedge, breathing through my anxiety. Her eyes snap to mine, and her narrow jaw ticks. I swallow and cock a brow. "You said we're out of time, whatever that cryptic comment meant, so say what you need to say because I have questions." *And I'm on the verge of losing my shit.* I don't say that, though, because I can't. Not now. Not in front of them, her.

"Skylar," she breathes, and my heart drops to the floor.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my hand is slamming down on her desktop. I think someone gasps, but I can't see anything past the red haze in my vision. "Do *not* call me that!"

Her mouth gapes open, and for the first time since I woke up here, I see a crack, a break, in her controlled façade.

Skylar Moreau.

That's what she called me.

Though part of the name sounds familiar, the last name doesn't.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs, her eyes flitting somewhere over my shoulder. She shakes her head slightly, and I know she’s telling the Hudsons not to intervene.

Turning back to me, she gives me a soft, sympathetic smile that makes my skin crawl. “I’m sorry, *Ella*,” she corrects. “I just look at you, and all I see is the little girl I used to know.” I watch her throat bob behind blurry eyes. “You look the same, but—”

“I’m not,” I interrupt. “I’m not the same at all.” My fingernails itch to cut bloody moons into my palms. Anything to distract me from the aching chasm in my chest. “I haven’t been *her* since the second you abandoned me at that hospital, bloody, broken, and *empty*.”

She flinches as though I’ve slapped her.

Another crack.

“It’s not what you think,” she defends with a sniff. “You have it all wrong.” When she looks away instead of continuing on, I nearly fucking scream.

What is wrong with this woman? Memories of the person, the mother, I once knew flit through my mind, but I shut that shit down. I was a child. Clearly, I didn’t know her the way I thought I did.

“Then explain it to me,” I say blankly, even though every nerve and fiber of my being is screaming for answers.

Her hand waves through the air as if to dismiss me, and I nearly lose it. “That’s not important right now. It’s a

conversation for another time.”

“Like hell it is.” This time, it’s Evelyn speaking up. Her hand grips my shoulder, but I don’t dare drag my eyes from the woman before me. I can’t. If I look at Evelyn, I’ll crumble. “Ella deserves to know the truth. All of it, Maddie.”

Maddie.

Somehow, the nickname is too soft, too gentle, for her.

My mother keeps her eyes locked on Evelyn’s, and for a long beat, no one speaks. No one barely breathes. Every second that ticks by makes my muscles bunch and my throat close. I can’t stand it.

“Why?” My voice breaks. “Why, Madeline? Why did you leave me like that? Why didn’t you come back for me?”

“I tried,” she breathes, and it’s the first truly honest thing I think she’s said. I can tell by the way the tears she’s kept at bay finally spring free. By the way her body goes lax, as if she can’t keep her mask up any longer. It’s the glint of the mom I once knew peaking through. “I tried, Sk–Ella. I really did. But there’s so much more at play here that you can’t understand.”

“Then make her,” Daniel cuts in, his voice harsh. He takes up residence at my other side, squeezing my opposite shoulder, and my blurry vision finally betrays me. I bat the tears away, but Madeline doesn’t miss them. Something tells me she doesn’t miss much. “If you don’t tell her, I will.”

“I don’t...” She sucks in a harsh breath, her eyes going distant. “I don’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning,” an unfamiliar voice murmurs. Though the voice is soft, I still jump. My head whips toward the door just as it clicks closed, and behind Daniel’s tall frame, I can just make out a burly man with greying hair and thick, black-framed glasses. “You start at the beginning, my love.”

Madeline’s face goes soft as she watches the man pass the three of us and head straight toward her. He cups her cheeks, wipes away another tear, and murmurs something too quiet for me to hear.

Or maybe I can’t hear because of the thunderous heartbeat resounding in my ears.

My hands are shaking, and Daniel squeezes my shoulder harder as if he knows I’m seconds from falling apart.

My gaze flits between him and Madeline. He steps behind her, wrapping his big hands around her shoulders in support. It’s obvious they’re together, but more than that, it’d be impossible to miss that they’re a *team*.

Like Evelyn and Daniel are.

Like me and my guys are.

Were.

Madeline sits taller with this man at her back, and he...he looks down at her with so much love, so much adoration, I feel like I should look away. A feeling that’s only made worse when he kisses the top of her head sweetly.

The man stands to his full height, and I realize then how tall he actually is. Not massive like Nyx or Maddox, but much

taller than I am. However, it's not his height that has my throat clogging and my body swaying.

It's his eyes.

They're blue.

So blue, they remind me of the ocean.

"This is Robert," she says, her voice full of love. "My husband."

My mother's husband.

My mother's....*husband*.

His oceanic eyes lock onto mine, and the wind almost gets kicked out of me. But then, he smiles, and I gasp at the heavy French accent that flows from his wide mouth.

"Hello, Skye," he murmurs softly. "Welcome home."

It feels like the weight of the entire world falls on my shoulders. I try to smile. I try to respond kindly. I try to think of anything civilized, normal thing to say.

But I can't.

Instead, the one word tumbling around in my head on loop falls from my lips without my permission.

"*Dad?*"



Chapter 11

HIS MOUTH DROPS OPEN, his glasses-covered eyes going wide, but I can't take the word back. I don't want to. The veil's been lifted. It's time for secrets to come out. Even if my heart is thundering so hard, it feels like I might pass out.

"W-what?" he stutters. I inhale through my teeth, my gaze flicking between the man, Robert, and my mother. Her eyes are huge, her face red, and her hands are a tangled mess of nerves on the desk. He swallows roughly, his Adam's apple bobbing. "No, Skye, I mean, Ella. I'm not. I'm sorry."

I don't know what response I was expecting. I thought I'd been prepared for either, but I wasn't ready for the sudden burst of pain to spread through my body at his words.

"Robert is my husband, sweetheart. We've been married for six years." She takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "We met *after* everything happened."

Everything being my world, all of our worlds, falling apart.

Nodding, I look down as my fingers trace the pressure-point cuff again. God, I wish the guys were here with me right now. I'm trying to be brave, to be strong, but I don't think I can do this without them.

Gone.

They're gone.

I didn't recognize the voice who'd said the words, and while they weren't said unkindly, I was still taken from them despite

how hard I begged. I was still brought here without my consent.

I want to ask so many questions. I want to beg to be taken back to that fucking parking lot. But I know the second I let my grief, my fear, for the guys, for Hunter, out, I won't be able to stop it. I won't hear anything Madeline is saying. I won't be able to stand the soft touch of my parents at my back.

I know that once my worst fears have been confirmed, I'm going to fall apart, and this time, I don't think I'll be able to stitch myself back together.

“Do you need anything to eat or drink?” Robert hedges, his accent thick and familiar.

I blink up at him, my head cocking to the side. “*Êtes vous Français?*” I don't know why I ask if he's from France, it doesn't matter, but something in my gut is twisting.

The memories from my childhood came tumbling back in the second I saw Madeline, but they're still fuzzy. I remember my aunt speaking French fluently around the house. Miles spoke it as well, just not as perfectly as his wife. Madeline was even less proficient, but everyone tried. It was common in our household but I never knew why.

He smiles kindly and bobs his head. He goes to speak, but Madeline quickly grips his hand. “Not yet, Robbie.”

His smile flickers for a brief moment before returning. He flicks his gaze back to me and cocks a brow. “*Avez-vous faim? Soif?*”

My heart warms at the language I've always found kinship with. I go to decline his offer but find myself nodding, my mouth dry. "I can't possibly eat." Not when I feel like puking. "But I'm incredibly thirsty."

"I'll be right back." Madeline immediately tenses when he begins to step away, and something in me softens toward the woman. Not by much, but a fraction. She's struggling. Maybe not in the same way I am, but she is struggling.

"I'll go," Evelyn offers, her hand disappearing. "You should be here for Maddie, Robert. She needs you."

I want to object. Want to tell her I need her. But when I see Madeline's shoulders slump, I tuck my lips between my teeth.

Evelyn disappears, and Daniel takes the free chair to my right. I meet his kind eyes, seeing the heavy bags beneath them. The familiar lines around his mouth, one that's always brought me smiles, even when I wanted to disappear. He *is* the closest thing I've ever had to a father besides Miles.

Maybe that's why I don't hesitate when he places his open hand between us, letting me decide what I need right now. I grip his palm, clinging to him for dear life, letting him tether me to this moment when all I want is to be far, far from this place.

He takes a deep, quiet breath, silently urging me to follow. I do. Then, I turn back to Madeline. Robert's at her back again, holding her up, supporting her.

“Twenty-three years ago,” Madeline starts, making my throat burn. “I was a college drop-out on the run from an abusive ex.” My fingers tighten around Daniel’s but he doesn’t move. “I was living in Florida at the time.”

“Is that where you’re from?” I blurt before forcibly shoving my lips back between my teeth.

She smiles sadly. “Yes. My family moved there from Boston before I was born.”

Boston? My brows crash together, but I say nothing.

“Anyway,” she continues. “I had nowhere to go. What little family I had left was estranged. All except for my brother.” Brother. My breath wooshes out of me with a barely audible sound, and she nods. “Miles moved to California for college the same year I started at FSU. He couldn’t get far enough away from our hometown. I’d been so mad at him for leaving me behind by myself. He said it’s what people did when they grew up, but I couldn’t fathom how a twin co—”

“Twin?” I interrupt, giving up on remaining silent. Twin? Miles and Madeline were twins?

Her lips curve up, and Robert kisses her hair. “Yes,” she murmurs. “Miles was the better twin. Two minutes older, inches taller, and a hell of a lot smarter, but he was my best friend.”

“I’m so sorry,” I find myself whispering. He was my uncle for ten years but her brother for their entire lives. Her best friend. And I watched him die. I wonder if she knows that? I

rub the ache in my chest with my free hand. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Madeline clicks her tongue. “I’m so sorry for yours.”

And my heart sinks again. The room spins, and my world effectively ends.

They’re gone.

They’re gone.

They’re gone.

“So it’s true then?” I choke out, my tears finally escaping.
“They’re dead?”



Chapter 12

I WAKE UP WITH a pounding headache, the dull throb in my skull intensifying with each passing second. It takes forever to peel my heavy eyes open, but the dim, sterile light filtering through the narrow window only makes the pain worse. I try to sit up, but a jolt of agony shoots through my side, and I collapse back onto the hard, cold floor.

Panic sets in as I struggle to remember how I got here. The last thing I recall is being with Ella and the guys, walking through the parking lot of The Den for her party. I remember saying something to make her laugh, but I don't know what it was. All I see is her bright, dimpled smile reflected in my mind before darkness.

No, my mind snaps. There's more.

I feel it there, lingering, scraping against my skull, but I ignore it. I ignore it because as my eyes slide around the small cell I'm locked inside, all I can think about is her.

Where is she?

Where?

Where?

"Ella!" I mean to shout it, but instead, I croak her name, my voice hoarse and weak. My brows crash together, and I force myself to swallow down rocks. I lick my lips and call her again, this time a bit louder.

There's no response, just the eerie silence of the cell. I push myself to sit up, gritting my teeth against the pain. My fingers

fumble with the torn, damp fabric of my white shirt, and I wince when I touch something sticky and cool beneath it.

Blood.

My heart races as I realize I'm injured, but I can't remember how it happened.

Yes, you can.

“No,” I grit out, shoving everything down again—the pain, the fear, the worry. I know it'll come. I can feel it. Can taste the way the memories will wreck me. I don't want them. Not till I have her back.

Struggling to my feet, I scan the small, barren cell, my eyes desperately searching for any sign of my baby girl. There's nothing, just gray walls and a cold, unforgiving floor. I stumble and catch myself on black bars, using them to pull myself upright. It's dim outside of my cell, but I know what a jail looks like—a prison.

Cell after cell.

Cold, bleak, dim.

Empty.

I hold my breath, listening for anything, any sound of life, proof that I'm not alone.

Nothing but silence.

Panic pulses through me, and I begin to call out for her again, my voice tinged with desperation.

“Baby girl? Where the fuck are you?” My voice trembles, but it’s louder this time, bouncing off the empty cinder block cells around me. It echoes down the vast hall, the tiny, barred-up windows, but there’s still no response.

Swallowing thickly, I let a little piece of my memories trickle through.

My brothers, my family.

Hunter.

My gut twists.

The Den.

The party.

Eric fucking Keaton.

“No!” I shake it away again, shoving it back down. My hands beat against the cold steel. “Gage! Nyx! Stone!” Everything inside me aches, and the longer I try to suppress it, the harder it becomes. “Hunter! Isabella!”

Nothing but the echo of my cracking voice shouted back at me.

Where the hell am I, and how the fuck did I get here?

I drag my heavy body towards the cell door, my hands gripping the bars. It’s locked, and I feel a wave of helplessness wash over me, but I shove that shit down, too.

I can’t stay here. I have to find her, have to get to them. My head throbs, and my side burns, but I push through it, using the bars to steady myself as I examine the cell. There’s nothing

that could help me escape, no hidden tools or weak points in the walls. My eyes scan the ceiling as my fingers drag over the rough blocks. No cameras, either.

Out of nowhere, the room spins, and I grunt, sliding down the wall. I suck in a sharp breath at the new scrapes that form down my back, but I let the pain ground me, let it keep me present so I don't freak the fuck out.

"One thing at a time, Maddox."

I can still hear Gage coaching me through my school books when I was a kid. He'd constantly tell me to take the words one at a time so they wouldn't get so jumbled. As we grew up, it became *problems* instead of words.

"One problem at a time, Maddox."

Don't focus on the entire picture at once, just one problem at a time.

And when shit got really bad, it was *seconds* he was urging me to consume slowly.

"One second at a time. Not too much. Just one second."

I tug off my tux jacket, letting the material sift through my fingers. I swallow harshly, my mouth dry.

"One thing at a time, Madd," I breathe as my eyes flutter closed. I squeeze the jacket against the wound on my chest and exhale roughly. "One thing..."

The gun.

My insides throb and twist as my heart begins to hammer.

One thing.

The sound of the bullet ricocheting through the air between us.

I breathe through the panic, willing those moments to come back to me slowly. They filter through, one agonizing second at a time.

I see the gun in Eric's hand, hear the bullet spear through the air, see the direction it's aiming, but I can't think, can't breathe, can't fucking move.

And then I do, but it's too late.

One thing. One breath. One moment.

Hunter dives in front of our girl, shoving her behind him. I watch with horror as his body bows backward from the force of the blow.

My fingernails dig into my palms, leaving bloody indents behind, but I don't care. Nothing matters as those seconds replay again and again. *He* got to her first. *He* jumped in front of a bullet for her. *He* didn't even fucking hesitate.

Ella screams, but my eyes are locked on his face. His gaze bores into mine, but I can tell he's not seeing me, not as pain spears through his chest. Blood spills almost instantly, creating a red pool that stains his too-white shirt. He was shot.

I lose my breath.

One second. Two. Three.

It's like something passes between us. Something unspoken but powerful. Something beyond words. I swallow dryly and mouth the words I don't deserve to speak out loud, "Thank you."

Hunter nods his head once, his eyes glossy, and then he's spinning, wrapping her body up with his and pulling her away. Away from me. Away from my brothers.

No. Away from the enemy.

One thing.

One thing.

One thing.

"Fuck," I breathe, my eyes burning as I try to choke back the tears. She almost died, and I was powerless to fucking stop it. But he didn't even hesitate. He saved her. He saved her, and then he....

I don't remember when it happened, but suddenly, I'm killing Eric Keaton.

My fist collides with his face again and again. My teeth scrape together, my jaw pulses, my knuckles crack, but I don't stop.

I can't.

