

REDEMPTION IS EARNED,
NOT GIVEN.

SUMMER SPARROW

EMMERSON HOYT

JACKALS AND VIPERS DUET

JACKALS AND VIPERS DUET
BOOK TWO

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EMMERSON HOYT

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*For anyone who learned the hard way that sharing blood
doesn't necessarily make you family.*

Summer Sparrow is Book Two of the Jackals and Vipers Duet.

September Doves must be read first.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Rylee is traumatized from the events of September Doves.

Please remember this book is a work of fiction and the contents thereof should never be considered advice. If you are looking for assistance with anxiety, panic disorder, or PTSD, please see a licensed professional.

A detailed list of content warnings can be found on my website.

www.EmmersonHoyt.com

Summer Sparrow is a different beast... Stick with it.

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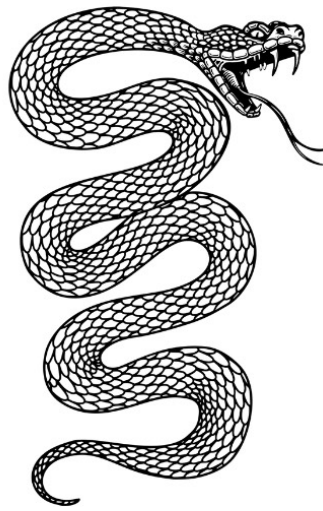
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PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

COLTON



The Next Morning

Late July

SMOKE AND FLAME seep through the cracked bindings of the old incinerator. The stench is pungent, charred and sickly sweet. Which is surprising—I thought Logan Eastmann's body would smell fouler.

Goddamn piece of shit.

Fighting the urge to spit on the ground, I cast my gaze to the orange light bleeding through the pines.

My first sunrise without Jack.

My first sunrise away from *her*.

The memory of Rylee's blood-soaked hands cradling Jack's head in her lap sends a jolt of pain through my chest.

After leaving Andy in charge of staging Sheriff Knott's death to look like an accidental overdose, my brothers and I drove straight to the funeral home outside of Eden. The owner is a Jackal—*thank fuck*—so he didn't ask any questions when we brought Jack's lifeless body in for cremation. He also didn't bat an eye when we threw Logan into the incinerator out back—the one normally used for roadkill. It's more than the scum bag deserves. I'd have left him out in the open for the rodents to devour, but that would've been too much of a risk for Rylee.

I should have protected her from all this, but I fucked up.

There's only one thing I'm good for and I wasn't even here to do it. If I had been, she wouldn't have had to be the one to kill Logan. If I'd stayed in Eden, like Jack asked me to at the meeting, then he might still be alive.

This shitshow is entirely my fault, and the crushing weight of that burden makes it difficult to breathe.

My brothers are still inside the crematorium with Jack. I should be with them, but I had to erase all traces of Logan. I can't let his death fall back on them, or on Rylee.

I won't.

Behind me, a rusty door creaks open as Minho and Danny drift outside, the latter carrying an ebony urn eerily similar to Jeremy's.

Danny's eyes are on the ground, but his steps are strong and confident. It took several hours and an additional dose of naloxone for the drugs Sheriff Knott gave him to clear out of his system, but he's lucid now. Stoic but lucid. Minho, on the other hand, looks like he's in a drug fugue of his own. With each passing minute he's sunk deeper within himself, barely saying a word to any of us. He just blinks, like he's expecting to wake up and find that this was all a nightmare.

"Andy's on his way," Danny announces after placing the urn in the front seat of his pickup. He shuts the door with too much restraint, and that's the exact moment I know how badly he's hurting. Danny's always like this when the world is going to shit. Quiet, controlled. Way too fucking calm.

He's trying to hold it together for the rest of us, like Jack always did.

Fuck.

Now my eyes are burning and the squeezing sensation around my ribs is near suffocating. I bite the inside of my cheek until the feeling fades.

The three of us hover in silence, watching the incinerator fumes dissipate into the dawn sky until the grumble of a clunky Bronco cuts through the stillness and Andy trudges around the corner of the brick building. Perspiration beads on

his forehead and drips down his neck, darkening the light tan of his uniform at his collar and under his arms. Hopefully that's not a sign something went wrong with Knott.

"It's done?" I ask at his approach.

He gives me a curt nod. "Made it look like a textbook overdose: belt tourniquet, a needle sticking out from one of his fingernails to explain the lack of track marks, the whole shebang. I even backed the cruiser all the way into the brush where he normally parks for speed traps. We're all set. I'll drive by and *find* him in a few hours, after he fails to show up for work."

Andy's eyes bounce between me and Danny, like he's not sure who he should be addressing. As vice president of the Jackals, Danny is now in charge, but until today, leadership's been a responsibility we've always shouldered together.

"Deputy Yates raided the medical wing at the jail," Andy continues, attention drifting between both of us. "She made it look like Knott's been stealing from the station's stock for months. The medical examiner confirmed his report will corroborate our overdose story, too. As far as tying anyone else to the scene, I went over every surface Jack or Danny might have touched in the cruiser and wiped the morphine syringe clean of Rylee's prints."

"You're *sure* this will work? We can't risk any fuckups." I cross my arms and shift my weight onto my heels. One of us should have stayed behind to verify Andy was thorough enough, but it's too late for that now.

"Like I told you earlier, we're covered," he says, a muscle in his jaw ticking. "But feel free to hop off my nutsack whenever you're ready." His fist clenches and unclenches at his side, like he's thinking about hitting me.

Go ahead. I could use a fucking release.

"Good work, Andy," Danny cuts in, stepping forward with a sideways glance in my direction. "With Knott out of the picture, Eden needs a new sheriff and *we* need the law on our side. It has to be a Jackal. Yates might have more years on the

force, but she doesn't have the family name she'd need to get the whole county behind her. Andy, it has to be you."

He squeezes Deputy Dipshit's shoulder, the gesture reminding me so much of Jack that I grit my teeth.

Andy opens his mouth like he might object but immediately snaps it shut. His nostrils flare once, and he nods. "I'll make it happen."

Danny's eyes drift to the incinerator where the fire is sputtering out.

"No one's going to like this next part," he announces. "Over the next month, I want the Jackals phased out of Eden. We can't give anyone in town the opportunity to notice Jack's missing or connect it with Knott's or Logan's death. Andy and Yates will stay behind with a skeleton crew to watch the town and protect the Doves, but I want the first wave of us in Lockwood by tonight. Minho, let Alex know he's in charge of keeping the bar open and getting the after-school center up and running. Nothing falls through the cracks while we're gone."

Minho's brows draw together. "How long will we be away?"

"I don't know, but we can't have this mess affecting the rest of the town. Our goal is to set people free, not bring a shitstorm to their doorstep. We won't be back until Andy is sheriff and we're absolutely sure the Jackals aren't on Charles Eastmann's radar."

Danny slips his hand into his pocket, the soft jingle of metal filling the silence until he holds out a handful of sparkling silver.

Jack's rings.

My throat threatens to close as Danny methodically places six of the nine rings on his own fingers before passing one to me and one to Minho. The silver is heavy in my palm, and I grip it so tightly I'm surprised it doesn't fuse with my flesh.

Danny examines the last ring, turning it over like an attentive jeweler inspecting for flaws. "Jack trusted you, so I trust you." He tosses Andy the ring. "You were already my

brother, but now you are one of his sons. Jack said you were going to change this town for the better, I need you to prove him right.”

A snort escapes me before I can smother it.

Danny shoots daggers in my direction, but Andy’s too shell-shocked to notice.

I was never totally on board with Jack and the others bringing Andy in. He’s a *Knott* after all. Ignoring the fact that he made a move on *my* girl, how can I ever fully trust a man who shares blood with my enemy?

This fucker is likely the only other Jackal who needs to earn his place more than I do, and now we’re asking him to be sheriff? I shake my head.

Andy slips the ring onto his left hand. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t.” Danny turns to me and Minh. “We’ll need to use Rylee’s initiation confirmation to elect a new president instead. That gives everyone enough time to get together.”

My gut tightens. “I’ll call the charter heads and set it up.”

Danny dips his chin. “Good. Onto the next thing. Logan’s car might have some sort of GPS tracker installed. We need it out of Eden before anyone traces him here. Minh, what are your thoughts on how we handle this?”

Minh straightens, cracking his knuckles and neck, as if booting his brain back up from rest mode. “I’ll load the car onto a tow truck and take her on a little road trip before disabling the tracker. Along the way, I can hit up the same high-end casinos and hot spots a rich asshole like Logan would if he was on a bender. Then I’ll dump the car where no one will ever find her. Do you think he mentioned where he was headed to anyone?”

“Unlikely,” Danny responds while shaking his head. “Eastmann never would have let his son go after the Adder girls by himself. Seeing how our skulls haven’t been bashed in yet, I doubt he told anyone where he was going.”

Danny pauses, running his fingers over the stubble on his chin. “The biggest problem is what Holly told us about Rylee’s tracking bracelet. If anyone knew Logan was keeping tabs on her or had access to that information, she could still be implicated in his *disappearance*.”

My fists ball and quake as rage and fear duel for dominance inside me.

I’ll kill anyone who comes after her, even if it means fighting the whole goddamn Eastmann empire.

“Colt, brother,” Danny says, softening his tone, “I know you’re eager to get to Rylee, but right now the safest thing for her is to be as far away from us as possible. Rick won’t let anything happen to his daughter.”

He takes a weighty breath, and my stomach clenches in nervous anticipation of what he’s going to say next. “Here’s the big ask: I need you for a few weeks. At least until everything has settled down and we’re through the vote. If you agree, I want you to go with Minho and take care of Logan’s car before meeting the rest of us in Lockwood. Once we’re all in Pennsylvania and a new president has been elected, we’ll make a plan to get you to Boston. Are you with me?”

I don’t know what’s worse, the fact that I can’t immediately go to Rylee or that my own brother thinks he needs to beg for my help.

Hands still balled at my side, I cast my eyes skyward where the sunrise is shifting the cloud gradient from coral to crimson.

Fixing this mess is going to be complicated, which is the whole reason I told Rylee I would come for her when it was *safe* instead of giving her an exact date, but that’s not going to make being away from her any easier to stomach.

I hate that she’s going to be on her own, but Danny’s right, no one would dare make a move on Rick Adder’s daughter. The Vipers may be monsters, but they’re at the top of their game right now. She’ll be okay for a few weeks, and the

sooner we dispose of Logan's car, the sooner I can make sure she's safe and get back to her.

Slipping Jack's ring onto my finger, I nod once. "I'm with you. We all are. I'll go with Minho and we'll meet you in Lockwood."

Danny's shoulders relax a fraction of an inch as he takes a long, drawn-out breath. "Good. Let's get to it. We have work to do, boys."

CHAPTER TWO

RYLEE



Five Days Later

Early August

THE ACRID ODOR of Boston Harbor, briny and tinged with decay, filters in through the Chevy's air conditioning vents. The night around us is tranquil and quiet, except for the movement of Colton's resin marigold as it swings from the rearview mirror like a pendulum.

I lean my head against the cool glass window, trying not to notice how the traffic light makes the epoxy flower glow red like a beacon.

Red like blood.

On my left, Holly reaches up to still the marigold. "We're almost there. Are you ready to see Dad?"

Ignoring the twitchy feeling in my limbs, I force myself to respond. "Is anyone ever ready to see Rick?"

"He's not *that* bad."

I lift a brow. "He is, and for the record, I still think this is a horrible idea." Anywhere has to be preferable to staying with my father and his Vipers, but after rehashing this conversation a dozen times over the past few days, neither of us have come up with a better solution.

"I know this is hard for you, but I promise Dad is our best option." The light turns green, and Holly accelerates through the desolate intersection. "Charles Eastmann will be looking for Logan. If we'd stayed in Eden, he could have shown up on

our doorstep at any time. The Vipers will protect us, and by staying away, *we* protect the Jackals.”

The mention of the Jackals catches me off guard and a violent flash of Danny’s anguished face next to Jack’s motionless body tears through my consciousness.

For a moment, I’m back in Eden, reliving every detail of that horrible night.

Jack’s blood seeps through my fingers as I push down on his stomach.

He’s taking his last sputtering breath.

Danny is screaming.

Colton is staring at me, absolute devastation in his eyes as he realizes I let Jack die.

I dig my nails into the bare flesh of my thigh until beads of blood pool around my fingertips and the sharp bite of pain pierces through the waking nightmare, making it fade.

Since leaving Eden, flashbacks of that night have assaulted my mind more and more frequently. Each time just as real and just as horrific. I’ve tried to hide it from Holly, but without a better way to free myself from the terrifying memories, her keen eyes always notice.

With a strained smile, she grabs my hand, prying free the nails still embedded in my thigh, and intertwines our fingers in her lap. Her smile wavers when she spots the fresh blood and the dozens of other crescent-shaped scabs marring the surface of my skin.

I squeeze her hand a bit too forcefully, but as always, she weathers it without complaint.

Holly’s been phenomenal. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have made it through these past few days. Not only did she take care of all of the arrangements for our slow progression to Boston—like covering our trail, making sure we weren’t tracked, and organizing safe houses for us to stay in overnight—but she’s also been overly patient with me when my nightmares rip us from sleep.

Each time my screams woke her, she regaled me with stories until I was calm enough to drift back into an uneasy rest. We've talked for hours about her life with Jeremy and her time with the Jackals. She's opened up about her experiences in the Navy—including a very harrowing story about a time she saved a colleague using her own belt as a tourniquet and another where her ship was boarded by actual pirates. On one particularly sleepless night, she even divulged a little about the year she spent with our father and the Vipers.

It's everything I've always wanted to know and yet still not enough. Even though I've appreciated the distraction, Holly's shared so little of herself for so long that it's difficult for me to be excited about her new openness. Honestly, it's difficult for me to feel *anything* other than grief and guilt and my bone-deep desire to have Colton here with me.

My hand still in her lap, we pull up to an old, redbrick warehouse connected to a sparkling black high-rise near the water. The surrounding buildings are industrial in appearance, with stonework and metal exteriors, but judging by all the For Lease and Coming Soon signs, most of them are being repurposed for residential or commercial use.

This is clearly one of the older parts of the city, but every corner looks newly renovated and expensive. Making me wonder how many of the former residents of this neighborhood can no longer afford to live here.

The Chevelle slows and Holly barely rolls down her window before the gate to a large underground parking structure grinds open. Two identical gates later, we park next to a row of shiny black Mercedes and Cadillacs.

Holly frowns. "I forgot how flashy Dad's tastes are." She slides out and comes around to open my door.

I'm vaguely aware that she's the one who's pregnant and I should be helping her, but the Mercedes we parked next to looks identical to the one Logan was driving when I strangled him and, as black creeps into the corners of my vision, I'm too focused on staving off another flashback to refuse her offer of assistance.