Eric grunts when my brother lands a kick in the fuckers gut, and I let out a sound of satisfaction. "I hope you fucking rot, you sick asshole!" Gage snarls, and the sound is dark, so viscous, I peel my eyes from Eric's.

His face is unlike anything I've ever seen before. Worse than when I was a kid, and my father was being the twisted bastard he is. Worse than when we found Ella in her house, tied up and injured. Worse than when she was missing.

He's just...empty.

I swallow and look back at the man sprawled out across the ground, his body broken and bloody. It's not enough. The pain he caused, the horror and devastation. The fucking scars, physical and mental...

It will never be enough.

There is no pain, no damage, we could inflict that'll ever make it right for her, for them. Nothing. But taking his life slowly, brutally, will have to do.

Feeling him bleed out under my fingers will have to do.

I suck in a sharp gasp, the organ in my chest squeezing at the reminder of what happened. Of *who* happened.

“One thing at a time,” I breathe, sinking deeper. My hands tremble as I lift them in front of me, eyeing the thick, dried blood stains. His and mine. My jaw ticks as I take in how perfectly the stains blend together.

When we're created, we're all the same—just a mix of blood, muscles, and bones. We're blank canvases waiting for life to paint us. And when we die, we're all nothing but broken promises, half-written stories, and unfinished breaths.

I know it's what's in between that counts. I know it's what you make of yourself that matters. But what we,

what *I've* become, isn't all that different from Eric, is it? From my father?

I ruin families and take lives. The stains on my hands are nothing compared to the stains on my conscience.

One thing, Maddox. Just one thing. Nothing more, nothing less.

I choke on my next breath as Gage's voice circles through my mind so loudly it feels like he's here with me. I quickly wipe my hands down my slacks and inhale deeply, letting the next part of my memories through the thick wall I keep the darkness trapped behind.

"What the fuck?" Gage grunts, but I barely hear him over the thump, thump, thump of my heart filling my ears. "Oh, fuck. Where is she?" Again, I try to tune him out while continuing my assault on the man beneath me. I don't think he's breathing anymore, but I don't give a fuck.

I know where she is.

She's holding her best friend while he dies.

Fuck, maybe he's already dead.

The thought of that sends a sharp stabbing pain through me that penetrates my nothingness, and I shove it down.

"He needs to pay," is all I can manage to grit out between clenched teeth.

I pull my fist back, and it collides with Eric's shattered cheekbone. I feel his blood coat my jaw, but I don't even blink,

refusing to look away. His ugly eyes are locked onto mine, lifeless and unseeing, but it still doesn't matter.

She matters, though.

Hunter matters.

Mattered.

And this fuck never cared.

“Maddox!” Gage shouts, and I vaguely hear the distinct sound of bullets firing. “Madd! Enough!”

“It’s not enough,” I whisper, black and red dots dancing in my vision until they’re all I see. “Not enough.”

I think I hear more guns and maybe a scream, but it’s not her, I know that, so I ignore it. She’s too busy grieving.

Not enough.

Not enough.

Never—

“I need you, Madd! We need you here!”

I shake my head, pulling my fist back once more. Gage grips my hand, squeezing me so hard, I freeze. My head whips toward him, a vicious snarl trapped in my throat.

“Wh—” My words die when I see my brother’s wide, terrified gaze locked on mine. The first thing I notice is that he’s no longer empty. I swallow, tasting copper, and the second thing I notice is that I’m not either.

I’m mad.

So fucking mad, I'm shaking.

So mad I never even realized I was straddling Eric and that his face no longer exists.

But Gage...

"We have to go, man!" He's begging, and that helps to wash away some of the darkness, too. "We have to find her. Nyx is in trouble, and Ella's missing."

He runs a hand through his hair, turning it red, and my fist falls.

"What happened?" I shove to my feet, stumbling over Eric. I kick him again for good measure and grip Gage's face. More blood. So much blood, it looks stark against his tan skin. "Are you bleeding?"

Gage freezes, and his eyes narrow. "Look around, bro," he breathes, his voice too quiet, nearly disappearing in the...

In the...

"One thing at a time..."

I look around, and my knees lock up at the sight, but Gage is there, like he knew I'd fall. How the fuck did I miss this? Bodies are sprinkled around the parking lot. There are guns being raised, bodies jolting, but the right sound never comes.

Silencers. Black tac-gear. Bodies. So many bodies.

What happened?

My mouth opens to ask the question even as my eyes frantically scan, looking, searching for the people I love most,

but before I can get a word out, a sharp pain blooms across my chest.

I suck in a breath and stumble backward. Gage's eyes go wide, and seconds later, his gun is raised, and he's shoving me behind him.

My gaze drifts down my body as the burn turns to fire, and I try to shake it off, but I can't. My brows crash together as I hear Gage yelling, yelling, yelling...

My fingers trail over the blood rapidly spilling from just above my ribs, staining my white shirt red just like Hunter's.

A chuckle leaves me as the world spins. "I got shot." I laugh again because my voice sounds funny.

I've been shot before, once. Stabbed a bunch of times. I was even hit by a car when I was thirteen. Nothing made me feel out of it this fast. I blink rapidly, and then, I feel Gage's hands on me, patting, searching.

"Madd," he chokes out, the sound so worried, I force myself to look up even as I stumble backward. He grabs me and helps me to my knees. "What the fuck is this? Why are you—"

He breaks off as his body jolts into mine.

His eyes go wide, and he jolts again.

"Gage..." My voice is cracked, warbled. It doesn't sound right. "Gage?"

His eyes flutter as he reaches his hand up toward my shoulder, leaving my wound to bleed freely. I grunt when his

fingers trail softly over my exposed skin before tugging harshly. I gasp at the unexpected prick of pain as something tumbles onto my lap.

“Tranqs,” he murmurs as he yanks one from his thigh. My eyes grow hazy and the world spins just as his words settle in, in, in...

“It was a trap.” He licks his lips, his eyes heavy as he sways into me. “They took her. They took Isabella.”

And then all I see is darkness....



Chapter 13

I 'VE BEEN AWAKE IN this damn cell for hours, my body aching and my mind spinning. Fury courses through me like a raging beast as I stare at the cold, unyielding cinder block wall before me. How the hell did they manage to capture me? I was supposed to protect Ella and my brothers, and I failed.

Failed.

The memories play on a loop in my head, taunting me. I remember the chaos, the sudden attack, and the adrenaline-fueled frenzy as I fought back against our attackers. Three of them, and it took all three to bring me down. They bound my hands, shoved a suffocating hood over my head, and still, I fought...*for her.*

I saw her being ripped away from me, her screams for us echoing in my ears as they dragged her away. I tried to crawl toward her, my voice hoarse from shouting her name, but it was too late.

It was too late for all of us.

They were gone, and I was left here, chained and helpless to do a fucking thing about it.

I clench my fists, my knuckles white with rage, as I recall the feeling of powerlessness. I should have been stronger, faster, smarter. I should have protected her. My brothers, too. They needed me, and I let them down.

With a growl of frustration, I turn away from the wall and start pacing the cramped cell. I've already checked every inch

of it; I know I'm alone in here. But the anger, the fear, and the guilt still gnaw at me, leaving me restless and consumed by the need to find them, to rescue Ella and my brothers from whatever hellhole they've been taken to.

I won't rest until I have answers. Until I have them back. And whoever did this to us, they'll pay with their blood for the pain they've inflicted on us all. For taking her from us.

Isabella.

I run a hand through my hair and shoot a glare at my filthy pile of clothes. I stripped off the blood-soaked mess the second I woke up, knowing it would only rot and fester the longer I'm stuck in here, and getting sick isn't something I can afford. I'd rather be cold than weak, powerless.

Never again.

This isn't my first time in a cell, but it is the first time I'm locked up without knowing why or where.

The memory of my final moments of consciousness comes rushing back, haunting my thoughts as I continue to pace the few feet I'm allowed.

"Why are you here?" I shout, my voice a thunderclap of fury barely audible over the warzone behind me.

The blacked-out fucker before me says nothing. His head cocks to the side, his body language oozing an arrogance that doesn't fit this situation. Doesn't he realize I could snap his neck in a second?

I press my arm across his throat even harder, cutting off his oxygen, and yank his ski mask off, revealing his smirking face.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. Wasn't him.

"Juan?" I grunt, my brows crashing together as I stare into the black, soulless eyes of Augustus Luna's favorite lackey.

Gus.

Gus.

Gus.

What the actual fuck?

But Juan doesn't answer, merely grinning at me with that fucked up, creepy smile I've hated from the moment we met. It's infuriating. My free hand slides down to my thigh holster while he continues to grin at me. I could shoot him. Could blow his fucking brains out.

I don't want to.

My fingers wrap around my tac knife. It's got a seven-inch blade that'll look really pretty, slicing him open.

"Why are you here?" I murmur again, distracting him. He coughs and sputters, his smile wilting a fraction when I choke him out with the arm bar, keeping him pinned to the truck. "What do you want with us?"

Nothing.

My temper rises so high, so fast, I'm surprised I just stab him instead of gutting him. The blade collides with his

stomach, and I revel in the way he grunts, slumping forward.

“Answer me!” I demand, shoving him upright as I twist the knife. “Tell me, and I’ll make it stop.”

I won’t.

Not until he’s dead.

Fuck this guy.

With a wheeze, he clicks his tongue, his eyes drifting over my shoulder. Instinctively, I follow his gaze, knowing every single person I love stands behind me, lost somewhere in the fight.

God, I hope one of the others is with Isabella.

As if conjured by my thoughts, I catch sight of her on the ground, holding a body. From across the lot, I can’t hear her, but I can tell she’s crying. Can tell she’s looking for help as she keeps her body draped over theirs. My eyes narrow, and I can make out the all-black tux that looks just like mine.

Panic surges through me, but I shove it down. I can’t afford to lose focus.

I turn back to Juan, his laughter echoing through the air, and suddenly, it all clicks.

Ella.

He’s here for Ella.

But he...Juan works for Gus.

I swallow bile as it coats my tongue and twist the blade, shoving him back further, harder. Juan gasps, his nails digging into my gut. His eyes keep flicking to the gun I knocked from

his grip just minutes ago when he'd first snuck up on me, but I chuckle, kicking it away.

"Motherfucker!" he hisses when the knife shifts, tearing his flesh like butter.

"What does Gus want with her?" I practically growl, my heart hammering.

Fuck, I can barely wrap my mind around what's happening right now.

I barely had enough time to call our guards at The Den and tell them to lock everyone inside for their safety before these fuckers were on me.

I can hear Gage somewhere behind me fighting off his own attackers. A moment ago, I spotted Stone blowing someone's fucking head off.

Juan licks his lips, savoring the moment, the anticipation. Dangling what little information he's probably been given over my head as though he has any fucking right to. As if he's important. He's not. He's just another one of Gus' cheaply hired hands drawn in by the notoriety the Diablos command.

He's no one.

I don't say that, though, not as he swallows hard and turns pale, finally understanding the severity of the situation.

"He's always wanted the pretty little princess," he taunts, his voice raspy.

My blood runs cold at his words. I can feel the anger bubbling up inside me again.

“Why?” I gritted out, my patience wearing thin.

Ella...he wants Ella.

Juan spits out blood as it begins to trickle from his throat, defiant to the end. “Think about it,” he sneers. “Think about who she is, what she means to this city.” His head cocks to the side, his grin widening. “Or maybe you and your friends have already thought about it? Already realized how much power she holds in her tiny little body. Maybe that’s why you’re all fucking her.” His bloody grin widens. “Bet her cunt is—”

Before I have a chance to rip his body to shreds the way I want to, Juan’s attention shifts once more, and he laughs as three masked men descend upon me, tackling me to the ground.

I blink rapidly, coming back to the present. Darkness claimed me after that, but the haunting words Juan left behind continued to echo in my mind, fueling my determination to find Ella and my brothers. To piece together whatever shit show we’ve all been pulled into and then make every one of these motherfuckers pay.



Chapter 14

MY EYES SNAP OPEN to an overwhelming darkness, an impenetrable void that engulfs me.

Nothing.

I can't see a fucking thing.

My head pounds, my body aches, and my skin is so cold it feels like knives are peeling it from my body slowly. I try to shift my arms, but I can't move even an inch. I try again with my legs, gritting my teeth to remain silent in the darkness.

Nothing.

Panic claws at my chest as my heart races, and I realize with a jolt why I can't move. Cold, rusted shackles dig into my wrists and ankles, chaining me to a rough wall, the metal biting into my skin.

I take a shuddering breath, trying to steady myself, but my mind is racing. Instead of fresh air filling my lungs, I get decay and rot. Mold, rusted metal, and damp cement.

No.

The wall, the darkness, the smell... it's familiar. Too familiar.

Flashes of my childhood flood back. I remember this place. Vividly. *Painfully.*

The place where my nightmares were born.

The prison.

The memories of being brought here as a child surge to the forefront of my mind. The wet, rotting stench of decay and

mold, the coldness that seemed to seep into your very soul, and the oppressive dampness that clung to everything. It all comes back to me like a torrential downpour, and I can't escape the suffocating feeling of dread.

I know this place, and I know who owns it.

My father.

My evil, sadistic fucking father.

The realization strikes like a hammer blow, and my anxiety spirals out of control. My father's sinister hideaway, the one place I vowed I'd never return to, now holds me captive once again. And if I'm here, then it means that he's the one who took me.

Fear courses through me like poison, every nerve in my body on high alert. I struggle against the shackles, the rough metal cutting deeper into my wrists, but it's fucking useless. I can't escape, and I'm far from safe. It makes it hard to breathe.

I choke on the stagnant air, holding it in my lungs, and slowly take in my pitch-black surroundings.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

I wait and wait and wait....

Nothing.

Nothing but the drip of water too far to touch, to taste, to quench my thirst, but close enough to taunt. Just the way it

was when I was a kid. Just the way he likes it.

The prison is the place Augustus used to take me. Not for punishments—no, he preferred to handle that shit in public places. Sometimes, at the Los Diablos club, in front of all his loyal lackeys. Sometimes, he'd just bring me to my knees in front of my mom or Maddox. Other times, he made the guys watch.

But those are the moments when he was trying to prove a point. When he was trying to force compliance into others by way of my flesh, my blood.

He saved the prison just for me.

Lessons, he called them. *Trainings*.

Teaching me to be a man, a successor, a *King*.

I scoff, rolling my eyes into the darkness. Augustus Luna is anything but a fucking king. He's a monster, the demon in all my nightmares, the Devil of the Bay, but not a king. Never that.

Yet, somehow, he snuck in beneath our radar. Somehow, he's caught us all off guard.

My mind races, and my arms flex against the restraints as I try to work through everything that's happened in the last few years. Before Ella came into our lives, he'd been making moves to take over as much of the Bay as possible, monopolizing drugs, weapons, and, eventually, human trafficking. He'd succeeded, too.

Until we convinced Matteo Grossi, a man high up in the Cosa Nostra, to break his ties to Augustus, leaving him without a weapon connection. After that, we'd torn apart his drug supplier one carefully laid move at a time. Right before shit hit the fan, we were supposed to have a meeting with the man, to form a partnership. Franco Hernandez wanted to separate himself from my father in order to protect his family, something I wholeheartedly understood.

Things had finally been falling into place. Our plan to end my father, break apart all his high-powered connections and cartel ties was finally within our grasp.

I clench my eyes shut and shake my head, anger, and disappointment battering against my organs. Fuck. I'd been so stupid, so arrogant. Ella came along, and we got distracted in all that is *her*. Her happiness, her love, her demons, the forces trying to steal her away from us.

No, my mind chides. Not distracted. You made a choice.