At the far end of the parking structure, a man dressed in black waits for us by a nondescript door. Although he's cast in shadow, I can just make out the faint outline of a tattoo on his hand, and for the tiniest second my heart soars with the thought that Colton beat me here.

Then I see the man's face—noting his clean-shaven square jaw and dark-brown hair that's been combed forward and shaved to the skin at the sides. Besides his imposing height, he looks nothing like Colton.

My heart plummets, leaving me cold and empty.

“Mac, wow. Feels like it's been ages,” Holly says with a light gasp. She sounds genuinely pleased to see this guy. Which, despite the fact that she's never mentioned him before, makes me think he must be an old friend.

The man, Mac, steps forward to plant a chaste kiss on her cheek, his muscular arms dwarfing her petite frame.

Holly jerks back as if surprised and stumbles. Thankfully, he effortlessly steadies her before she falls. My eyes zero in on the open-mouthed viper tattoo adorning the hand wrapped around my sister's bicep. Something about the ink is vaguely familiar, though I can't exactly say why.

Interesting.

When he notices me staring, he clears his throat, and I promptly avert my gaze.

“It's good to have you back, Holls,” he says. “I'd ask how you've been but I already know the answer. I didn't have the chance to tell you at the funeral, but I'm very sorry for your loss.”

Holly's hand goes to her stomach, her eyes dropping to the concrete floor. “Thank you. It meant a lot that you came.” Her voice is full of watery emotion, followed by an awkward half-coughing, half-choking sound as she motions me forward. “Rylee, this is my friend Mac. Mac, this is my sister Rylee.”

He extends a hand, and when I don't immediately take it, the black viper poised between his thumb and index finger flexes, daring me to continue ignoring him.

Still, I don't shake his hand. Holly's friend or not, if he's one of my father's cronies, I have no interest in introductions.

The corners of his lips twitch, like he's amused by my rejection, but the smile clears from his face so quickly I almost doubt it was ever there.

"Alright then. Just the same, it's nice to officially meet you." His words are laced with the faintest hint of an Irish accent that was undetectable moments before. "Now, if you don't mind accompanying me inside, the Boss is waiting in his office."

With heavy limbs, I follow Holly through a black marble hallway to a chrome elevator with a giant coiled snake carved into its center. It's gaudy and ostentatious as hell.

I absolutely hate it.

I know I promised Holly I'd be there for her and this baby, but I can't believe that means I have to be *here*. Never in my life did I think I'd show up at my father's doorstep begging for anything, let alone begging for protection from my slain ex's father with blood still staining my hands.

The elevator opens on the twentieth floor, revealing a coffered ceiling dotted with crystal chandeliers above a hallway lined with decorative mahogany paneling and low-lit wall sconces. Whoever designed this place had very clear instructions to make it drip with wealth and scream intimidation.

I let loose a *tsk* of vexation, but my annoyance is such a welcome reprieve from the way I've felt since leaving Eden that it's almost pleasant. Rick has always had a special talent for pissing me off—maybe I can find a way to use my hate for him to ward off the flashbacks.

The corner of my mouth tugs up as I remember what happened the last time I let my emotions get the better of me around my father.

"Why are you smiling?" Holly whispers.

"I was thinking about the time I hit Rick." I'll never forget his shocked expression when my fist connected with his face,

or the way his hair flew forward as his head snapped back.

Not only had he shown up to my mother's funeral uninvited, but he'd also refused to sign my emancipation paperwork and insulted my mom in the same breath. My father more than deserved my fury then, only time will tell what part of me he deserves now.

Holly huffs and pushes me forward. "Jesus, Rylee. Not here."

Mac looks over his shoulder at me, his head tipped slightly to the side like he's surprised or possibly impressed. "Holly's right, but I'd *love* to hear that story later."

Once again, a hint of an Irish accent seasons his inflection, but Holly smacks his shoulder before I get the chance to hear it again. "Don't encourage her."

Mac breaks away to open a double set of hand-carved doors, and just like that my smile is gone.

Rick, with his perfect bouffant, black tailored suit, and expensive cufflinks fashioned into serpents, looks every inch the wealthy gangster I now know him to be.

The only new part of his appearance is the pronounced scowl on his lips and the deep-purple bags beneath his eyes. It looks like he's been having as much trouble sleeping as I have. I cross my arms over my chest, attempting to hide my immense satisfaction at the image of Rick Adder lying awake at night, unable to escape into the comfort of sleep.

This is the first time I've seen him since learning that he didn't actually walk out on our family. According to Holly, it was my mom who asked him to leave, and he only did so to keep us safe. I thought knowing those things would make seeing him easier, or that my feelings of abandonment and resentment would have dwindled, but I guess twenty-three years of bitterness doesn't fade away overnight.

How could it when Rick is the one who willingly chose to stay away?

Admittedly, there's also a tiny persistent voice in the back of my head saying that my sister's version of the story doesn't

quite add up. But then again, what does? Nothing in my life makes any sense at the moment. If I could go for a run, maybe the rising tide of doubt and guilt wouldn't feel so overwhelming, but Holly says my ribs need time to heal from the car accident and altercation with Sheriff Knott. So, for the time being, me and my unchecked emotions are a package deal.

Mac takes a position behind Rick's left shoulder, clasping his hands before him in a subservient posture where his viper tattoo once again stares at me tauntingly.

Rick rises from his seat and comes around the desk to take Holly into his arms, his jaw dropping to the floor as she whispers something in his ear.

"You're pregnant?" He sounds awestruck.

"Jeremy's last gift. It's a boy," Holly confirms.

"A boy?" Rick's voice is low, the rapid movement of his eyes calculating. Behind him, Mac shifts from one foot to the other.

"I'll get our doctor to find a discreet obstetrician," Rick announces after some thought. "All your visits will need to be in-house, but I promise you'll receive the best care, and no one will find out you're back in town."

He lifts his arm, running his fingers lightly over the stitches on Holly's forehead. The swelling and redness have gone down, but she'll have a scar for the rest of her life. A constant reminder for her, *and for me*, of what happened with Logan...and how I almost let him kill us.

"Sounds good, Dad. Thank you," Holly says through a yawn.

"I kept your old room in the penthouse and had one of the spare rooms made up for Rylee. I know you must be tired, so I won't keep you long. We can discuss everything in more detail tomorrow over breakfast."

"No." My head shakes so rapidly it's a miracle I don't have whiplash. Until now, I'd been so concentrated on getting

safely to Boston and avoiding memories of what happened that I never stopped to consider where we'd live once we got here.

"I'll get my own place. There's no way I'm staying in this hellhole." I say that last part under my breath, but judging by the way Mac's chest bounces with silent laughter, at least one person in the room heard me anyway.

"Rylee," Rick says, striding in my direction.

I take two steps back.

He stops advancing but doesn't stop talking. "You don't understand the severity of what's happened. Three men are dead. The Jackals have taken primary responsibility for the cover-up, but we have other issues needing our attention. Like the fact that yesterday Charles Eastmann filed a missing person report for Logan, and you and your sister have been named as persons of interest."

Rick takes a step closer, and this time I'm too shocked to move away. "Holly already has an arrest warrant out for corporate espionage, which, as I'm sure you know by now, is part of the reason she's been living off the grid for the past six years. I doubt Eastmann thinks he can actually find her, but *you* are a different story. He will use you to get to your sister and then he will kill her."

"Dad," Holly chides, reaching for his arm. "Rylee's been through enough. She doesn't need you to—"

He shakes her off. "If she's acting this stubborn, then she absolutely needs me to spell it out for her."

Rick pins me with a stare. "Everything you do has the potential to put Holly and her child in danger. Those online summer courses you took, for example. If the Jackals hadn't been smart enough to hide your IP address, Charles Eastmann would've ambushed that backwoods town you were held up in long before Logan got there."

I blink rapidly, realizing that if my actions have the potential to put Holly at risk, they could also fall back on Colton and the Jackals.

“Thankfully,” Rick continues, “my team falsified a paper trail making it appear as though you’ve been in Boston with me all summer. So yes, unless you want to put your sister and your unborn nephew at risk, you *will* be living here. In fact, like I said, you’ve been here since leaving North Carolina after a bad breakup.”

I swallow audibly.

It’s painfully obvious that I don’t really have a choice here, but I’m still struggling to accept the idea of staying with my father. This is Holly’s home and her people, not mine.

Rick must take my silence as a refusal because he lets go of a long-suffering sigh. “I will not let your obstinance put you or your sister in danger. Hate me all you want but do it under the safety of my roof. If you refuse, know that you’re not only putting our family at risk, but your Jackal friends will be liable for aiding and abetting a murderer.”

A murderer.

My eyes burn from the firestorm of emotions swirling inside my chest. Holly can trust Rick all she wants, but I’m not ready to share a living space with this man—especially not when he just called me a freaking murderer.

But I also can’t put the people I love at risk...

Dammit.

My nails bite into my palms. I need to set aside my feelings and suck it up, but the lack of autonomy in choosing something as small as where I live makes me feel powerless.

Mac’s eyes drop to my clenched fist, an expression flashing across his face that looks way too close to pity. “Boss, what about a compromise? She can stay in the Den. The room connected to mine is still vacant. I’m already assigned to look after her, this will make it easier—if you’ll allow it, of course.”

Rick pinches the skin between his eyes. “My youngest daughter staying in the Vipers’ Den? That sounds like my worst fucking nightmare.”

If Rick hates the idea, then sign me up.

“I’ll do it.” However much I hate my father, if it means protecting the people I care about and keeps me out of his penthouse, then I can do this—at least until Colton gets here.

Holly grabs my hand. “Are you sure? Dad has the whole top floor to himself. I need to keep a low profile, so I can’t stay anywhere else. There’s plenty of room—”

I hold up a hand to stop her. “I’m sure. This way I’ll be close by when you need me.”

“Fine,” Rick says, still pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’ll allow it, but remember Rylee, you need to convince everyone you’ve been in Boston and that you haven’t seen Holly in years. As far as you’re concerned, Eden and the Jackals don’t exist.”

CHAPTER THREE

COLTON



JACK'S RING, a simple Jackal emblem with a large *A* stamped in the center, fits perfectly on the pointer finger of my left hand. I tap the worn silver against the steering wheel of the massive flatbed tow truck we're using to transport Logan's car and check our surroundings in the mirror.

We stopped so Minho could verify the tarp straps are still cinched down tight and the black Mercedes isn't visible. It's the second time I've made us check in the last three hours and, judging by the rigid posture of my brother's approaching reflection, he's less than pleased.

Minho's grumbling is accompanied by a wave of humidity and the high-pitched insect chorus of the deep south as he climbs back into the cab. I give him time to swat the mosquito on his neck and resituate himself.

"We good?" I ask once he's wiped the smashed bug carcass on his jeans.

If looks could kill, I'd no longer be breathing.

"Dude, we're good. Everything is covered and even if it wasn't, we're in butt-fuck nowhere, Louisiana. We got rid of the GPS tracker back in Atlanta two days ago. The plates and VINs were destroyed back in Eden. Who would recognize it now?"

With a snort of disbelief, I throw the truck into drive and steer us back onto the road. "You and I both know Eastmann filed a missing person report yesterday. That asshole's money and influence means every law enforcement agency in the US

was notified. If anyone recognizes the car or stops to question us, we're fucked. Since when did *you* get so lax about this stuff? What's going on?"

I rub my brow to ward off an impending headache. I've been so fixated on every possible thing that could go wrong that I'm too wound up to sleep, too restless to blink. One mistake and all this blows up in our faces. Minho's usually the overly cautious one when it comes to covering our trail, but this whole trip it's been like pulling teeth to get him to participate.

He mumbles something under his breath and buckles his seatbelt. "Like I said, it's fine."

I cast a tentative glance in his direction. We've all been fucked up about losing Jack and leaving Eden, but this is something else. Minho hasn't been acting like himself for days. "Alright man, spill it. Tell me what's really going on. This isn't you."

He leans against the headrest, his eyes on the roof as he exhales. "Alex wants *in*."

It takes me a minute to realize what he means. "Alex wants to be a Jackal?" Minho's only response is a nod. "I thought that's what you've always wanted. Isn't this a good thing?"

While my brother has never pressured his partner to join, Alex's reluctance to go *all in* with the club has oftentimes made Minho feel like there was something wrong with us for choosing this life. It's made him question if he could ever fully give himself to someone who didn't absolutely share the same beliefs as him. If Alex wants in, that means all the turmoil is over. I thought he'd be happy about this...

Minho's head droops. "Rylee almost died. She's not even officially a Jackal and we almost got her killed. Now Alex is in Eden on his own. Danny keeps saying he's safer there without us, but does that mean he's safer without *me*?"

Rylee almost died.

I grip the steering wheel so hard my fingertips go numb.

Rylee. Almost. *Died.*

Maybe he's fucking right and they're both better off without us, but the thought of a life without her makes my throat tight and my skin crawl.

My grip on the wheel tightens further as I wrestle with my thoughts. I could never give her up. She's the piece of my soul that I've always been missing. The only thing that brings me comfort and rest.

But if I really love her, shouldn't I be willing to sacrifice my own happiness for hers? Especially if it means keeping her out of harm's way?

Minho cracks his knuckles, tearing me from my dark musings. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I know you've got a lot going on, too. Let's just get rid of this car and get to Lockwood. Now that we have Logan's computer, I need to figure out what's on that thumb drive. I don't want to waste any more time out here than we need to."

The goddamn thumb drive Jeremy was bringing home when Knott executed him.

I'm ashamed to admit I haven't thought about that stupid thing once since we left. How could I when the only thought in my head has been about protecting Rylee and my brothers?

I reach across the cab and squeeze the back of Minho's neck. "If we can bring down Eastmann with whatever's on that drive, we won't have to worry about him coming after anyone we love ever again."

Minho's answering smile doesn't touch his eyes. "No pressure, though, right?"

I clap the base of his skull. "Right."

Hours later, with my gaze glued to the hood of Logan's car sinking below the murky surface of the Atchafalaya Swamp, it's not the thumb drive, Eastmann, or even Jack that I'm thinking about.

It's Rylee.

The way her long, golden-red hair whips around her face when we go for a drive in the Chevelle with the windows

down and the music up. The warmth of her smile and the beautiful notes of her laughter that even now tug at something deep inside my chest, like a siren song calling me to Boston.

When Logan's car is fully submerged beneath the turbid water, a tiny fraction of tension eases off my shoulders knowing this makes her a little safer. But there are still too many unknowns, and the only way I'll ever feel like Rylee's actually safe is when I get to hold her in my arms again.

The night is calm and almost peaceful as my brother and I climb back into the tow truck, or at least it was until my phone lights up, Danny's name flashing across the screen.