I grit my teeth, my eyes flying open but seeing nothing. We did make a choice. A choice to prioritize her, her safety, her enemies, before our own, and though there's not a damn part of me that would change that, I'd been remiss to forget about the threat right in front of us.

Always right in front of us.

Augustus went quiet, and I mistook his silence for distraction, for absence. He was never absent, just quietly moving under the radar and waiting for his perfect moment to attack.

And now...

Now he has me and probably my brothers. If anything, he's nothing but consistent, using us against one another, knowing we are our greatest weakness.

But Ella... she's the unknown variable. I vaguely remember seeing flashes of her fighting someone off, but I'd been on the verge of passing out, and Maddox, Madd had just been shot.

There was screaming and fighting, and everything after that is blank.

Everything inside me wants to rebel against the knowledge that we're separated, that I'm tethered to this wall in the midst of my own personal Hell and unable to do a damn thing about it, but I can't.

After years of being carted here for lessons in death, murder, and destruction, I know the most important thing is saving my energy for the battle I can't yet see.

Desperation fills me, shoving out the anger and hatred, as visions of Ella crying, begging for us, her fingers dripping with blood, permeate my brain, quickly followed by the sight of Maddox's body jolting with the force of the gunshot.

My eyes burn, and my heart skips a beat, then another.

"I'm not this man," I whisper, my eyes sliding shut as I force myself to breathe through it. My father's twisted agenda and his unfathomable cruelty will undoubtedly be unleashed upon me soon enough. I can't break now. Not when this has only just started.

In this pitch-black abyss, I'm left with only one certainty—
I'm trapped in my worst nightmare, and there's no way out but
right through the eye of the storm.



Chapter 15

I BLINK IN AND out of the memories for what feels like days. But I know it's not. Somewhere deep inside of myself, I know it's only been minutes, maybe an hour at most. But in my mind, in the darkness, it feels like forever.

The man I used to call my dad pulls me from my now too-small cage and tosses me to the floor. I lock eyes with him, noticing the green is nearly invisible, and I already know what it means. My body instinctively locks up, but I force my muscles to relax.

It hurts worse if I'm tense.

But not as badly as seeing my mother step out from behind him, her face just as emotionless, her eyes just as black. Even after all these years of enduring this exact sequence of events, it still hurts.

I may be ten, an old ten, but I'm still a child. Still their child. It doesn't matter, though. Not now, not when they're like this.

Not ever.

They're high.

They're always high these days.

Probably drunk, too.

My days consist of reading. Not books like I wish they did, but emotions, moods, mannerisms. Good day, bad day, or the kind of day that makes me wish they'd just kill me already.

Which day?

Which version of them will I get?

Sometimes, they throw parties for their friends, making sure they stay in the only furnished parts of our huge, skeletal home, pretending to be something they no longer are. My parents exist in a world of crime and opulence, yet they've become nothing more than the dredges of society they used to prey upon.

Sometimes, they disappear for days, even weeks. Those are my favorite times. I've learned how to pick any lock, my empty bedroom, my cage, the basement door. I can escape when they leave, and when I do, I pretend to be whole.

Even when I'm broken.

I keep my eyes locked on my father's as he strikes out, kicking my gut.

I don't blink or look away when she starts in with him, slapping my cheek.

I don't cry like I used to. I don't beg or plead for a mercy that will never come.

I stay silent, and I let them see how much I hate them.

Hit after hit lands until I'm a ball on the floor, bleeding and watching them stumble toward their room, leaving a pile of clothes in their wake because they're just sick enough to get off on this shit. On beating their child.

I pretend to be passed out until the sounds start. I remain unmoving, clinging to the pain, letting it keep me present. My

ribs throb, and I embrace the burn. If I'm burning, I'm still breathing.

I wait and wait and wait. Until the sound of him fucking her stops. Until she stops screaming. Until they start fighting about being out of drugs. Even when the bedroom door opens, then the garage door, I still don't move.

And when they finally speed away, I say a silent prayer that this is the time they OD and don't come home, then I move.

Hours later, I'm sitting in my favorite place, the only place I feel safe: my treehouse. In the darkness, I let myself cry. I let the night sky see how sad I am, promising that when the sun starts to rise, I'll pretend I'm okay again.

My crying is loud. My heart is loud. My hurt is loud.

Everything is so loud, and I want to scream into the world, to tell it to shut up. My mouth falls open to do just that, but then I hear it, and for the first time, everything goes quiet.

Everything except her.

"Are you okay?"

"Mi Cielo?" My voice cracks, barely a whisper, swallowed by the sterile air. Silence stretches out, mocking me.

I strain my eyes, desperate for a sign, a glimmer of familiarity. But all I see is ugly white. No blue. No green. No dark chocolate hair. No warm, sweet smile in the middle of an adorably freckled face. Just...nothing.

Memories crash through the fog in fragments. Laughter, the comforting warmth of her presence, nights in the treehouse, and days in a cage. Then... darkness. Fear snakes its way through my veins, tightening its grip, but I push that away too.

No. Not darkness.

Asphalt. Night. The stars, barely visible against bright parking lot lights and the glow from The Den. Car lights. Flashes of bullets and screams, so many screams.

Blood.

“Fuck!” I gasp. My eyes flit from one corner of the room to the other as things slowly start to trickle in, and my reality begins to make sense. “Oh, fuck!”

My hands slide down my knees and tremble against the fabric of my tux. I do a quick inventory, finding myself dirty and scraped up to hell, but I’m not bleeding. My tux is intact for the most part, my shoes are on, and other than feeling sick, I’m not injured. Was I drugged?

It doesn’t make any sense.

I quickly pat down my body, finding my weapons and phone gone. I grit my teeth.

“Think, think, think,” I whisper.

I’m alone in a padded room. The guys and Ella aren’t here, but hopefully, they aren’t far. I have no weapons, no phone, no way to call for help. The harder I try to focus, the more my head pounds, but I shake it away, knowing every second counts.

Pushing up my sleeve, I say a silent thank you when I find my old watch still strapped to my wrist. The leather is worn, and the glass is cracked, just like always. It's from the sixties, has no bling or shine to it, making it unassuming. When I first got it years ago, I considered adding tech to the inner mechanics but decided against it for this very reason. If I was scanned for bugs, it would never be picked up, and hopefully, it wouldn't be taken from me.

I knew if I was ever trapped again, I'd need this—a lifeline to the outside world. Time in the darkness to help keep me sane in the midst of insanity. I know what it's like to lose my mind to solitude. I'll never let it happen again.

My thumb traces the glass, wiping a blood smear from it, and I idly wonder whose it is. My eyes flutter closed for just a brief second as the memory of killing someone flashes through me. I swallow it down and look back at my watch. It's six in the morning on November 1st. It's only been a few hours since Ella's party.

I lick my dry lips and run through everything that happened. My fingers spear through my hair as the visions circle through my mind on repeat, each one more clear than the last.

The file that came through just hours before the party—the proof that what I'd been suspecting for weeks was true. I have a brother.

Hunter is my brother.

I'd told the guys, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him, not yet, maybe never. And Ella...fuck. How will she react to

something like this? When she realizes how interwoven our lives truly are.

I click my tongue, another memory pulsing through me.

“Come out, come out, little doll. I knew I’d find you here.”

Eric Keaton.

Their abuser, their rapist, his uncle. He came for them, for her. Came for his last moment of revenge, and then, he told me something else I’d considered but hadn’t dared speak out loud.

“I didn’t put him in your life, but you’d be surprised at the lengths people have gone to for information about the infamous Princess of the Bay.”

The Princess of the Bay.

“It doesn’t make any sense. It’s impossible,” I rasp, my voice thick. Even as I say the words, I know they aren’t true. Everything in our worlds is possible. We live amongst thieves, murderers, villains.

We *are* the villains.

“Kept you alive but broken until you turned twenty-three.”

Twenty-three.

I knew her real age. I’ve known it from the moment she fell back into my life. When she dropped to the ground in that elevator, and had a panic attack that shattered my fucking heart. I didn’t even realize who she was, but it didn’t matter. She was so small, so broken, so *sad*, and she needed my help.

Then, she looked up at me, and I knew, I fucking knew.

Ella.

Mi Cielo.

My sky.

She was there, and I—I couldn't tell her a goddamned thing. Maybe if I had, maybe if I'd opened my mouth and let the truth spill out, we could have talked, could have figured shit out before it all went to hell. Maybe if I'd have told her that even though she'd lost her memories, I remembered them for the both of us. That even after all this time, I held them, kept them safe and protected, just for her.

“Maybe if I'd said something, we wouldn't be here now,” I breathe, shaking my head.

My fingers dig deep grooves in my palms, and my shoulders drop with the sharp bite of pain.

There's no point arguing my choices with the bright void I'm existing inside of right now. It won't do a damn bit of good. All I can do is prepare, keep my mind right, and myself as healthy as I can.

The rest of the memory comes into focus, and I choke on the barely-there air in my lungs as I cling to the words.

“He's always wanted your blood, little doll. From the moment I met him, it was always about your blood. Your mother first, and then you. He thinks you're the key. He needs your name, your blood.”

Who the fuck was Eric talking about, and what do they want with our girl?

Where is she?

Is she okay?

What about the guys? Hunter?

So many questions fill my mind faster than I can process them. But above all, one stands out...

Are they alive?

Acid pools in my throat again. Fuck. I don't know him well. Don't know what our future holds, but I do know I want a chance to find out. If he—if they—if *she* died, I...I...

“No!” I growl, my voice low.

I refuse to believe it. Refuse to give way to that possibility.

My fists ball, and the motion tugs on my suit. My eyes snap down, and I trace my fingers over the golden cuff links I designed. Seeing her initials makes something inside my chest shift, reminding me what I have waiting outside of this cell.

Everything.

I slide my jacket off and quickly detach both before letting it fall to the floor. I roll them around in my palm, taking in the delicate design.

They took months for me to create, but the ode to Ella was a last-minute edition for her birthday. Though I'd hoped we wouldn't need them, I'm glad I spent the time and money to

get them done on time. I flip one over and thoroughly inspect it, making sure it's fully intact before checking over the other.

Glancing up, I double-check check there are no visible cameras in the room again. They may be hidden, but something in my gut says I'm not being recorded—not yet, anyway.

Once I'm as confident as I can be that I'm truly alone, I drop one onto my jacket and slide my nose stud out. It only takes me a moment to use the tiny metal end to pop the golden faceplate off, revealing mostly microscopic wires. I gently use the stud to push them aside. It feels like my heart is in my throat as I search for the tiny red light that'll let me know they're still emitting a signal.

It feels like I search for minutes, but I know it's only seconds, and then finally...

"It's perfect," I sigh, my body deflating. A small smile tugs at my lips, and pride washes over me.

I quickly press the top back on, hearing it click into place before repeating the process with the second cuff link. I know something's wrong the second I get the faceplate off. One of the tiny black wires is broken free from the main tracking component, and I don't have the tools to fix it.

My jaw pulses as frustration replaces some of the pride I'd been feeling just moments ago, but I breathe through it. I have one tracking device. One chance to be found. And hopefully, if the guys are somewhere near me, their matching cuff links will multiply our hope.

I slide my stud back in and click the top back on the broken link before returning it to my jacket. I slide it on, checking that I look as normal as I possibly can in this situation. The link with the working tracker stays gripped in my fist like the lifeline it is.

I check my watch and see it's nearly seven. The sun's up, and life on the outside is starting to come to life. Whoever took me, whoever stuck me in this cell, will likely be here soon. Luckily, with my watch and that beautiful little red dot, I have some answers that I didn't have before.

The tracker has a fifty-mile radius on it, which means we can't be too far from the city.

"We're still in the Bay," I breathe, hope clinging to me like a second skin. Thank fuck.

The signal pings to an app installed on my computer at The Den, the security system at our house, and our phones. Only the six of us know about it. Only the six of us can access it. As long as one of the guys or Ella can get to their phones, they'll be able to track all of us.

But if we're all here, locked up, or...

No.

I squeeze my eyes closed again, the cuff link digging into my skin as I inhale deeply, forcing myself to focus on those last moments.

I remember seeing Eric's gun. Remember hearing it go off. But then, something, no, *someone*, collided with me, taking

me down before I could see what had happened. I tried to catch sight of Ella, of the guys, as I fought my attacker off, but then all hell broke loose. I caught glimpses of Maddox and Gage killing Eric, his blood coating their hands, but there was something...

Something....

“Who are you?” I snarl, my fist colliding with some random fucker’s face as they pin me to the ground with their heavy weight.

Whoever they are, they’ve got a black plastic mask on and are wearing a black hoodie. They refuse to answer, pulling a gun from the back of their jeans which only serves to piss me off even more.

“Who.The. Fuck. Are.You?”

Still nothing.

The second the barrel presses to my temple, I stop fighting with my fist and press my own gun to their gut. I don’t blink, I don’t pause, I don’t falter. I just shoot.

“Shit!” He grunts, his voice deep and slightly accented. My brows furrow as I shove him off me. His gun clatters to the ground, and he grips the wound in his stomach, but he’s bleeding too much, too fast, and drops backward without another sound.

Gritting my teeth, I push up to my elbow and snatch his abandoned weapon up. A quick check tells me it’s a Tec 9, a

street gun.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, my eyes scanning the parking lot. My breath catches. Chaos. Complete and utter chaos.

People are fighting everywhere. Guns are going off, some with silencers, some not. The sound of grunting and cries of pain fill the cold, all air. I shove to my feet as I frantically search and search.

Maddox is still beating Eric’s dead body into the ground, completely unaware of the insanity around him. His body is straddling the broken, bloody corpse of our girl’s rapist as if he can force the years of pain she endured to disappear with his fists alone.

I leave him to it, knowing he needs this. We all do.

My eyes flit to Gage, watching as he fights off three masked men. I swallow thickly, and my brows crash together when I notice one of them doesn’t seem to be fighting Gage as much as...trying to help him?

I quickly spot the differences between that attacker and the others, noticing that some are wearing all black but simple street clothes and the same black, faceless, plastic mask the fucker I killed was wearing. The rest are in full tactical gear with ski masks. Their fighting styles are different. Their weapons are different.

Quickly spinning, I drop down and rip the mask off the man, still bleeding out from my gun wound and choke out a raspy, “fuck.”

Because the man I killed is a man I recognize—a man I hate. Ruben Paloma. It makes no sense. None. But it doesn't matter, not right this second. As I shove to my feet and wrap my fingers around my gun, aiming it at his head, all I feel is regret that I didn't make him suffer more, and joy that he's finally dead at my hands.

“I promised I'd kill you, motherfucker,” I grunt. “See you in Hell.”

I unload five bullets into his face in rapid succession, and then, I feel nothing. I lock it all down and turn back to the chaos, back to my family.

“Ella!” I shout, my body moves on autopilot as I search for her, search for Nyx and Hunter.

People come at me, then drop like flies as I home in on my years of training. When each person falls, I do a brief scan, checking their attire, noticing every single attacker is dressed the same. The people in the tac-gear aren't coming for me, for my family. They're fighting the others.

It makes no sense. No fucking sense.

“Isabella!” I yell, dodging a random bullet.

God, there have to be at least fifty people out here. Where are the cops? Where are the people inside The Den? Surely, they've heard all this by now.

“Mi Cielo!” Where the fuck is she?

As if in answer, I hear a scream. But it's not just a scream for help or from fear. It's full of so much pain, so much

devastation, my knees buckle. I whirl around, following the sound of her, of her crying, begging, pleading.

“No! Hunter, no!”

There’s at least thirty feet between us, and I wonder when we got so separated. How?

“Holy shit,” I breathe, stumbling forward. Stumbling toward Ella as she bows her small body over a crumpled figure, keeping them both protected, shielded.