My pulse hammers against my temples.

He wouldn't be calling unless something was wrong.

I pick up on the second ring, the wildlife around us falling eerily silent.

"What happened?" I breathe out in a rush.

"Frank's trying to take my seat."

I was so sure he was calling to tell me that something happened with Rylee that the mention of Ashlynn's dad, the head of the Lockwood Charter, just doesn't compute. "What do you mean Frank's trying to take your seat?"

Danny snorts humorlessly. "He said I'm too young to lead the club and one of the charter heads should step up. We both know he means himself."

Minho rips the phone from my hand and puts it on speaker. "Did you tell him to eat a big fat dick? Who the fuck does he think he is?"

A silence falls between us because that's the problem, Frank knows exactly who he is.

While not technically an Original, he was the very first outsider we brought in. Frank is charismatic, cunning, and more than willing to get his hands dirty. His influence and reputation within the club was only ever rivaled by Jack's.

For years, the two of them butted heads over the best way to bring Charles Eastmann and men like him to heel. Every time Jack opted for patience and the long game, Frank spoke out in favor of a quick, violent response. What's been most alarming is how every year Frank gets more and more support.

Unlike Eden, the mine outside of Lockwood is still operational—worse yet, so is the poisonous factory thriving on its coattails. For over a decade, Lockwood has witnessed their families succumb to illnesses stemming from a chemical exposure at the factory that occurred back when Eastmann himself was still the owner. Some, like Frank's wife, died in the first few weeks following the incident, while others have had to bear the slow, excruciating burden of death by cancer or lung disease.

With new owners and new accidents or safety violations occurring at the factory every few years, the loss Lockwood has experienced isn't only painful, it's fresh and ongoing. Now that Jack isn't here to harness their rage, it looks like Frank is primed and ready to take full advantage.

Danny breaks the silence. "I need backup. How soon can you guys get here?"

"We just finished up at the dump site. We'll drive through the night, but we need to stop in Eden to get our gear," I reply, forcing a note of optimism into my voice for my brother's sake. "We have three weeks before the vote. Three weeks to remind everyone you're the right man for the job. Trust me, there's no way we're letting that fucker steal your seat."

"It's a vote, Colt. If they want him as pres, we're out of luck." There's a long pause and then Danny says, "I hate to admit it, but I'm afraid of the direction he'll take the club. I've only been here a few days and I've already heard the words 'pipe bomb' ten times. It's like he never really saw the true Jackal vision—or like he was just going through the motions to use Jack's connections. We can't let him be president. He'll turn us into terrorists. Innocent people will die."

There's real fear in his voice and it does something to me that I can't quite explain. "Danny, I promise you I won't let

that happen. We'll be there in less than forty-eight hours."

Minho and I don't speak as we drive away, no doubt each lost in our own thoughts.

This is bad. If Frank is voted in as president, he'll reign absolute chaos. No one in the club will be safe from the fall out, including the Doves we're sworn to protect.

Fuck. How did everything go to shit so fast?

CHAPTER FOUR

RYLEE



I WAKE the next morning in an unfamiliar bed with scratchy sheets that reek of bleach stuck to my sweat-drenched skin. My breath is labored, my heart rate frenzied.

It was just another nightmare, I remind myself. It wasn't real.

Placing my hand on my damp forehead, I let loose a shuddering sigh and pry open my eyelids. It takes me a hot second to figure out where I am, but as soon as I do, I shut my eyes again and pretend that if I just lay here long enough, I'll wake up in Colton's bed back in Eden.

Brrrring. Brrrring. Brrrring.

What the hell is that?

I grab a pillow and smother myself with it, but I can still hear the incessant shrill. It sort of reminds me of one of those old-timey telephones you see in movies from the 1950s, but since I don't have a phone, that can't possibly be right.

When I finally surface for air and blink away the sleep clouding my eyesight, a cordless landline with Holly's name flashing across the screen comes into focus.

Brrrr—

I rip it off the charger.

"Yeah?" My voice is hoarse, my throat dry as if from disuse.

“Holy crap, Rylee. I was about to send someone in or march down there and drag you out of bed myself,” Holly says in a single breath.

My gaze flutters to one of the windows, but judging by the subdued light creeping in through the curtains and the annoyingly loud bird chirping outside, it’s still early. Why is she all worked up and why am I so groggy?

“Slow down. What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been asleep for a day and a half. I figured you needed it, but I was starting to freak out.”

A day and a half? I’m way too tired for that to be possible...

“Sorry,” I mumble, not knowing how else to respond.

I can practically hear her biting her lip through the phone. “You don’t have to apologize, I was just worried. Anyway, that’s not why I called. I want you to come up for breakfast. Mac will need to escort you, but Dad’s already in his office a few floors down—so we’ll have the place to ourselves.”

My lips curl into a frown at the thought of needing to rely on one of Rick’s flunkies for something as simple as seeing my sister. “Can’t you just come get me?”

“You know I can’t be seen in the Vipers’ Den, it’s too much of a risk. The fewer people who know I’m here, the better. I—” Something shatters on her end of the call. “Shit. I just broke one of Dad’s dishes. Knock next door when you’re ready and Mac will bring you up. See you soon.”

Holly ends the call before I can argue, and I throw myself back onto the pillow in silent protest of her demand.

My head weighs a thousand pounds, my body aches everywhere, and it feels like I just ran a marathon. There’s absolutely no way I slept as long as Holly says. If I had, I’d have enough energy to get out of this bed. This very uncomfortable, very *empty* bed.

Rolling over, I place my palm on the cool sheet next to me. Even without Colton here, I unconsciously left space for him.

His image floats through my mind. The way his bright blue-green eyes light up as he smiles at me when we go for a drive or a swim at the old mill. The contented twist of his lips first thing in the morning when his long lashes flutter open and he finds me lying next to him. Suddenly the images morph and we're back on the road to Eden.

Colton's eyes are dark and full of an emotion I've never seen before.

His gaze shifts from me to Jack's body, then down to my blood-caked hands.

I pinch my thigh, digging my thumbnail into my flesh as hard as I can, and the memory drifts away like mist on the wind.

My stomach sours. What if Colton's never able to look at me again without remembering that it's my fault Jack died? What if he only sees me as the weak girl who wasn't quick or strong enough to save his father...

I blink away the liquid shame pooling in my lower lids.

Without a phone or computer, I haven't spoken to anyone since leaving Eden. Part of me wonders if they hold me responsible for what happened that night. After all, it was my idea to steal Logan's laptop—which led to everyone being separated—and it was me who failed to stop Knott from killing Jack.

The gnawing sensation in my stomach intensifies. How do I face any of them?

I shake my head. I need to save tomorrow's problems for tomorrow, especially when my bladder is screaming at me.

Throwing off the sheets, I barrel across the room and through the door I assume leads to the bathroom, only to slam straight into a hard, wet wall with an audible *smack*.

Not a wall, I realize. *Flesh*.

Mac stares down at me with wide eyes, a toothbrush dangling from the corner of his mouth and a big, fluffy towel draped around his shockingly chiseled waist.

As if scalded, I rip my hand off his abdomen, and he spits in the sink, resuming his teeth brushing like I'm barely a blip on his radar.

"I did warn you it was a shared bathroom," he says through a mouthful of foamy toothpaste.

"Then maybe you should have locked the door or put some freaking clothes on," I retort, cheeks burning. Shielding my eyes, I blindly walk through an additional door that separates the sinks from the toilet and shower.