They’re hidden behind a car; but I can just make out her and my brother beneath the glow of a street lamp. Can just see the blood, so much blood. It’s covering her hands and face, but not nearly as badly as it’s covering his body, the ground under him.

“No,” I choke out, my head shaking. I force my feet to move as all the emotions, the fear and pain I’d pushed down, surges forward, making the world spin. “Hunter! Ella!”

Twenty-five feet.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Twenty.

He’s dead.

Fifteen.

My brother is dead.

Ten.

Is she hurt? There’s so much blood.

Then, a van pulls up, its tires screeching. I freeze, and it feels like everyone goes still, goes silent. I spin, my gun raised. The door slides open, and more men, more people, pour out. I barely have time to inventory their clothing before something sharp pierces the back of my thigh, once, twice, three times.

I drop to the ground, the world spinning, the chaos waning, my vision blurring. My head cracks against the ground just as I see Nyx fall. Then Gage. Then Maddox.

I grit my teeth, feeling the effects of whatever I just got injected with trying to pull me under and turn to find Ella. She's screaming so loud, so hard, I'm surprised she hasn't passed out.

"No," I breathe, my words shaky and barely audible. "Let her go, you sick fuck."

No one hears me. No one sees me. I watch helplessly as some big fucker picks my girl up and tosses her body over his shoulder like a rag doll. She beats against him as she continues to scream for help. For Hunter. For Maddox and Gage. For Nyx.

For me.

The last thing I see before the world goes black is one of the plastic-faced men stepping over my body. I blink rapidly, trying to stay awake as he reaches up, shoves the mask off, and smiles down at me.

"Boss wants a meeting," he chuckles. "And he's pissed."

“Fuck!” I shout. Gus. We’re with Gus. He’s brutal at the best of times, but to go through all that just to get to us...

The door to my cell clanks loudly, like metal scraping against metal, and my heart thunders at the sound. My eyes fly to the door, the sound permeating the padded material separating us. My fingers clench around the cuff link, and I force my breathing to slow down before I lose my shit.

My gaze snaps to my hand, and I flip it over, opening my palm. I can’t see the little red dot, but I know it’s there. I know it’s transmitting, at least for now.

It’s our last hope, our *only* hope.

Just as the door slowly begins to open, I make a choice I hope I won’t live to regret, knowing we don’t stand a chance without it. My mouth opens, and I roughly swallow the cuff link, praying to a God I’ve never believed in that someone, *anyone*, will search for us before it’s too late.

My throat works around the odd shape, and I nearly choke, but I clamp my lips shut and shove to my feet, refusing to be looked down upon by an unknown force.

“Well, well, well,” he drawls, grinning maniacally. “What do we have here?”



Chapter 16

“WHO, DEAR?” MADELINE ASKS, her green eyes wide and clouded with emotion.

I swallow thickly, my gaze darting between the three of them as my heart races in my chest. I press a hand to it, willing it to slow down, but it won't, it can't, and I...

I can't *breathe*.

“Ella,” Daniel soothes, his hand squeezing mine. “Calm down. Breathe for me.” He wraps his fingers around my jaw, my chin quivering in his grasp, and makes me face him. His face is so soft, so kind, and I want to pull away, but I can't. He leans in and murmurs, “Is *who* dead?”

I pause for one second, two, then jerk away, my teeth gnashing together. “Like you don't know!”

Fuck, I'm losing it.

I don't mean to spit the words, but I do. He jerks back like I've slapped him. “What are you talking about?”

No, now I've lost it.

I jolt to my feet and shove away from them, their prying eyes, their worried gazes. It's all lies. All of it. How could they do this to me? Daniel and Evelyn, the only family I've remembered for the last ten-plus years, and Madeline, my *real* family. My flesh and blood. My mother.

I run a hand through my fucked up curls, my fingers catching in knots. The weight of my jewelry is heavy against

my throat, my ears. My fingers wrap around the necklace from Gage, and my eyes burn.

“You killed them,” I breathe, the words like acid on my tongue. I take another step back, my head shaking. I clench the diamonds. “You were there. You killed them.”

Gone.

They're gone.

I think I might be sick, or pass out, or fuck, both.

My eyes fly around the room, looking, searching, for a place to vomit as bile continues to fill my mouth. My stomach swirls.

Dead.

I take another step back, and Madeline pushes to her feet as Robert takes a step toward me. Then Daniel is standing.

“Don't come any closer!” I rasp, feeling like a trapped animal.

My bare foot catches on my long dress, and I stumble, my hand darting out into thin air as if to grab something, but all I see is blood. Dried, reddish-brown blood. Hunter's blood.

Oh my God.

Hunter's dead. He died in my arms. Oh my God.

The words repeat through my head again and again.

I'm seconds from puking all over Madeline's floor when the door swings open, and Evelyn saunters through, a tray full of

food and drinks in her hands. Her eyes meet mine, and they quickly shift from soft to worried.

“What happ—”

But it’s too late.

My heart pounds in my chest. I’m on the verge of losing control. The weight of the moment is crushing me, and I can’t breathe. The urge to vomit rises. I’m trembling uncontrollably, tears streaming down my face. I can’t stay here, not for another second.

In a blind panic, I bolt from Madeline’s office, my feet barely registering the sensation of the shiny industrial floors beneath me. I don’t know where I am, and I don’t know where to go, but I need a bathroom, a sink, or fuck, even a potted plant—anything to get away from this suffocating tension.

Away from the eyes. The sympathy. The questions.

The lies.

Frantic and disoriented, I slide on bare feet as I turn a corner and find myself in a massive concrete hallway. The dimly lit space stretches out before me, doors sporadically scattered along its length. The hall is bustling with people, all dressed in black, their ages and appearances varying widely. My body shakes as I take in the surreal scene.

This place feels like something out of a spy movie, reminiscent of the underground bunker from one of my favorite shows, “Agents of Shield.” It’s high-tech and

impressive, with bewildering complexity that leaves me feeling both awed and utterly confused.

The air is cool but not cold. The lights are dim but not dark, casting long shadows along the walls. The hum of machinery fills the air.

People move purposefully, engrossed in their tasks. I feel like an intruder stumbling into a secret world. I stumble backward, and my spine hits a wall. My head jerks backward, finding a door labeled *Library* behind me.

Swallowing thickly, I look to my left, then my right, finding an entire hall full of similar doors, all labeled.

Someone shoots me a smile, but it drops a second later. He steps forward, and I flinch. He looks alarmed, and try as I might, I can't get myself together to reassure him. What would I even say? I'm the one that doesn't belong. I'm the one who doesn't even know where she is. I'm the one crying, covered in blood in an evening dress, trying not to puke my fucking brains out.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly. "Do you need help?" He looks all over, his body tensing as if I might be in danger.

My eyes dart over his frame. He's a little taller than me and maybe around the same age. His hair is blonde and curly, his skin pale. I idly trace the freckles covering his nose before my gaze snaps to his soft brown eyes. The man is wearing a black polo with an emblem I can't decipher across a pocket filled with pens. Below is a pair of nice dark slacks and shiny leather shoes.

He looks...

Fuck, he looks *nice*.

So nice that my shoulders drop, and I sink into the door.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't to meet someone my age that makes me want to ask for a hug.

"Miss?" he prompts, taking a step closer. My heart picks up again, and my head shakes against my will, my fingers digging into my thighs. His throat bobs, and he freezes. "Shit. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to scare you." He spears his hand through his hair. "My name is Oliver. What's yours?"

"E-El-" I grit my teeth against the stammering. "Ella."

He nods slowly. "Okay, Ella." His eyes scan me before pausing on my bloody hands. "Are you hurt?" I shake my head. "Is someone else hurt?"

I let out a keening sound that I can't hold back, and Oliver jolts. Nausea returns full force as I think about Hunter's last breaths in my arms. I slap a hand over my mouth, then choke on a sob when I see his blood all over again.

"Bath-room," I barely grit out between clenched teeth.

His eyes gape. "*Fuck*." Then, his hand is wrapping around mine. I squeal a pathetic sound that I'll regret later, but before I can say anything, we're moving. He tugs me along, his feet moving swiftly, and looks at me over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, but you look lost, and this place is a goddamned maze."

"Okay," I rasp before cupping my mouth again.

He picks up pace with a curse. “Please don’t vomit on my back.” He gags as he takes a sharp right. “I’m a sympathetic puker.”

“Okay,” I repeat, the sound muffled. As we run through the slippery halls, I keep one hand over my mouth, the other bunched in my long dress, and take in the building.

I want to ask questions, and something tells me Oliver will give me the answers, but I can barely think past keeping my stomach contents intact, let alone how to ask what I need to without getting sent back to that fucking office.

The underground bunker stretches before me with its long, unadorned halls, a labyrinth of metallic corridors that seem to extend into infinity. There’s an eerie vibe to the surroundings, devoid of any decor or personal touches, as if function and secrecy take precedence over comfort.

Yellow lines are painted onto the cold, unfeeling grey walls, their bright hue providing the only hint of color in this otherwise monochromatic landscape.

The floors beneath my hurried footsteps gleam with a reflective sheen, an unforgiving surface that echoes with each footfall. It’s as if the entire building is polished to perfection, adding an unsettling, almost clinical quality to the atmosphere. The cold, impersonal air sends shivers coursing through my body as I run, my breath whooshing between my fingers.

The hallways seem to stretch on endlessly, making it all too easy to lose one’s way in this intricate maze, and I idly wonder

if that's on purpose. Everything about Madeline seems to radiate secrecy, my life being the prime example.

“How much lo—”

“Right here!” He grunts, his feet freezing so quickly my front collides with his back. Oliver grunts and practically boot-kicks a door open before unconsciously shoving me through.

I stumble, shooting him a glare over my shoulder, but his hand is slapped over his eyes, and his throat is bobbing restlessly.

“Alrighty,” he chokes out, saluting me with his free hand. “Catch ya’ around, Ella!”

I nearly chuckle at his awkwardness, but as he releases the door, his foot falls back to the ground, panic claws at me all over.

“Wait!” I practically scream, wincing when my voice bounces off the walls.

He smashes the door open again, and this time, I do giggle. “What?” He shouts. “Are you okay?”

My eyes dart to the sink, the toilet, the single stall. I bob my head even though he can't see me. “Don't leave,” I murmur, swallowing another ball of emotions. “Please.”

He holds the door open with the toe of his shiny shoe and rubs the back of his head, his other hand still covering his eyes. “Look, Ella, you seem to have the whole damsel in distress thing going for you, but I don't *do* vomit.” He gags

and clears his throat. “I can’t be the guy to hold your hair back for you.”

An unexpected laugh bubbles up, and I rub my chest in surprise.

“Was that the prequel to your Linda Blair moment?” he grunts. I laugh again, and this time, it comes out as a sob. “Aww, shit.”

“No,” I quickly say when he moves to step toward me. “It’s okay. I just meant...” I pause, trying to get my emotions under control. “I just meant, can you stay outside until I’m done? I don’t know where I’m going.”

I swear, the sigh he releases is so long and so loud it’s like he’s audibly deflating. “Yeah, of course. No problem.” His thumb hikes over his shoulder as he steps back. “I’ll just, uh, wait out here. Take your time. No rush.” He takes another step back. “You do your thing, and I’ll catch ya’ on the flip—” The door slams shut, cutting off his words, and just like that, I crumble to the floor.



Chapter 17

I DON'T KNOW HOW long I lay on the ground, but when I finally get up, my face is red, my head is throbbing, and I've vomited all the contents of my stomach. I wish I could say my heart is lighter as if I've cried out all my demons, but it's not.

I don't think it ever will be.

In fact, I'm pretty sure the more time passes, the deeper the pain will grow, the more shattered I'll become.

I bend over, rinsing my face in the sink. I cup water and fill my mouth, swishing a few times before spitting it in the sink. When I finally feel semi-human and clean, I dare to look up, meeting my broken reflection in the mirror.

As my tears continue to mingle with the water droplets on my face, I find myself locked in a heart-wrenching confrontation with myself. The woman reflected back at me, seeming like a stranger.

My fingers reach up, and I trace the pink scar dissecting my brow that goes up to my scalp. It's barely visible now, but I know it's there.

For the longest time, the first thing I spotted when I looked at my reflection were my scars. I saw the evidence of my past, the horrible accident I was involved in, the events that followed.

Then, I met the guys. I got healthy, I got better, I got *happy*. I stopped seeing my scars and started seeing *me*, the woman I was finally becoming.

Now, all I see is a shell.

My once-meticulously styled and curled hair is a chaotic nest of dirt, debris, and the blood of my best friend. The strands clump together, heavy and matted, clinging to my scalp like a weight I can't shake off. There's a profound disarray to it, a stark contrast to the carefully constructed image my guys had fawned over just hours ago.

Fuck, how long's it been?

My makeup, painstakingly applied before all hell broke loose, now appears as a smeared mask on my face. Mascara tracks streak down my cheeks like dark rivers carved by the relentless flow of tears. The red lipstick, once a bold statement of confidence, has become a haunting reminder of the chaos that unfolded, leaving stains on my jaw that won't disappear.

But it's the blood that haunts me the most, the crimson stains that mark my hair, my throat, my trembling hands. It's as if the very essence of death clings to me. His death.

Hunter's death.

You fall, I fall.

I love you.

It was always you.

Please forgive me.

With a choked sob, I pump soap into my hands, scrubbing my skin with a frantic desperation. The harsh, stinging sensation is a painful reminder, a futile attempt to cleanse not

only my body but also my soul from the horrors that have unfolded. My skin turns raw and red, protesting against the relentless assault.

In my grief-stricken frenzy, I'm barely aware of the door creaking open. I pay no attention to the intruder, my world spiraling into a whirlpool of despair.

Get it off.

Off.

It will never be off.

Cool hands begin to rub up, and down my back, a soothing gesture, and a soft, comforting voice breaks through my anguish.

“What can I do, sweetheart?” the voice murmurs, filled with empathy.

My body shudders.

Evelyn.

I slowly lean back, my hair dripping and tangled, and my eyes meet hers in the mirror.

“Mom,” I choke out, my voice trembling as I use a name I've struggled to use for so long, too long. Evelyn *is* my mom. Even with Madeline here, she's still my mom. She's earned the title again and again. It's hers. “He's dead. They're all dead.”

With tears streaming down her face, she watches me unravel in the reflection. Wordlessly, she reaches for a stack of paper towels and, with gentle tenderness, dries me off as best as she

can. Her touch is a lifeline, a silent promise that I'm not alone even though my world's imploded.

“We'll sort it all out,” she murmurs softly with a sniffle as she proceeds to clean me up the best she can. “I think a shower and a change of clothes is in order, hmm?”

She smooths my hair back, and I try to nod, but I can't. I'm so tired, so fucking weary, I can barely move. I blink up at her, my eyes heavy. “Tell me,” I rasp.

Her eyes flit between mine, and finally, I can see past the pain, the fear, the confusion. She genuinely has no idea what I'm talking about.

I swallow and lean against the sink, pulling away a fraction. Her hands drop to her sides, the wet paper towels still clenched between her fist.

“Tell you what, Ella?” she asks, her voice soft.

God, that's a loaded question. I have so many things I need answers to. Where am I? Who am I? How? Where has my mother been all these years? What the hell happened?

But the only thing that tumbles out is a desperate plea born from deep in my soul. “Gage, Maddox, Nyxon, Stone,” I say their names, one at a time, reverence clear in my voice, even as it cracks. “They were with me in the parking lot of The Den.” I swallow, forcing my spine to straighten. “So were you and Daniel. Are they dead?”

Her brows crash together. “I don't know—”

“Not good enough!” I shout, my lungs heaving. She flinches, and I take a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I just, fuck, I’m so confused. I don’t know where I am or what the hell happened, but all I care about is them. What if it was Daniel that bled out in your arms?” She jolts like I’ve slapped her, but I go on, my voice echoing in the small bathroom. “What if you held the love of your life while he died? Wouldn’t you want some goddamned answers?”

“Who died, Ella?” she asks, her own voice wavering. She shakes her head and straightens her sweater. “The last I saw, the boys were all still alive, still fighting. But our job was to get to you, and that’s it. Nothing and no one else mattered.”

My fists slap against my thighs as I scream, “*They matter!*”

The bathroom falls silent except for my heaving breaths. My eyes are blurry from tears, but I blink them away. “They matter, Mom. They matter.”

Her lips roll between her teeth as she swipes her damp cheeks and nods. “I know they do.” She looks away and exhales harshly. “I told her they were important to you. Daniel and I fought for them to be extracted with you and Hunter.” Her jaw pulses. “She didn’t go for it, clearly.”

“Who is she?” I ask, smoothing out my dress even though it’s a lost cause. “Madeline?”

Evelyn nods again. “She’s in charge, for now.”

I leave that ominous comment for later, circling back to the guys. “The man who took me—”

“Bobby,” she cuts in, flitting her gaze back to me. “He’s a big bear, but he’s kind.” She searches my face again and takes a tentative step forward. “He didn’t hurt you, did he? I swear to all that is holy, if he—”

“No,” I sigh, my fingers tangling in my soaked, gross hair. I cringe. “He didn’t hurt me.” Not physically, anyway. “But he said...” I choke on another sob and growl in irritation. *Get it together, Ella.* “He said *they’re gone*. What does that mean if they’re not dead.”

Hope fills me as I wait for her to answer with bated breath.

Unfortunately, I know the answer isn’t good, as she slowly shakes her head. “I don’t know, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.” I turn around and bow over the sink, my knees shaking all over. “But I will find out. We have a debrief in a few hours with the Tac team that was on the recovery mission tonight. We’ll get answers then.”

I spin back around. “We?”

Her lips lift in a slow smile. “I figured you’d want to be there for that.” She squeezes my bicep. “I know you have so many questions, Ella, so many. And you deserve the answers. But one thing at a time, okay? First, you need to get cleaned up, and you need to rest. Then, we’ll go to the debrief and figure out where your men are. After—”

Where my men are...

My men.

Four missing.

One dead.

“Hunter,” I breathe, cutting her off. “I can’t go to the meeting or de-whatever it’s called. I need to go back.”

I push past her, my heart racing, my eyes seeing nothing but him, him, *him*.

She grabs me again, and I whirl around, jerking my arm free as anxiety turns to blinding panic. “I have to go back. I have to. He needs me.”

“What are you talking about?” she practically hisses. “You are *not* going back there, Isabella, so help me God.”

“Leave him the fuck out of this,” I hiss right back, my jaw pulsing. “God didn’t help me out there when I held Hunter while he died. He didn’t help me when four of the five people I love more than my own life were taken from me. He didn’t help me when I was being ra—” I suck in a sharp breath, swallowing the words down before I can unceremoniously spill them out in this sterile bathroom. I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. I refuse to allow him to rot out there alone. I’m going, and I’m bringing him back.”

“Hunter?” she asks, her throat bobbing. “You’re going back for Hunter?”

“Of fucking course I am!” I growl, backing up. If I’m lucky, Oliver will take me for another run through this hellish maze before Evelyn, Madeline, or anyone else can catch up. “He doesn’t deserve to be left alone.” This time, my voice breaks, and try as I might, I can’t stop it.

Her entire body seems to soften, making me pause. “Oh, sweetheart,” she coos, brushing my hair from my face. Leaning forward, she cups my cheeks and bends to meet my eyes. “Hunter is here, Isabella.” I suck in a breath. “And he’s very much *alive*.”



Chapter 18

MY HEAD THROBS WITH a relentless, pounding ache, as if my brain is trying to claw its way out of my skull. Nausea washes over me, and I'm trapped in a disorienting fog. I struggle to make sense of where I am, my eyelids heavy and uncooperative. Blinking again and again, I try to force my eyes open, but they're so fucking heavy.

Around me, I can hear the sounds of a hospital—soft murmurs, the beep of machines, and distant voices. Panic begins to claw at my chest as my heart races, the overwhelming sensation that something is wrong washing over me.

Desperation makes my insides twist as I attempt to move, but my limbs betray me, unresponsive and heavy. Fear takes hold as I realize that I'm trapped, unable to escape, to move.

What the fuck?

Am I dead?

Buried alive?

My heart hammers, and distantly, I hear something beeping wildly. That's a good sign, right?

I try to move again. Nothing.

Okay, bad sign. Bad, *bad* sign. I inhale slowly, and air shoves its way up my nose uncomfortably.

I think I groan or grunt.

Then I freeze.

That's progress. I inhale deeply again, getting another thick rush of air. This time, my groan is a gag turned cough.

Fuck yeah. I'm not dead. Dead people don't cough.

And then, it all rushes back. The parking lot, the chaos, the gunfire. The moment when I threw myself in front of that bullet to save Ella's life. Wrapping my body around hers, pulling her away from the pandemonium that erupted. The searing pain, the knowledge that I might not make it.

And the most haunting memory of all—the sadness etched on Ella's tear-streaked, freckled face as she sobbed and begged me to get up.

I think I told her I love her.

I feel my brows pull together. Another good sign.

I *meant* to tell her I love her.

“There's nothing to forgive. Nothing. There never was. I love you, Hunter. I do. I love you. I promise,” she'd sobbed.

“It was always you,” I promised.

The macabre slideshow of those moments replays in my mind, each frame etched with pain and love. The room spins around me, and my dry, cracked lips manage to form her name before I succumb once more to the unforgiving darkness, the weight of my actions, and the uncertainty of what comes next weighing heavily on my heart.

“Ella.”

I think I hear her speak, but before I can force myself to see if she’s real, I get dragged back into nothingness.



Chapter 19

I AWAKE ONCE MORE, my eyelids heavy as if weighted down by the nightmares that plagued me in my sleep. I blink rapidly, and everything comes into view slowly before they fall shut again. I breathe slowly, happy air isn't being shoved up my nose anymore.

Get it together, Hunter.

Focus.

This time, when I muster the strength to open them, I'm met with a stark realization that sends my heart into overdrive.

I'm in a hospital bed, that much is clear. But this isn't any hospital room I've ever seen before. There are no windows to offer a glimpse of the outside world, and the dim, muted lighting casts an eerie shadow over everything, enveloping me in a darkness that feels almost oppressive instead of cozy.

Not that hospitals are ever cozy. I should know.

I swallow, shoving that thought away.

My tired eyes slowly scan the room, from the unassuming white door to the ground. The floors gleam with an almost unnatural sheen, but not the usually sterile white you'd expect from a doctor's office. The walls, stark white like blank canvas, enclose me in an unfamiliar coldness that seeps into my bones.

Or maybe it's because I almost died.

I did, right? Or did I just imagine that?

The room lacks the telltale signs of a conventional hospital setting—the absence of professional medical equipment, the sterile precision that I’ve come to associate with life-saving efforts. Instead, it feels more like an at-home setup in someone’s basement.

The thought has me struggling to sit up with a groan.

I have to get the fuck out of here.

“Hunter?” a tiny voice cracks, and my heart goes right along with it. It feels like my head whips to follow the sound, but I can tell I’m moving way slower than intended. Doesn’t matter. She’s always been worth the wait. “Oh my God, Hunter!”

Then, she’s on me, and my body releases a pained sound that pisses me off. Ella immediately shoves herself away, and I grit my teeth. Fuck, I’d kill myself all over if I could. I didn’t want her to leave.

Blinking against the pain that’s steadily spreading across my chest, I meet her eyes, and everything else disappears.

She’s been crying. More than crying if her swollen red cheeks and puffy eyes are anything to go by. She looks fucking wrecked, but still, so damn beautiful.

“Ba-by,” I rasp, the sight of her so sad, breaking my heart. Her mouth opens and closes. Her blue-green eyes go wide at the name, but I don’t take it back. Wouldn’t if I could, which I definitely *can’t*, as I spiral into an intense coughing fit.

The heaving coughs rip through the heavy silence in the room. Ella reacts swiftly, her anxious hands reaching for a

small green pitcher by the hospital bed. With a shaky grip, she slips one hand under my head, helping me sit up while offering the cup to my lips.

“Slow sips,” her words are barely a whisper. I comply, taking measured sips, my eyes locked on hers, ignoring the pain that burns and aches in my chest. The cool water offers relief to my parched throat, and my coughs finally subside.

After I’ve had enough, she delicately removes the cup, placing it back on the nightstand. Her own hands tremble with uncertainty, her worry and nervousness palpable.

“How long have I been out?” I grunt, licking my lips.

Her eyes flit to a clock on the wall, and her brows crash together. “You went into surgery as soon as you got here, and then you took a while to wake up. It’s been about six hours since...” She breaks off, and I know what she’s referring to.

Since I was shot.

Since our world went to shit.

Ella wrings her hands together, a nervous tic she’s always had. My lips nearly twitch, but then she speaks, and the vulnerability in her voice has my pulse thrumming.

“Do you need anything?” Her voice quivers as she asks, her gaze darting toward the door. Her movements are disjointed as if she’s trying to anticipate every possible need while fighting the urge to flee. “An extra pillow? A blanket? Oh, maybe the doctor should come to check on you. Yes. Definitely.” She takes a hesitant step away, her intention clear.

“Stop,” I interrupt firmly, my voice surprisingly strong. She freezes, her wide eyes fixed on mine.

“W-what?” Her stammered response slips from her lips. I can see the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, but I hold my ground, determined.

“Come here,” I command, my voice carrying the weight of authority, even as it rasps with disuse. Her eyes widen, and for a fleeting moment, I worry she might leave. But she silently obeys, shuffling across the cold floor in her long black gown.

My brows furrow when I notice her feet are bare, but I don’t comment on it. Not yet.

Ella stops beside my bed, her fingers hesitatingly tangling with the stark white sheets.

“Look at me.”

She shakes her head, refusing to meet my gaze, her eyes fixated on her own fingers.

I utter her name, a deep rumble, “Isabella. Look at me, baby.”

With a small gasp, her eyes slowly lift to meet mine.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice laced with worry.

She shakes her head once more, and I feel a pang of dread. I’m flooded with concern as I scan her face, searching for any signs of injury.

“Were you hurt?” The thought of her being harmed sends my heart racing.

Again, she shakes her head, this time more firmly. My lip twitches with a mixture of relief and frustration.

“Are you going to speak to me?” I ask softly.

She exhales, her nostrils flaring, her mouth opening and closing in an attempt to form words. But nothing comes out. She offers a helpless shrug.

God, she’s so fucking adorable.

But she still doesn’t move or speak. My eyes rake down her body, taking in every detail. The tiny scrapes on her exposed knuckles. Her face is red but free from makeup. Her tangled mess of smashed curls. The diamonds still draping her delicate throat, her ears.

Gifts from the guys.

Guilt swamps me.

I should have gotten her something.

My gaze snags on her wrists, where I know leather cuffs are doing their best to keep her calm. It’s not working, though, not really.

I watch as her eyes cloud over with unshed tears, and my girl does everything she can to keep from falling apart. Her hands are trembling, her body swaying with exhaustion.

And it hits me then.

Ella is fucking *terrified*.

I don’t know why, but I have a few guesses. Maybe because of what happened in that parking lot, to me, to the guys. I

swallow thickly. Damn, I don't even know what happened to them. My stomach twists, and my heart throbs, but I shove it away. I'll ask about them soon.

She's my priority.

Now.

Always.

Slowly, so slowly, I reach out and grab her hands, stilling her erratic movements. Her eyes snap to mine, glossy and shadowed. I grip her hand, bringing it to my lips. I press a shaky kiss to the tips of each finger, watching her eyes dilate, her breathing turn to pants, her jaw tremble.

"I told you I love you," I murmur. She jolts but doesn't speak. She also doesn't pull away, so I'm counting it as a win. "I told you I love you, and I want to be with you. I told you I've always loved you, that you're mine, and I'm yours. I told you I'd die for you so you could live the life you deserve. I told you all those things as I lay dying in your arms, Isabella."

Her head shakes, her tears now flowing freely down her round cheeks, and it's an achingly beautiful sight even in the middle of devastation. I swallow hard, my voice trembling with a potent blend of emotions.

"I said all those things, baby..." I suck in a sharp breath. "And I meant them."

At that moment, as our emotions collide and entwine, I can feel the overwhelming depth of my love for her coursing

through my veins, an unbreakable bond that defies death and transcends fear.

“Hunter!” she wails, falling into me. I jerk when her small body collides with my chest but ignore the pain as I wrap her in my arms. There’s nowhere else I want her to be, *ever*. Her tears hit my neck as she sobs into me, and I hold her as tight as I can. “I was so fucking scared. I thought you died!”

I rub her back with one hand and palm her head with the other, keeping her tucked in tightly, refusing to let her go.

“I know, babe,” I croak, my own eyes filling with tears. I squeeze them shut, inhaling her scent. Beneath the sweat, the tears, the coppery scent of blood, *mine probably*, she still smells like my Ella. “I’m so sorry.”

She tries to pull away, but I can’t for the life of me let her. She huffs a small sound of annoyance, and even through our tears, I smile, but it falls as her lips ghost over my throat. A shiver races down my spine.

“It’s not your fault,” she breathes. “I’m still mad at you for diving in front of that bullet, but, *fuck*, Hunter...” She breaks off, her body tensing before another wave of sobs hits her. I can feel her shaking, the effort of staying on her feet and bent over the bed too much for my exhausted girl.

I groan in pain as I slide my hand down her back and palm her ass. She jerks in my grip with a little squeal, and I chuckle before sliding a bit lower to grip her upper thigh. I tug her hard but can’t pull her where I want her. Luckily, she knows what I

want and helps me up, climbing onto the bed as gingerly as possible, avoiding all the wires connected to me.

I tuck Ella into my side, an arm wrapped under her so I can thread my fingers through her hair. I pause when I realize it's tangled and soaked, but I don't comment.

We're a fucking mess.

I don't know how long we sit there, no sound in the room beyond our combined breaths, her sobs that turn to quiet sniffles, and the beeping from my monitors. I can tell I was seriously injured, but the pain meds are doing their job for the most part. I remember being shot, remember her, but not much else, and I'm not sure when the right time to ask is.

Part of me doesn't want to disrupt this peaceful moment we've found. Having Ella in my arms after everything I admitted, everything that happened, with it all out on the table—it's nearly too much.

But, fuck, it feels so damn right.

"Hunter," she breathes, breaking the silence. I hum in response, continuing to gently detangle her hair, my eyes heavy. Ella exhales slowly and leans up, her clouded eyes meeting mine. I brush her tears away, loving the way she sinks into my touch. "Everything is so fucked up."

I almost laugh at her eloquent way of stating the obvious. Instead, I give her a stern nod. "I know."

Her eyes search mine, and my gut twists. "Did you really mean it?" she whispers, her voice cracking.

My heart rate kicks up, and I curse the damn monitor for betraying my nerves, my excitement, my love.

I rub her cheek, my thumb making slow strokes across her face, tracing it, memorizing it like I've done hundreds of times before.

“What part?” I murmur. She gives me a look that has my lip twitching. I pinch her chin, bringing her face closer, closer, *closer*, until we're only a breath away. “If you're asking about the part where I died so you could live,” I whisper, pinching harder when she tenses. I press a kiss to her cheek, murmuring against her skin, “Yes. A hundred times over, yes.”