Of course there would be a shared bathroom. Why wouldn't there be?

To make matters worse, my new suitemate must take crazy-hot showers because everything in here is covered in a light layer of steam, including the damn toilet seat. It's so damp that when I reach for the toilet paper, I slip right off the pot and onto the floor.

Fucking perfect.

When I'm done, I find the bathroom blissfully empty.

I should shower, but I don't have the energy or ability to care about what I look or smell like right now. Besides, it's not like there's anyone here I need to impress.

Instead, I opt for a quick rummage through Mac's medicine cabinet and drawers, helping myself to his toothpaste and deodorant. It's been a long time since I've had to brush my teeth with my finger, and I definitely smell like a musky man, but it's better than nothing.

Back inside my room, I find a neat stack of clothes next to the bedside table. Judging by the size and style, they're Holly's, which is the only reason I shrug on the black cotton leggings and oversized olive-green sweater.

I may be staying on my father's property out of necessity, but I won't be accepting any handouts from that man. If it ends up taking Colton longer than a week or two to get here, I'll need to figure out a way to pay rent.

The same moment my head pops through the knit collar, a knock sounds from the bathroom door.

I ignore it.

“I’m not here to give you a hard time,” Mac says through the wood, his light Irish accent more noticeable than yesterday. “Holly asked me to bring you upstairs. I think she got you a breakfast spread, and I know you have to be hungry.”

As if on cue, my stomach lets out a traitorous rumble.

“Yeah, I can hear that from here. I’m coming in.” Mac enters, frowning when his gaze settles on my face. I don’t know what he sees there, but whatever it is, he’s not pleased.

“Come on, let’s go,” he says abruptly before showing himself out.

I want to be stubborn and refuse, but the grumbling in my belly forces my feet to follow him out into the Vipers’ Den.

“This is the great room,” Mac says as I step through the door. “I don’t recommend coming out here without an escort, especially at night.”

Although my brain is sluggish and foggy, vague memories of walking through here after leaving Rick’s office flicker through my mind, but the images are so disordered they hardly seem real.

Someone snorting coke off the chest of a barely dressed woman.

A man spinning a loaded gun on the bar—Russian roulette style.

A table being knocked over and poker chips floating in the air before clattering to the ground.

Whether it was real or not, seeing the great room now feels like the first time. From the look of it, I’d say we’re in a warehouse that’s been converted into some kind of living quarters.

“This whole structure is what we refer to as the Den,” Mac explains. “We used to run the business from here, but as our

operation expanded, we needed more space, so the Boss built the high-rise we were in yesterday. The two buildings share a wall and basement sublevels.”

I scan my surroundings, taking in the open courtyard-style layout of the interior before craning my neck to gawk at the octagonal domed skylight several stories overhead. While not quite as luxurious as my father’s office, the Den is well decorated and richly furnished. The concrete floors and exposed red brick and ductwork give the space a modern industrial vibe, while the emerald, gold, and black accents scream art déco hotel from the 1920s.

On my right, men gather around a fully stocked bar next to a roaring fireplace, drinking from white Styrofoam cups or lounging on the black suede sofas that separate the rest of the enormous room from a grouping of empty tables. The scent of roasted coffee and stale cigarettes lingers heavily in the air.

Mac ignores the chin dips and curious glances in our direction, placing himself between me and our spectators before heading for the glass elevator on the opposite end of the room. Once inside, he does the same thing, stationing himself against the glass to shield me from view—*just like Colton did during the memorial at the mine.*

The memory of the event honoring the victims of a mine collapse isn’t exactly a happy one, but that was also the day I told Jack I wanted to help the club. And later that night, playing dominoes around Danny’s kitchen table, was when Eden started to feel like home. It was also the first time Colton and I slept in the same bed...

Shoulders draped in a weighty blanket of yearning and melancholy, I force myself to take a deep breath, wincing when pain shoots through my rib cage.

“Are you alright?” Mac asks with a heavy brow.

“I’m fine,” I say, blinking rapidly. “Is no one allowed to look at me or something?”

“Come again?” Mac cocks his head like he has no idea what I’m talking about.

“You keep putting yourself between me and anyone we pass. Are you afraid I’m going to get catcalled or is someone here a danger to me? Whichever it is, I’m more than capable of handling myself.” I step to the side and wave to the onlookers below. One or two of them wave back, and a small triumphant smile spreads across my cheeks.

“No one would dare catcall the Boss’s daughter. But by all means.” He steps to the side, gesturing to the empty space next to him and making me the center point of the glass cage.

More faces swivel toward the lift, pausing their caffeine consumption to follow our gradual ascent skyward. My smile falters and I turn away, silently fuming.

When we reach the top floor, Holly rips open the doors and pulls me into a hug. After squeezing me extra tight, she runs her fingers through my hair and fusses with my sweater. “More bad dreams?” she asks, sliding her thumbs across the bags under my eyes.

I nod, not wanting to discuss it in front of Mac.

Holly wraps an arm around my shoulder and leads me inside. “Let’s get some food in you and see if that helps.”

The penthouse is so bright that I have to rub my eyes in order to focus.

White marble floors. White walls. White couches. White kitchen. White furniture. White. White. White. It’s Logan’s loft 2.0, and it only takes a second before I’m back in that Mercedes with my duct-taped wrist wrapped around my ex’s throat.

I blink and the image is gone, but my heart is racing, my palms now slick with perspiration.

Mac eyes me dubiously, but for once my sister seems to have missed the episode.

Thank God.

“This way.” Holly ushers me toward a food-laden dining table adjacent to a wall of windows overlooking the harbor.

I let out a low whistle and take a seat. It was so dark when we got here that I didn't realize we were right on top of the water. If it wasn't for the gray skies and rain obscuring our visibility, this view would be insane.

Too bad it belongs to Rick.

Holly shoves a plate of sausage across the table. "Eat. I know you're hungry."

I take a small bite, but just like everything else I've tried recently, the food turns to ash on my tongue. Returning the sausage to the plate, I run my gaze over Holly. "Are you okay up here? Do you need anything?"

"I'm great, but Dad was pretty upset when you didn't come to breakfast yesterday."

My face pinches. She can't actually think I'd care that Rick was pissed. I'm here because I killed two people and need to keep my sister and the Jackals safe from the fallout, not because I suddenly think we're going to be some sort of big happy family that shares meals.

I thought she understood that... "Listen, Holly—"

She slices her hand horizontally through the air to cut me off. "I know that this is hard on you, but for the sake of my unborn child, I need you and Dad to at least pretend to be civil toward one another. I don't want the baby picking up on your tension."

Well shit, I can't exactly argue with that logic...

My shoulders sag as I nod my reluctant agreement

Holly smiles and pops a blueberry into her mouth. "Thank you, I really appreciate that. Oh, I almost forgot, our stuff from Eden arrived last night." She points to a series of boxes on the opposite side of the room. "I already unpacked mine. Everything over there is yours."

I only came to Eden with two bags, but there are six oversized boxes neatly stacked against the wall. I'm across the room in a few quick strides. Sure enough, my name is scrawled across the top of each cardboard box in black marker.

“Who brought this?”

Holly grabs some more fruit. “I’m not sure. Mac stopped the guy at the garage gate.”

I whirl on Mac, who’s been standing forgotten by the door since we walked in. “How long ago were these dropped off? Is the guy still here? What did he look like?”

My heart drums in my ears.