“Hunt...” she breathes.

I tug her in closer, and she comes willingly. “Or about when I said that it's always been you. From the day we met until the day I actually let Heaven or Hell take me, it has been and will always be *you*.”

A kiss to her jaw.

Her nose.

Her eyes flutter closed, so I kiss them, too.

There's not even an inch between us now, but I don't stop, not until she tells me to. Even then, it would kill me, but I'd stop. For her, I'd respect every boundary she needed. There was a time when I couldn't, and I will never take that from her again.

“What about the part where I said that I love you, hmm?”

She whimpers at my words, and I smile, kissing the corner of her mouth, this time slower, longer. Ella shakes in my hands, leaning in further, leaning into my touch, into *me*.

Despite the fucked up situation we're in, despite the throb in my chest, my cock kicks up to full-mast, eager and willing now that she's here.

We're alive.

My lips hover over hers. "Look at me," I rasp. Her eyes flutter open as I slide my thumb over her jaw and grip the back of her neck. "Or are you asking about when I said you're mine, Isabella?"

"That one," she chokes out.

I smirk, running my lips across hers, inhaling her sweet scent.

"Yeah," I murmur. "I meant that, too."

And then, she's kissing me.

Or maybe I'm kissing her.

I don't know, and I don't care, but her lips are on mine, and for the first time in my life, I feel *whole*. I don't waste a damn second of this opportunity, using my grip on the back of her head to pull her into me until I have no idea where she ends, and I begin.

There, on a hospital bed in an unknown place, I kiss the love of my life the way I should have in the back of that fucking SUV before our lives went to shit. I should have kissed her so

deep, so hard, her lipstick was smeared across my soul, and everyone knew what I'd done—who she belongs to.

Ella moans into my mouth, and somewhere, in the back of my head, a voice whispers that she doesn't belong *just to me*. But then, I remember the way Maddox gave me his, *their*, blessing to pursue her. The way he taunted me as if she'd never choose me.

But she's choosing me *now* just like I've chosen her always.

A thought I'd had out there on that pavement lot flits through my mind again, slamming into me like a ten-ton boulder.

I should have loved her loudly.

I rip my mouth from hers, one hand cupping her cheek, the other keeping her close so she doesn't get any crazy ideas about leaving me. Her hazy eyes meet mine, and for one brief second, I get distracted by her lust-filled gaze, her puffy lips, her red cheeks. Not from tears, but from *me*. Because I turned her on. Because she wants *me*.

“I love you, Ella,” I rasp, emotion choking me. “I love you,” I say it again and again, needing her to truly *know*. God, I've waited so fucking long for this. I swallow hard. I'm not one to beg, but I'm begging now. “Please tell me you still—”

“I love you so much,” she chokes out, and my heart fucking soars.

But I have to be sure. My lip kicks up. “Like sexy love, right? Not like a brother?” Or a friend, or sidepiece or gay-bestie, or....

She slaps my chest softly, and I wince with a gasp. Ella's eyes go wide as she frantically tries to soothe the hurt with pets and kisses across my bandaged chest. "I'm so sorry. Fuck, Hunt. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm—"

"Ella," I chuckle, guiding her face back to mine. I cock a brow. "Answer me, baby."

"You're so demanding all of a sudden." She scoffs and rolls her eyes, but the snuffle she sniffs takes away from her sassiness.

Leaning in, she presses another kiss to my lips, her tongue sliding slowly against my mouth, asking for entrance. I groan, letting her tongue play with mine in a slow, exploratory way.

We've kissed before. When we were younger, but I've done everything I can to forget those moments. They were forced, and though they made my heart soar in the darkness, they were tainted. Then, just a few months ago, I kissed her at that club, and while it had meant a hell of a lot to me, we'd been shitfaced, completely drunk. Those memories are tainted, too.

But here, now, with my hands cradling her sweet face, hers roaming my chest, my bare neck, threading through my long hair as her tongue slides against mine, it's different.

It's everything.

"I love you in a sexy, boyfriend kinda way," she whispers against my mouth. "A very sexy way."

Her eyes flick up to mine as she smirks before biting down on my lower lip. I groan, my eyes rolling to the back of my

head. Unable to help myself, I palm her ass and grind my erection into her thigh, letting her see just how much I want her. Ella whimpers, rolling her hips back before pulling away slightly. She has to shake the lust from her mind so she can think straight, making me chuckle and her huff.

We stare at each other for a long moment, and I give her space to find her words, sensing something on her mind. A lot, no doubt.

Her fingers trace my brow, my nose, my jaw. “I love you in a *forever* kind of way, Hunter Morris.”

I swallow, my eyes burning. “Yeah?”

The smile she graces me with is one I’ll never forget. “Yeah.” All too soon, her smile’s fading. “But, Hunt,” she murmurs. “I love them too.”

I nod, my teeth grinding. “I know you do.”

Her eyes search mine. We’re still close, too close for any kind of civilized conversation that requires me to think, but I don’t dare remove her body from where she’s cradled next to mine.

“And that’s okay with you?” she murmurs.

I sigh a long breath, stroking her hair again. “I won’t say I love the idea of sharing you. I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I’d always hoped...” I shrug, watching as my fingers trace her earrings.

The diamonds are huge, heavy, and ostentatious as fuck, but it's everything she deserves. It's also something I could never hope to give her myself. And therein lies my answer. What I've already figured out. What I've already accepted.

My gaze flicks to hers. "You deserve every ounce of love and adoration the world has to offer. You deserve pretty jewels and fancy houses, fast cars, and nights on the town. I can't give you all that." I swallow, my pride taking a massive hit. "But they can."

"I don't need all of that," she interjects, her voice hard.

I smile softly, kissing her jaw. "I know you don't, baby. But you should have it."

"That's not why I'm with them," she grumbles, trying to pull away. I keep her cute little ass banded to my chest, chuckling when she grunts in frustration.

"Oh, I'm one hundred percent aware that's not why you're with them."

"How do you know?" she huffs.

I smirk. *Little brat.*

"Three reasons," I grunt, holding up the fingers of my free hand. "One, you're not like that." I give her a knowing look.

I know Isabella better than I know myself. She'd rather live in a shack and eat nothing but cheese and potatoes for the rest of her life than live in a mansion if it meant she could be truly happy.

“Two, I’ve seen the way those men love you.” I cup her cheek, making her look at me. “You are their fucking world, baby, and I will never take that from you. As long as you keep me as part of your harem, I’m in this shit with you for life.” I waggle my brows. “We should get matching shirts.”

“Oh yeah?” I nod and Ella bursts out laughing, her head rubbing against my shoulder. “You said three,” she mumbles.

“Ah, yes. Three reasons as to why you’re with them.” I smirk, my eyes scanning the hospital room as she settles into me again. “Those guys are hot as fuck.”

“Oh my God,” she cackles, her body shaking against mine. The sound of her happiness lights me the fuck up. When she goes quiet, and her fingers start to dance along my chest, I know she’s back in her head. “So,” she whispers. “You think they’re hot, huh?”

My throat bobs, and I’m suddenly glad she can’t see my face. “Well, yeah.” I clear my throat, trying to play off the way my stomach flips. “Who wouldn’t think that?”

Ella giggles. “All of them, or anyone in particular?”

My brows lift. I feel like she knows something she can’t possibly know. “Uhh…”

Fuck.

Why did I say anything?

My mind swirls with images of the guys. Each of them is attractive. Anyone with eyes would agree. They’re all big and tattooed and growly, some more than others.

Stone is objectively attractive, but he's not my type. Never has been. Something about him reminds me too much of myself, and I can't stand myself on the best of days.

Gage is hot as fuck, but he's also beyond obsessed with Ella in a way that makes me want to peel my skin off with a carrot shaver when I'm near them. Not that I'm not equally obsessed, as are the rest of the guys, but the dude acts like he wants to put her in a glass case and worship at her pussy-alter.

Again, *same dude*, but fucking hell. He's constantly all, *eat more protein. Have you had enough water? Take a nap.* It's exhausting.

I run a hand through my hair, wincing at the tangles.

Nyxon King is a growly, demanding prick. I hate him because of how awful he's been to my girl. For everything he's done to her. But damn, if I wouldn't let him bend me over any goddamned solid surface and fuck me into oblivion.

My body shudders at the thought, and I swear, she grins against my throat.

I groan, my cock already throbbing at the thought of Maddox.

Fuck me.

I don't know what it is about him. He's annoying, smug, cocky to the point that I want to scream and stab his stupidly pretty eyes out with a dull knife. He's also tall, muscular as fuck, tattooed up to his goddamned throat, and beyond adorable. He's loyal, sweet and funny. He's got a lip ring I've

ached to tug between my teeth, a body I crave to explore, and dimples I've imagined filling up with cum.

More than once.

My cock throbs, and I shift to hide my reaction.

But Ella is apparently refusing to drop it because seconds later, her delicate fingers are trailing over the tented sheet as she presses a kiss to my throat.

“Is this for me or for him?” she quietly rasps, her voice husky.

I suck in a breath and pull away enough to meet her eyes. “What?” I choke out, my face burning hot.

She bites down on her thick lip and shrugs. “I've seen the way you are together.” Her words are damn near silent, but I hear them loud and clear.

My eyes flick between hers. “Who?”

Her head tilts. “If you want to keep pretending, it's okay. We don't have to talk about it.” I watch as her hand rubs my cock with a bit more pressure before sliding up my body to wrap around my jaw. I shiver at her touch. “Just know, I support you in all ways. Both of you.” Her lip kicks up. “In fact, I more than support you. If you decide to pursue him or any of them, it's okay with me. I just want all of us to be happy.”

My mouth gapes, opening and closing, until I finally find the words to say. They aren't eloquent, but I get my point across. “How can you be okay with that?”

Her brows crash. “How could I not?” She licks her lip, and my fucking cocks drips precum at the sight. “You all share me so I can be happy. How could I not give you that respect right back?”

“But,” I object, not understanding.

She shakes her head. “I’m not saying I want all of you sleeping with just anyone, but if there comes a time when you find someone outside of our group that you love, that you need, just talk to me, to us. I want this to work out, and I know it will be hard, but it’s worth it.” She kisses my jaw. “You’re all worth it and—”

Ella breaks off with a soft sob, and I cradle her to my chest. “And what, baby?”

“And I almost lost you, Hunter,” she whimpers, her body shaking with the force of her tears. “I almost lost you. You bled out in my fucking arms. You said *goodbye!*” God, the grief in her voice is enough to break my heart. “And then, the guys, they, they—”

Again, she falls into a fit of sobs so hard I worry she might pass out. I drag her into me so we’re as close as possible without her ripping out my IV or any wires and rock her the best I can, murmuring words of love and praise until she can breathe again.

“That’s it, that’s my good girl,” I whisper, stroking everywhere I can reach. “Breathe for me, baby. In and out. In and out. Such a good, sweet girl.” She shivers, sniffing. “Keep going, nice and slow.”

When she can finally breathe normally, I wipe her tears away and guide her eyes to mine. I kiss her cheeks all over, making her smile softly. My finger trails down her nose, across her freckles.

She's so fucking stunning, she knocks the air from my chest.

"Ella," I whisper, my eyes flicking between hers. "Tell me what happened, baby."

"So much," she whimpers, inhaling deeply. "So fucking much."

I nod. I'd figured. "Okay. Start with something small." She eyes me questioningly. "Where are we? What is this place?"

Her mouth opens, but before she can get anything out, a sharp voice cuts through the room.

"You, Mr. Morris, are in the Intensive Care Unit of the *Les Beaux Voyous* Compound, hidden twenty feet under the heart of San Francisco. Now, please remove your hands from Ms. Moreau before I have the guards remove them for you."



Chapter 20

I JOLT UP FROM the bed, my eyes wide and my heart racing as I turn to the newcomer.

Anger pulses through me, hot and bitter. Who the hell does she think she is? My eyes slide down her body, and unfortunately, her white lab coat means I want her here despite her condescending tone. Gritting my teeth, I turn back to Hunter, pressing a kiss to his shocked face before carefully sliding from the bed.

Rolling my shoulders back, I adjust my dress.

Well, at least she made her entrance with information I'd been unable to get from anyone else so far. I have no idea what she's talking about, but something inside of me is urging me to pretend, to fake it. That I'll get more information if I don't out myself as a fraud right off the bat.

So, keeping my back to the woman, I squeeze Hunter's hand, drawing his attention. His wide, confused eyes snap up to mine, and I give him a discreet head shake before mouthing, *play along*.

His brows crash together, and his jaw tenses, but he gives a tiny nod right back. I squeeze his hand once more, then slowly turn to face the doctor, who's eyeing us with questions written all over her stern face.

Stepping forward, I extend my hand. "I don't believe we've met yet..." I let my words hang, cocking a brow, channeling Gage's power ego.

She straightens, clasping my palm firmly. “Doctor Leclerc, Ms. Moreau, it’s so nice to finally meet you.”

I barely stifle my flinch and slowly slide my hand from hers. Why the fuck do people keep calling me that? I thought Madeline’s last name was Vega. Well, Vega-Torres, if she hyphenated. Or, I guess she could have dropped Vega when she met Robert—

No. Wait.

I shake my head.

Get it together, Ella.

Stop talking to yourself.

Be professional.

Get answers.

No.

Stop. Talking. To. Your. Self.

Every word is accentuated with an internal clap in my head, and it finally shakes me from my thoughts, but not before the doctor notices. The doctor who, like almost everyone else I’ve met here, has a French accent to some extent. Everyone except Oliver.

I smile to myself as I think of the sweet, little goofball who’d led me here the second Evelyn said Hunter was okay. She’d had to go back to Madeline to prepare for the debrief, and Oliver had been kind enough to bring me to the MedBay.

Or, maybe I half-dragged him.

You're doing it again, Ella.

Stop talking to yourself.

Fuck, I'm spiraling.

With a fake as fuck smile, I step back toward Hunter and grab his hand, hoping he can keep me tethered to the present. "How is he?" I ask, my hand shaking but my voice steady.

Hunter gives me a weird look but squeezes my hand.

She closes the distance between us, her eyes idly scanning Hunter but mostly me. "Are you okay, Ms. Mo—"

I hold a hand up. "I am not your patient." I don't know who these people think I am, but clearly, they think I'm important. I hate it. "He is." I point to Hunter. "What the hell happened? Is he okay? Will he make a full recovery?"

I hadn't even bothered to talk to the doctors when I got here. I merely sobbed out Hunter's name to the first scrub-wearing person I found, and they pointed me to the third door on the right, their face a mask of pure shock. I honestly don't even know if it was a woman or a man. I didn't-care.

I flew into the room, fell to my knees the second I saw his sleeping, pale face, and cried myself to sleep.

Now, I'm awake, I'm piecing myself back together, and I need answers. So many answers, I want to scream my head off.

"Um, I'm not sure," she says so fucking un-reassuringly, it's not even funny. I think I snarl, and she quickly snatches his

chart from the foot of his bed. “I apologize,” she murmurs, swallowing thickly, her eyes flicking from mine to Hunter to the chart. “I’m just a little surprised to finally be meeting you, is all.”

“What is—” Hunter starts, his words trailing off. I give him a look, and his mouth snaps shut, but I don’t miss the threatening glare he shoots me while she’s distracted.

With a huff, I look back at the doctor and wave her off with a coy smile. “I’m here sooner than planned.” Because I’d never planned to be here.

Ever.

I don’t even know where *here* is. Underground, apparently. I suck in a slow breath, suppressing a shiver. I hate being underground.