Mac barely looks my way. “Short guy. Brown hair. Didn’t catch his name, but he said the boxes were from Alex. I checked for anything dangerous, but I didn’t pry or read the note, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“There’s a note?” I rip open the closest box and find a sealed envelope taped to my duffle bag. I tear it open and read:

Ry,

I'm sorry I couldn't deliver these myself, but life's been hectic since the Jackals decided to leave Eden.

Colt made sure I collected all your belongings and Minho threw in a few extras. I couldn't get your car to start, but I'll try to get that delivered to you in a week or two. Let me know if you're missing anything else.

I've been thinking about you a lot. ~~Are you okay after~~

I hope you're alright.

Do NOT use any communication device the Vipers give you. I hid a phone inside one of your running shoes and programmed my number into it, just in case you need me.

This might sound selfish, but please need me soon.

Eden has never been this quiet before.

Miss you.

- Alex

P.S. This goes without saying, but don't trust anyone at the Vipers' Den.

The note crinkles under my crushing grip.

The Jackals decided to leave Eden.

Don't trust anyone.

My gaze bounces between my sister and Mac. *Does that include Holly?*

I need to go through the rest of these boxes, but I don't want to do it up here.

“Holls, do you have something I could use to take all this down to my room?”

My sister rolls her eyes. “Come on. You've made your point, but you can't live in the Den. Stay here with me. Dad works so much you'll hardly see him. We have a cook and someone to help us clean that we trust. I want you close and I want us to get to know each other again. Maybe you and Dad —”

“No.” I haven't put my foot down about many things in my life, but despite Holly's flinch at my abrupt answer, I refuse to budge on this.

She puffs out her cheeks, her eyes dart to Mac like she wants to say something but won't in front of present company. An unexpected wave of gratefulness washes through me for the Viper-lackey's presence. Normally, my sister would be attempting to talk over me by now, but apparently that's not the case with him around.

“Listen, you're pregnant—you need to be wherever you feel safest. I don't fault you for wanting to stay up here, but Rick isn't my dad the same way he is yours. You might have happy memories of him from childhood, but I don't.”

Her obvious disappointment tugs at the corners of her mouth. “I explained to you what really happened. I don't know why Mom never told you, but it wasn't his fault.”

As annoyed as I am that my own sister can't see my point of view, I remain calm. “It doesn't change the fact that Rick

willingly chose to stay out of my life. Now I'm willingly choosing to stay out of his. We are here out of necessity, and while I want to support you, I will not share a living space with that man."

Holly's mouth stretches into a thin line.

Mac clears his throat, breaking the silent standoff. "There are a few luggage carts in the hallway. I'll go grab 'em for you."

I shake my head. "I can do it myself, if you don't mind showing me where?"

His eyes meet mine and then land on my sister. "I've got it."

The door opens and closes behind him with a soft *click*. Holly stands, coming to join me by the boxes before taking my hand. "I'm not asking you to stay up here purely for selfish reasons. I want you closer in case *you* need *me*."

Her eyes fall on the door. "Mac said you were screaming in your sleep and calling out Jack's name, just like you were while we were on the road. I've seen the marks on your thigh. Rylee, we eventually need to talk about what happened, and that would be easier if you were staying up here with me. You don't have to go through this by yourself."

My neck and cheeks burn with mortification.

I'd noticed that my throat was dry and scratchy this morning, but I assumed it was from being exhausted or dehydrated. I hate knowing that someone besides Holly heard me vulnerable like that, but it's still not a good enough reason to stay with Rick. Not only am I not ready to talk about what happened with her, or anyone else, I also refuse to let her use my trauma to guilt me into compliance.

"I'm fine," I say, brushing off her concern and searching for something to change the subject. "If Rick's Vipers can't know you're here, why is it okay for Mac?"

Judging by the pursed lips my question receives, Holly senses the evasion but decides not to call me on it. "He's Dad's right-hand man. There is very little that happens with the

Vipers that Mac doesn't know about. But more importantly, I trust him."

A flare of adrenaline spikes my heart rate. "Does that mean you don't trust the rest of them?"

Her eyes drop to the floor. "Eastmann has a price on my head. It's enough money to turn most anyone."

"But not Mac?"

"Not Mac," she affirms.

The man in question chooses that moment to return, toting two gold and black luggage carts behind him as he shuffles awkwardly through the set of double doors.

As if sensing my attention, his head snaps up. "Staying or going?"

"Going."

It only takes a minute to load up the boxes and then Mac and I are back in the glass elevator, leaving a disappointed Holly to finish breakfast on her own. We ride down in silence, crossing the now-empty great room back to my new prison cell.

Mac uses a keycard to open my door before unloading the carts.

I try helping, but the sharp pain in my ribs from where Sheriff Knott kicked me slows me down so much that by the time I've brought in one box, Mac's already done with the rest.

"Do you need help unpacking these?" he asks, setting the keycard on the desk in the corner.

He makes a motion like he's going to remove his suit coat, but I stop him. "I'm good. You can go back to Rick and do whatever it is you Vipers do."

He sighs. "I'm not your enemy, Rylee. I could even be your friend, if you'd let me."

I cross my arms. "How much is my father paying you to say that?"

His expression slackens at the accusation, but he doesn't deny it.

"That's what I thought." I usher him toward our shared bathroom door. "I appreciate the help, but I have enough friends."

Once he's gone, I rest my back against the frame and slide down to the floor.

Truly alone for the first time since leaving Eden, it only takes a moment before the tears break free and a crippling pressure in my chest threatens to crush my lungs.

I try controlling my breathing, but after a few seconds, black clouds creep into the corners of my vision and Sheriff Knott's laugh fills the room.

This time, I don't fight the memory. I just curl into the fetal position and give in.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLTON



I FORGOT how much I hate the Lockwood charter.

Frank runs this place like it's still just a goddamn motorcycle club. If I didn't know better, I'd say their only goals in life were quick fucks and fast rides. But I do know better, and I also know what their real goal is...

Retribution.

It took me all of five minutes of being back here to realize that while the rest of the Jackals were lying low all summer—like Jack ordered after Jeremy's murder—the Pennsylvania charter has been busy.

There are ten new girls mulling about, all former sex workers the charter apparently *liberated* from an organized crime syndicate in Massachusetts, along with about twenty other new faces, all unpatched and unmarked by our sigil. Why the hell any of them are permitted in the clubhouse at a time like this, I have no fucking clue. The worst part is, I'd like to say Frank's unsanctioned actions were shocking, but it's not the first time he's gone outside of proper club channels.

What a fucking mess.

After a quick stop in Eden to get our bikes and grab Minh's computer, I made sure Alex would pack and send Rylee's things to Boston before hitching up a trailer and driving through the night to get here. I'd expected a warzone and instead found a giant party, complete with half-naked women and empty beer bottles on every surface. *Un-fucking-*

believable. How Ashlynn grew up here and turned out halfway normal will always be a mystery to me.

After an hour of sitting on a beer-stained couch with Minho, Danny and the charter heads still haven't come out of the back office. The VPs and other ranking members, Ashlynn included, are back there with them, but since Danny sent a text asking Minho and I not to come in, I'm stuck out here avoiding rogue darts flying dangerously close to my skull.

I tap my booted foot and lean forward.

I understand my brother wants to hold his own and not look like he needs me to fight his battles for him, but it's fucking torture to sit here and do nothing. Especially when I know Frank's likely spouting some nonsense about Danny being too young to be president.

If I was back there, the meeting would already be over. My brother is good at what he does, but he also makes a point to hear everyone out, no matter how wrong they might be.