She nods, her eyes skimming his chart before dropping it back down and rounding the bed opposite me. With a smile, she slides her stethoscope from her neck. “I’m just going to check a few things, then I’ll give you both the full rundown.”

Hunter grimaces as she guides him to sit up and breathe deeply. My heart contracts painfully in my chest, but I never release his hand. I still can’t believe he almost died. I almost lost him before I even had the chance to tell him how much I love him, want him, *need him*.

Never again.

I watch as the doctor checks over the stitched-up incision on his upper left chest, near his shoulder. He grits his teeth and

looks away, avoiding both our eyes. Leaning forward, I smooth his long, messy hair from his handsome face, drawing his gaze to mine. The doctor presses on a particularly sensitive spot, and I shoot her a glare before kissing his forehead.

Hunter chuckles softly, and not for the first time, I'm shocked at how easy this is. Being with him, the transition from best friends to...*more*. It feels right. It feels perfect.

Except for the fact that everything around us is imploding.

Literally.

I bite my cheek and inhale slowly.

One thing at a time.

"Well, Mr. Morris," she chimes, taking a step back.

"Just Hunter," he cuts in, running a hand across the blankets, his face a mask of discomfort. My brows pinch, but I don't say anything. "You can call me Hunter."

She nods. "The gunshot wound was in your upper left chest, and it was a close call, but thankfully, it just missed your right ventricle. You did lose a significant amount of blood because the wound was through and through, but we got you into surgery quickly. During the procedure, we carefully repaired the damage and stopped the bleeding. You'll be in recovery for the next few days, and as long as you continue responding well to treatment, I don't see any reason why you can't go home within the week. We'll continue to monitor your progress, but the outlook is positive." She pats his shin, and I finally take a breath. "You were very, *very* lucky."

“A week?” I gasp, clapping a hand over my mouth to stifle a sob. I squeeze my eyes shut, berating myself for already looking weak when I meant to fake the hell out of this interaction. But...a week? Seriously? I thought...

“I know,” Hunter murmurs, tugging me into his side. “I know what you thought. Me too.”

I blink my eyes open, my hand falling to my side as I glance down at him. “I said that out loud?”

He smirks and shakes his head, brushing my hair from my face. “No. I just know my girl.”

His girl.

Fuck.

I soften and turn back to the doctor, who’s eyeing us skeptically. My smile drops, and I cock a brow. God, I probably look insane.

She clears her throat and moves toward the door. “We’re not equipped for long-term recovery. As I said, as long as he continues to improve, I’ll feel comfortable sending him home. If not, we may need to discuss sending him to a larger facility.”

I want to ask about this facility. How it exists. Where it exists. *Why it exists.*

I say nothing but nod and murmur my thanks. I move to turn back to Hunter, but she pauses, her hand wrapped around the door handle. “Also, Ms. Moreau,” she says, her voice taking on a sharper quality once more. I flick my gaze to hers. “Your

mother said it's time for the debriefing and to please meet her in The Chamber.”

And then she leaves without another word.

My mouth falls open, and my brows crash together as I stare after her, my heart in my throat.

“What the fuck is The Chamber, *Ms. Moreau*?” Hunter snaps. “And where the hell are we?”

My mouth clicks shut as I slowly turn toward him. My throat bobs with the force of my swallow. “The Intensive Care Unit of the *Les Beaux Voyous* Compound, apparently.”

“Ella,” he grunts, shooting me a tightlipped glare. “Explain.”

With a sigh, I sink into the chair I'd been napping in and grip Hunter's hand tightly. I can't seem to let go. “I don't even know where to start,” I breathe.

He gives me a soft look. “At the beginning, baby.”

His words are so similar to Madeline's that I cringe, my eyes burning all over again. “I don't really know much. I woke up here while you were in surgery and then passed out again.” I shake my head, those first few moments, or fuck, hours, hazy. “I don't know how much time passed, but then, I was looking at my mother.”

Hunter sucks in a sharp breath and bolts upright before groaning loudly. “What the fuck?”

“Christ, Hunter!” I snap, jumping up and fluffing his pillows before adjusting the bed so he can sit normally. “Is this okay?”

I murmur.

“Ella,” he grunts, batting my hands away from his bed and tugging me toward his face. “Tell me.”

So, I do. I tell him everything that’s happened so far, which is literally everything and yet nothing. When I’m done, I’m back in my chair, my head smashed into his thigh as I sob for my missing men, my Diablos.

I’ve tried to ignore the throbbing, twisting pain, but it’s impossible. I miss them. I’m terrified for them. I just want them back.

“I need them, Hunt,” I rasp. His hand smooths down my hair as I continue to cry, releasing all the hurt so I can hopefully think straight for whatever’s bound to come next.

“I know you do,” he murmurs calmly. “What does your heart say?” I look up and snuffle. He wipes my cheeks. “Does your heart say they’re dead?”

I wince at his blunt question but pause, really digging inside myself for those moments, those painful memories. I remember seeing them fighting, killing Eric, battling with gun-wielding, masked men. I don’t remember seeing them fall or get shot. I didn’t hear anyone scream in pain.

I also didn’t see them get taken the way I was.

Because in those seconds, all I saw was Hunter.

But deep inside my soul, I feel like I’d know if they were dead. I know it’s silly, but I’m connected to them. All four of

them, five if I count Hunter, and I do. They're my soulmates, my happily-ever-afters.

"My soul, my gut, tells me they're alive," I rasp. "It also says they need me."

He bobs his head as if he knew that, too, and tucks my messy hair behind my ear. "And what do you want to do about that, my love?"

My love?

Fuck. He's killing me.

His fingers trail over my chandelier earring, and my heart pangs, thinking of Maddox. Hunter's brows crash together as his fingers slide down until he's gripping my necklace.

He sucks in a sharp breath, his eyes colliding with mine. "The trackers!"

I jolt upright, a grin spreading across my face. "*The fucking trackers!*"

I grab his cheeks and slam my lips to his. Hunter groans, pulling me into his body. For just one second, I lose myself in him. His taste, the soft caress of his mouth against mine. For just one second, I let myself breathe him in as if he's filling me with the hope I need to go on.

We pull apart, breathless and giddy. My forehead lands on his. "What's next?" He murmurs. "What do we do?"

"Well," I breathe, standing upright. "I need to go to this meeting and find out everything I can about where and what I

am. And then, I need to leave.”

“Who,” he grunts, his eyes narrowing as he starts to shift his blankets. I arch a brow. “*Who* you are, not *what*.”

I grimace, stepping back. “Yeah, I don’t know, Hunt. The way these people talk about me and look at me.” I shrug. “I’m kind of feeling like a sideshow freak instead of a nameless ex-orphan.”

His brows waggle as he tosses his blanket off his legs. “You’re not nameless, *Ms. Mo*—”

“Don’t say it!” I cut in, slashing my hand through the air. “I’m fucking tired of that name already, and I don’t even know what it means.” My eyes crash together as he shuffles down the bed and swings his legs over the side. I jump forward, shoving him back. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He bats my hands away. “Going with you, obviously.”

“The fuck you are, Hunter!” I shout, then proceed to look like a crazy, overprotective mother as I hen-hover around, trying to corral him back to bed when he tugs on wires. “Hunter! No!”

“Ella,” he grunts, pausing with a heavy breath. His face is tight, and I know he’s in pain, but he also looks irritated. “Baby, I’m fine. The doctor even said it—”

“She said—”

“—it herself that the injury was minor and—”

“And you almost bled out!” I screech, interrupting his annoying mouth again.

He rolls his eyes. “Look, Mom, no hands,” he chuckles as he slides from the bed to his sock-covered feet.

I screech again, wrapping my arms around his waist as he wobbles. “For fucks sake!” I snap. “Just, shit, just hang on a second.” With a huff, I make him lean against the bed. “If you’re insisting on coming with me, we’ll need help.”

“Now we’re talking,” he laughs, though he sounds out of breath. “If they’re all looking at you like you’re the queen, go demand some royal assistance.”

I wave his words off and turn toward the door. “Princess,” I grumble, Madeline’s words flitting through my brain.

Princess of the fucking Bay.

“What?”

“Nothing!” I snap.

“Where are you going?” he calls.

I smirk at him over my shoulder. “This job calls for an Oliver.”

“Who the fuck is Oliver?” he bellows at my retreating back as I slam his door shut. Just before it clicks, I hear him groan in pain.

Fucking insufferable, annoying men. Can’t even stand a cold, but they get shot, and all of a sudden, they want to play superhero.

Don't they know period pains have already made us invincible?



Chapter 21

“ARE YOU SURE THIS looks okay?” Hunter grunts, tugging on the white button-down shirt with a scowl.

I bend, adjusting the wrinkled collar as my eyes scan down his body. He’s wearing the shirt, some fitted tan chinos that ride up high on his calves from his seated position, white socks that only cover half the exposed skin, and dad shoes. You know the kind. Old, beat-up, white tennis shoes with grass stains that should have been retired twenty-two years ago, but your dad insists on wearing them proudly with jorts?

Yeah. My boyfriend is wearing *those*.

Even worse, he’s in a wheelchair, so they enter the room ten solid seconds before him like some kind of cringy beacon.

Swallowing down the laughter bubbling up my throat, I smile and brush his freshly washed hair from his face. “You look hot.”

He shoots me a glare, batting my hands away. “But is the fucking tie necessary?” he hisses.

A chuckle comes from over my shoulder, and I stand, grinning at a blushing Oliver. He shrugs. “Sorry, man. It’s the only thing I had that would fit over your bandages.”

“But the *tie*?” Hunter snaps, yanking the thin pink silk from his neck.

“What?” I laugh. “It completes the outfit.”

Hunter points at Oliver, taking in his nice, dark jeans that rest comfortably at his ankle, shiny shoes, and fitted black polo. “Why can’t I wear what he’s wearing?”

Oliver brushes his hands down his shirt, his deep dimple barely concealed. “You won’t fit in my shirt, dude. Not unless you want to rip a stitch.” His dimple pops out. “Besides, I’d never wear that.”

Hunter snarls and tries to shove up out of his wheelchair, but I plant my hands on his shoulders, forcing him down. “We don’t have time for this!” I whisper-hiss, eyeing the nervous-looking nursing staff flitting around the tiny medical ward. “You look fine.”

“No,” he grunts, settling into his chair with a sigh. “*You* look fine. I look like I ran through Goodwill with a blindfold on and said *do your worst, bitch.*”

Oliver doubles over, laughter peeling from his chest, making his shoulders shake. Sighing, I shake my head, eyeing my own outfit. For as silly as Hunter looks, Oliver took his time to make sure I’d appear professional, clean, and yet perfectly invisible.

I don’t know where he found the black athletic pants and matching fitted zip-up that somehow fits me like a glove, but I have a niggling feeling this place is equipped with way more extra clothing than Oliver’s letting on. He even somehow found brand new Nikes that are pink, adorable, and my size.

I’m pretty sure I’m wearing something reserved for fitness training. It still had the tags on it, for Christ’s sake, all the way

down to the bra and panties.

I smirk to myself and quickly glance at Oliver, who waggles his eyebrows, humor lighting up his kind face.

Yeah, he's fucking with Hunter, I just don't know why.

But as lightness fills my chest and some of the anxiety I'd felt about what's to come dissolves, I wonder if maybe Oliver sensed I'd need a distraction right now.

After snagging him from the hallway outside of Hunter's room earlier, I filled him in on everything. Well, not everything. I'm still not sure people should be made aware of how little I know about this entire situation, but something inside me says I'm not fooling Oliver. He already knows how out of my element I am. I also kind of think I can trust him.

His eyes went wide when I explained the shoot-out, Hunter's near death, my missing guys, the trackers they should still, *hopefully*, be wearing, and my need to extract as much information here before hunting them down.

But he surprisingly took it all in stride. He simply gave me a sharp nod, adjusted his glasses, and took care of everything else.

Hunter was ushered to a shower that he insisted on taking by himself, but I quickly stripped down without a word and got us both clean. If he hadn't been slumped on the wall, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, I have no doubt the shower would've been awkward or *not*, considering we haven't been naked and close like that in...

Well, a long time.

But I gritted my teeth, ignored the hard dick pointed at me, and washed us both quickly. I may have taken a peak while he rinsed his hair, but I'm only human.

The second I'd found myself getting turned on, I looked away, guilt, anger, and sadness replacing everything else.

I need my guys back.

Now.

And as much as I love Hunter, as much as I desire him, we can't take it any further with them out there suffering or worse. Not yet.

I shook the thoughts of Hunter's sexy, tattooed body and veiny cock away, rinsed and dried us both, and got us into the clothes Oliver had left on Hunter's bed. A wheelchair also magically appeared, as well as a nurse who Oliver promised wouldn't rat us out.

When I'd given her a questioning look, she merely shrugged, reattached Hunter's wires and IV, making them portable, and said, "*Who the hell am I to question you? You're in charge here. No one else.*" I gaped, Hunter choked, Oliver chuckled, and the nurse winked before spinning on her heel and leaving us behind.

Now, here we are, ready to go to the debriefing that Oliver assured me wouldn't start until I arrived.

It makes no sense.

None.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

I can't do this. I can't handle this. I'm not made for this world, whatever it is. I have no idea what's waiting for me inside that meeting, but I know it's not good. I know it'll have the power to stop my world and burn it to ashes.

How can I allow that to happen when I have nothing left to give?

When I've already lost it all?

"Ready?" Oliver murmurs, pulling my attention from my shoes. My fingers are tangled in my sleeves, and Hunter leans forward, gripping my hands and tugging me into him. My knees hit his bent ones as I meet his eyes, bending slightly since he's a bit shorter than me in the wheelchair.

His palms cup my cheeks, his eyes flitting between mine. "You are Isabella Hundson, a friend, a barista, a lover, a daughter, a kind-souled woman with so much strength, it knocks the breath from my lungs." My eyes mist over, but I blink the tears away. "You are beautiful, sweet, pure, and so much more than whatever your mind is telling you right now. You *can* do this. I swear to God, Elle, you really can."

"How can you have so much faith in me?" I ask, my voice cracking. I sense Oliver move away to give us privacy, and I could hug him for it. "I don't even have that much faith in myself, Hunt."

He smooths a hand over my hair and wraps his fist around my long, damp ponytail, using his grip to bring my lips to his. I think I hear someone gasp, but I ignore it. Nothing exists but me and him right now.

His lips ghost over mine as he speaks, sending shivers down my spine. “I used to think I wasn’t worth the air that filled my lungs,” he murmurs, making me tense. “And some days, I still feel that way. But you’re always there to remind me that we deserve more than our pasts. We deserve a future. I refuse to believe that your future is small, baby. Not when I look at you and see the whole damn world shining back at me.”

“Hunter...” I breathe, but he presses his lips to mine, stealing the words from my throat before they can form on my tongue.

“Shh,” he murmurs. “I’m not done talking.” I huff a laugh, my palms braced on his knees as my legs wobble. “I have faith in you because, despite everything, you’ve never stopped looking for the best in life. Even when your days are dark, and you consider the worst, you’ve stayed because somewhere deep inside, you know the world is waiting for you to make your move. You can and will do this, Ella. It’s your turn to live.”

My lips collide with his, and I breathe in his steady reassurance, letting his faith in me calm my nerves. I don’t know that I believe his beautiful words, but I want to. God, I want to so badly.

“Guys,” Oliver chuckles. “I know I said they’d wait for you, but I’m pretty sure you have some time-sensitive things to handle.”

I hear the unspoken words, and they have me pulling away from Hunter’s sweet taste. Nodding, I kiss his forehead as his fingers slip from my hair. “Okay,” I whisper, more to myself than anyone. I nod my head and brush my shaking fingers down my pants. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

My eyes flutter closed for a brief moment, and I picture the way Gage man-spreads when he walks into a room. The way he somehow makes himself look bigger when he’s taking on his power stance.

I stand, backing away from both of them. Chin up. Face flat. Jaw tense. Legs tense and wide. Fists clenched.

“Uh, Ella,” Oliver chokes out, his eyes wide. He leans in and drops his voice, jutting his chin toward a hall. “There’s a bathroom over there if, you know, you have to...” He breaks off, rubbing his neck.

My brows crash together, and my body deflates. “What?”

Hunter rubs his hand over his heavily stubbled jaw, barely stifling a laugh. “He thinks you need to shit.”

I gape at them both. “What?” I practically screech.

Hunter’s head falls back with a deep, rumbling laugh that has goosebumps breaking out all over my skin, even if I am mortified.

Oliver blushes again, something I noticed he does often.
“You just looked—”

“Like you have to shit,” Hunter supplies. He glances at Oliver. “It’s her power stance.” At my cocked brow, he shrugs. “I’ve watched Gage do it enough to know what you were going for there, babe. Sorry, but he does it way better.”

With a sigh, I flip him off.

“Fucking hell,” I grumble, giving them my back as I head toward the MedBay exit Oliver brought me through hours ago.
“Whatever. Let’s go.”

I toss my shoulders back, pretending I’m not turned on, and sad and terrified all at once. Pretending I’m someone else.

Just not Gage.



Chapter 22

I STAND BEFORE A heavy door in the heart of the compound, my fingers nervously twisting and turning. A golden placard on the door reads “The Chamber,” and it sends shivers down my spine. Behind me, Hunter sits in a wheelchair, and Oliver stands by his side, waiting for me to make my move.

And I will.

I need to.

I just can’t seem to make my legs work.

“So,” Oliver’s soft voice breaks the uneasy silence, drawing my attention. He offers me a gentle smile. “This is where I leave you.”

My eyes widen, and my heart begins to pound in my chest. “You’re not coming? You have to. You’re like the nicest person here,” I croak as my hands flail between us. “What if I need you as, like, backup or something?”

He laughs. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m any good for that job. I’m just a lab nerd.” He reaches out and grabs my hands, stilling my movements, his smile warm. “My credentials don’t afford me a place in that room.”

“That’s bullshit,” I mutter, my throat tight with emotion. I squeeze his hand back, gratitude welling up inside me. “Thank you for everything, Oliver. Seriously. I really appreciate you.”

Hunter lets out an irritated sound, and Oliver chuckles, stepping back. He gestures toward the door. “You’ve got this, *Princess*.”

My mouth drops open, and Hunter tries to leap up from his chair, frustration clear in his expression. But Oliver simply pats his shoulder and walks backward down the hall, shooting us a wink.

“Come find me when you’re done. We’ll grab some food, and I’ll help you out with, uh...” He hesitates, his smile fading as his eyes dart to the Chamber door. “You know.”

I nod, my heart heavy with the knowledge of what he means. Oliver is talking about the storm that has become my life, the escape I may need to make if these people refuse to let me leave.

My men—my family, are my top priority. No matter what I discover behind these doors, nothing else matters more than them.

As Oliver disappears from view, I glance down at Hunter, who’s gritting his teeth like a feral animal. I chuckle softly, my shoulders relaxing a fraction, and press a kiss to his cheek.

“You ready?” I murmur, my eyes locking with his.

He blinks at me, his expression softening. “I should be asking you that.” His finger traces a gentle path down my cheek. “Ready?”

I nod, straightening my borrowed clothes and taking a deep breath. I smooth my hands down my outfit, my heart pounding in my chest. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

I raise my hand, hesitating for a moment. Should I knock? It feels absurd, considering the way these people have treated

me. Would knocking make me look weak, even weaker than they already perceive me to be? Should I just walk in?

Before I can decide, the door swings open, revealing a man whose face I shouldn't recognize but somehow do. "Welcome back, Skye," he greets me kindly, his aging face lit with a warm smile. "It's so nice to officially meet you after all this time."

The fuck?

"Uh," I stammer, my brows furrowing in confusion. What the hell is happening? I shake my head slightly, pushing the strange thoughts aside, and extend my already-suspended hand toward him. "Nice to meet you..."

He grins and firmly shakes it. "My name is Steve. Come in, please. We've been waiting for you." His words trail off, and I sense the unspoken *for a long time*.

I swallow dryly and nod, following as he turns his back. My eyes flick over my shoulder, my hands outstretched to grab Hunter's wheelchair and help him in, but he bats me away. With a grunt, he pushes to his feet and wraps his fingers around the metal pole holding his IV and pain fluids.

"Hunter!" I hiss. "Sit your ass—"

"No," he snaps, shoving me to follow Steve. "I'm fine."

With a huff, I grit my teeth, watching for a moment as he holds himself upright with the help of the wheeled pole. When I'm sure he's not going to pass out, I shoot him a glare that he

quickly returns, his jaw ticking wildly, and spin away from him.

The second I step both feet inside the Chamber, I freeze again, making Hunter collide with my back.

Instead of growling again, he slides his hand down my spine and murmurs, “You’ve got this, babe”

Suppressing my shiver, I toss my shoulders back and hold my chin high. As I step into the room, I’m met with a sea of unfamiliar faces, each one displaying a mix of emotions that mirror the turmoil inside me. Shock, awe, worry, happiness—they all seem to jumble together. Some appear genuinely concerned, while a few others give off an air of irritation or unease at my unexpected presence.

I tense at those, not expecting any form of hostility from strangers. But Hunter’s palm on my back keeps me from stumbling as I push forward.

With each person’s gaze I meet, I count inwardly, *one, two, three...* until my eyes finally land on the twelfth and thirteenth people in the room, Daniel and Evelyn.

Their expressions are a stark contrast to the others, radiating love and pride. Daniel’s strong arms envelop Evelyn, like always. Her fingers are clasped tightly beneath her chin as though she’s trying to hold back tears. The sight has my own eyes misting over, but I forcefully blink away the emotions threatening to surface.

Our gazes locked, I summon the strength to take another step forward, and then another, until I'm standing before the last two people in the room—Robert and Madeline.

Robert nods in approval when I meet his eyes. I brace myself as I slowly turn my attention to Madeline. In my mind's eye, I see flashes of the mother I once knew—stern when necessary, moody at times, neglectful on occasion, but mostly kind, warm, and loving. I choke back a surge of emotion when I find her struggling to keep her own tears at bay.

Then, she extends her hand in the space between us, her smile gentle, patient, and, above all else, filled with love.

My body moves almost instinctively, my fingers tangling with hers. “Skylar,” she murmurs, her voice catching. The name sounds odd but also right. “Welcome home, sweetheart.”

People keep repeating those words, and for the first time since this surreal journey began, I allow the weight of them to settle over me. She's my family, and I've spent so long thinking I had none, no one left from my past. But here she is, seemingly out of nowhere, and as mad as I am about that, I'm also so damn happy. A sob escapes me, and in the next moment, she's pulling me into her warm embrace.

I go willingly. Even though she's much taller than me, my chin barely reaching her chest, I feel protected instead of smothered. I breathe her in, feeling an overwhelming sense of home wash over me. She sniffs softly, her fingers tracing soothing paths down my back.

“I can’t believe you’re finally here,” she chokes out, holding me even tighter. “It’s been so long. I didn’t think we’d ever get you back.”

Questions. So many damn questions. But all I can muster is a joke. “I don’t even know where *here* is,” I half-laugh, half-sob.

Madeline chuckles, patting my back lovingly. “You’ll know everything soon.” I tense at the thought, not quite ready to face the overwhelming truth, but I know I can’t fight it.

Before I can utter another word, the room erupts in applause and excited cheers. Robert’s deep laughter reaches me, and I find it oddly soothing. I pull away from Madeline, discreetly wiping my face before anyone can spot my tears.

Hunter’s warm hands encircle my shoulders, and his lips brush gently against the sensitive skin behind my ear, causing a rush of heat to flood my cheeks. I can feel the stares of our audience, which is still completely fixated on us, and it only makes me blush harder. His soft chuckle sends shivers down my spine that are stupidly inappropriate.

“They love you already,” he murmurs in a tone that’s just for my ears.

They don’t even know me. They know nothing besides the fact that I’m Madeleine’s daughter, and she’s apparently important.

“Madeline,” I whisper, my eyes wide with embarrassment. She arches an elegant brow, a mischievous smile playing on

her lips. Leaning closer, she positions herself so I can murmur my plea, “Please make it stop.”

Her amusement shines through, and she rolls her eyes playfully. “We need to work on your showmanship, sweetheart. You’re far too modest.” With a click of her tongue, she turns her attention to the still-clapping crowd. “Alright, everyone, take a seat. We’ll revisit...” She pauses, a smirk forming on her lips. “*That* later.” The emphasis on “that” doesn’t escape my notice, but I choose to ignore it as she moves back to the center of the room.

A massive table dominates the space, surrounded by chairs. While they all appear similar, one stands out—a larger, more prominent seat at the head of the long table. Madeline starts to pull it out but hesitates. Her shoulders slump briefly before straightening, and she finally slides the chair from beneath the table.

Turning toward me, her expression shifts too quickly for me to decipher.

“Come, sweetheart,” she urges, her tone serious. “We have much to discuss and not much time to do it.”

Her gaze flickers briefly to Hunter standing at my back, and I can’t help but stiffen. Her eyes linger on him, observing the way he clenches the IV pole with white-knuckled determination. She shakes her head and clicks her tongue again as if in disapproval.

“Kiernan,” she calls, and a man I hadn’t noticed before with red hair steps forward from a corner. “Please get Mr. Morris a

chair and place it next to Skylar's."

I grit my teeth at the name, still unsure how to feel about it. Inside, I'm a disaster of nerves that are only made worse by the urgency clawing at my heart. I want to get to the guys. I *need* to. Which means I need to hurry this along.

With that thought in mind, I squeeze Hunter's hand and step forward without another word, dropping into the seat Madeline indicated. As Kiernan shuffles chairs around and gently helps Hunter sit next to me, I let my eyes scan the room. Everyone's taking their seats, Madeline directly to my right, Robert next to her. When an older grey-haired woman on his opposite side catches me looking, I quickly glance away, distracting myself with my surroundings.

The room has a long boardroom-style glass table, offering a stark contrast to the underground compound that I've seen so far. Sixteen leather chairs surround the table, each one exuding an air of comfort and sophistication. While there are no windows, the bright lighting overhead compensates for the absence of natural light. A chandelier hangs gracefully above the table, adding a touch of elegance to the otherwise utilitarian space.

The floors beneath my feet are the same glossy cement that extends throughout the compound, giving the room a modern and industrial feel. On one wall, flat-screen TVs line up, although they currently remain off. The far wall is a blank canvas, with a projector poised next to a complex computer setup, hinting at the room's multifunctional capabilities.

In one corner of the room, I spot a set of comfortable couches nestled beside a slightly ajar door, revealing a minimalist bathroom. The overall design strikes me as simple, clean, and modern, yet surprisingly cold, the complete opposite of Madeline's personal office, and I idly wonder why.

Although I have no idea what this room is meant for, it vaguely reminds me of the Comms room back at the guys' house—no, *our* house.

My chest throbs all over.

I miss them.

“Alright!” Madeline calls, and I jolt in my chair. A palm lands on my thigh, squeezing, and I quickly cover Hunter's hand with my own. “I'm going to start with introductions, and then we can move on to the debrief.” Her eyes flit to mine, a bright, borderline fake smile etched across her lips. I can sense she wants me to speak, but I have no idea what the fuck I'm supposed to say.

Everyone's gazes slide in my direction as if they sense the way I'm already floundering. I bite my lip so hard it bleeds. My mouth opens and snaps shut again.

I hate this.

Hate it.

Silence stretches on and on, growing so tense and uncomfortable, people start to shift in their seats.

“Well,” a raspy voice comes from my left, and I nearly melt in my stupidly comfortable chair. “My name is Hunter. I’m twenty-five years old. Born in Oakland, raised in Marin County.” His hand tightens around my thigh, and I sense the unspoken words. “Now I live with my girlfriend, Ella, and her four other boyfriends who are currently missing, no thanks to any of you. You were there in that parking lot. You saw what happened. You know who was there. So, why don’t we all cut the bullshit niceties and get with the fucking program, hmm?”

Mic. Fucking. Drop.

A moment of honesty...

MY BEAUTIFUL READERS,

As you can tell, this book has been broken into two parts. Worry not, they will be rapid-released. So much happens for Ella and her men that I felt the characters were owed more page time and more growth.

On a personal note, due to my massive release schedule this year, particularly in the last six months, things have been pushed back. This year, I've written nearly 1.3 million words in books you've seen and some you haven't, including *Sin With Me*, which is a whopping 260k.

I've been word-blessed, tbh.

On top of that, I've been struggling with my mental health. So, I've needed a bit of extra time on this one, guys. I didn't want to rush the story or give you half-assed words or forced content. The story is in the finishing stages and will come out within **the next four weeks**

However, I will not be putting up a preorder for it due to the Zon's extremely strict preorder guidelines. Should any emergency arise, they're inflexible with date changes within that four-week mark. But it IS coming ASAP.

For updates, follow me on socials, my newsletter, or Amazon.

For those of you who Pre-ordered this book, I will be placing part two up for FREE to OWN immediately after its release, so make sure to snag it so you can own both copies and have *Prevail* completed.

For physical copies, parts one and two will be combined immediately after part two's release and bound in that stunning purple cover.

The fifth and final book will be released HOPEFULLY in/by May.

Thank you for being so wonderful to me and always understanding. I swear, I'm doing the best I can and doing it for all of you.

Love you tons!

-Bex

Stalk Author

Bex Dawn

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Interested in ARC reading for Bex Dawn? We're always looking to add to our team

Emergency Resources

This book, like most of the Los Diablos World series'; contains graphic but very real-life content. If you or anyone you know requires emergency support, please call for help immediately. There are resources that can help.

You are not alone.

Human trafficking, CSA, abuse, and assault are very real, very damaging occurrences. Statistically, 4 million people are sexually trafficked worldwide *annually*. Within that, 71% of all victims are women and children.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center: 1-888-373-7888

Without Permission is an excellent site for information, signs, and resources

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453).

Nationally, dial 988 for an emergency suicide and crisis situation or contact LifeLine.

Also By Author

Bex Dawn & Phoenix Saint

The Los Diablos world encompasses these three series (for now!)

For full reading order, please visit my website.

They are all still growing, but these are the books you can read/preorder now!

Los Diablos Syndicate (Unfinished)

Crash (Prequel)

Burn

Evolve

Resurrect

Prevail

Reign (Coming Soon!)

The Trichotomy of New York (Unfinished)

Violet Craves (Prequel)

Rough Love

Tough Love

Trust Love (Coming Soon!)

Sons Of Satan MC (Unfinished)

Brass-Part One



This series is a separate world. These are stand-alone, loosely interwoven, that take place in the town of Blue River, Colorado.

They each follow a different couple(or more) and their very specific kinks!

Carnal Expectations(Unfinished)

Cracked Foundation

Primal Urges

Santa's Baby

Power Struggle

Dominate Me



Divinity Falls Co-Write World with Haley Tyler

Sin With Me (Coming October 31, 2023)



For The Love Of Villains Anthology(Coming Fall 2023)

(This book will include a special bonus scene for Rayvn and Wolfe from Primal Urges.



Salt: A Reverse Harem Dark College Rockstar Romance

This book is part of the shared world series-Groveton College



Do you like Paranormal Romance or Omegaverse? Check out my second pen name,

Phoenix Saint and my upcoming book,

Burning Wild!(Part One)

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