A girl, the third one in the past hour, walks up to me and Minho. "You boys need anything? I could show you to the rooms in the bunkhouse?"

This one's skirt is so short that her entire ass hangs out. If she was involved with the club in any real capacity, she'd know not to offer what it sounds like she's fucking offering. More importantly, she'd know I'm not interested.

But that does give me an idea...

"We're good, I do have a few questions for you, though, if you don't mind?" I motion her over with a crook of my finger.

"Sure thing." Her smile brightens as she sits on the armrest of the couch, placing her heeled feet in my lap. When she leans forward, her tits are right in my face—the smell of liquor, cigarettes, and something sweet emanating off her skin is so strong it makes me want to gag.

Minho side-eyes me with a disapproving shake of his head, abruptly standing to move away. "You better know what you're doing," he spits.

It takes every ounce of my willpower not to shove her off and follow him to explain, but I need answers too badly to risk offending her.

It's been months since I had to charm someone into compliance, but I give her what I hope is a beguiling smile. The expression feels heavy and foreign, almost like I've forgotten how to use it. With Rylee, I never needed to do any of this shit. No fake smiles, no pretending, just me.

I relax into the sofa. "A lot of new faces around. Has Frank been recruiting?"

She leans away, glancing around the room before her eyes land back on me and drift to the Jackal mark on my neck.

I snake an arm around her hip, my skin crawling with the contact. "I'm one of the Originals, you can trust me."

She swallows so hard it makes her bleached-blond curls bounce. "Frank knows he can't add members without a vote. These guys are prospects."

Her legs tense and shift ever so slightly, like she's about to bolt, so I lay my free hand over her crossed ankles to prevent her escape. "I'm more than a little curious how you know what a vote is in the first place?"

"I—"

The back door swings open, and she uses my momentary lack of attention to scurry off, passing right by the Lockwood charter head.

Frank's long salt-and-pepper hair is pulled back into a braided ponytail and his leather cut is much tighter around the middle than it was at Jeremy's funeral, but he's still got that same smug-ass expression twisted across his sun-leathered face. He's also got a phone sticking out of his cut pocket, like he forgot the club's number one fucking rule: no tech in the clubhouse.

"If it isn't the Enforcer himself." Frank closes the distance and pulls me to my feet for a rough clap on the back. "How the hell are ya?"

“Been better, Frank. Where’s my brother?” I lean around him to spot Danny, but Frank steps to the side.

“He’s still in the back with Lee and the other heads. If he’s going to be president, you’ll need to let him fight his own battles every now and then.” He shakes his head like he can’t fathom the thought. “Let’s step outside. There are a few things I want to talk to you about in private.”

Without waiting for a response, he makes his way toward the back door. Curiosity getting the better of me, I fall into step behind him. Once the door clatters shut, the relief from the noisy clubhouse is instantaneous.

Frank pulls out a match and takes a long drag from his newly lit cigarette. The smoke climbs into the starless sky, mingling with the air pollution from the nearby factory. “Been a while since you’ve made it out this way,” he says after another inhale.

“Spit it out, Frank. What do you want?” I don’t have time for whatever this is, not when I haven’t slept in a week.

Even in the poor lighting I can see his eyes crinkle with a smile. My biceps quake with the restraint it takes not to wipe that look right off his face.

“Been here ten seconds and you already want to hit me? You know, even when you were a boy I appreciated your penchant for violence. Jack always thought it might get you into trouble one day, but not me. I knew you’d be an asset to the club. Sergeant at Arms, the Enforcer. It’s a perfect role for you. Then you went off and got a law degree on top of it? Quite the package you’ve become.”

I grit my teeth. “Get to the point.”

He takes a long pull, the lit ember of his cigarette flaring. “I’m not voting Danny in.”

Fuck.

Frank knows that without the unanimous vote of the charter heads, Danny can’t be confirmed as president. He also knows there’s no fucking way the Originals will *ever* support his own bid for the position. So, either he’s purposely trying to

start a civil war that will destroy the Jackals completely...or there's more to his statement.

"Unless what?" I growl through my clenched jaw.

A falsely saccharine smile takes over the lower half of his face. "I won't vote Danny in *unless* you agree to do something for me first."

Motherfucker.

"You're forgetting something, Frank. While we need Lockwood's charter head vote, we don't need *you*." I step into his space, but he doesn't give an inch.

"I had a hunch you'd say that, but eliminating me won't get Danny elected. Actually, it'll do the opposite. If anything happens to me, every single member of this charter has orders to vote him down."

I take a step back.

"No reason to panic, boy. You haven't even heard my proposal yet." Frank blows out a cloud of smoke. "Danny can have my vote *if* you agree to back Lockwood's separation from the club."

My brows lift. "That's it? That's all you want? Done."

We should've gotten rid of him and his toxic bullshit years ago, but Jack was reluctant to let him go if it meant losing the entire charter, and separation requires presidential approval. Frank's making this too easy.

After dropping his cigarette to the floor, he puts up a hand. "I didn't say that was all."

My blood runs cold. Of course it wouldn't be that simple. "Name your price."

His sickeningly sweet smile grows. "My newly annexed club is going to need muscle. You'll come with us for a year, maybe longer."

"You want me to agree to leave with you?"

Fat fucking chance.

“I’m not asking you to leave the Jackals, I’m asking you to work for my club until we’re on our feet.”

I scoff, but Frank seems undeterred.

“This is happening one way or another. I’m done waiting, and I’ve presented you with the least painful option,” he says with indifference, pulling out a new cigarette. “I imagine you have a lot of thoughts swirling around in that head of yours, so I want you to take a few days to mull it over. However, if you’re still not sure if you should say yes *or* if there’s any chance you’re thinking you can back out of our deal once Danny has my vote, there’s something else you should know.”

My fists clench so tightly the tendons in my arms threaten to snap. “What’s that?”

“If you refuse my proposal or betray me in any way once you agree, I’ll tell Charles Eastmann who killed his son and show him exactly where to find that girl of yours.”

“COLT, stop breaking shit and tell us what happened,” Danny shouts as my fist connects with the wall of the bunkhouse.

“I already told you,” I seethe, pacing while trying to catch my breath, “Frank wants his charter to separate.” I’ve explained this to Danny three times, but each time he just stares at me, blinking like he knows I’m keeping something from him.

I didn’t want to tell them anything, but I had to say something to explain my shitty attitude and behavior.

Chest heaving, I rack my brain for a way around the deal with Frank and once again come up empty. I want to march back over to the clubhouse and rip the fucking skin from his face for threatening Rylee, but if I do that, Frank made it clear his charter won’t back Danny as president and everything we’ve been working for—everything Jack dedicated his life to—will all have been in vain.

I'll tell Charles Eastmann who killed his son and show him exactly where to find that girl of yours.

My fist connects with the wall again, leaving a hand-sized hole as something warm and wet drips down my knuckles.

Minho throws a towel at me from across the room. “Maybe we should let them leave. I don’t trust any of these people anymore.”

“Agreed.” Danny flops down onto the closest bed. “But now isn’t the time.”

“We don’t have a choice.” I wipe the blood from my hands. “When I propose the separation vote, I need you both to back it.”

Minho stares at me, eyes narrowed and body still, like he’s running diagnostic testing on my words and actions to see what the real problem is. He cracks his knuckles. “Frank threatened you, didn’t he?”

Danny sits up, and I sigh, raking a hand through my hair.

I’ve never kept anything from my brothers before, but Danny would be devastated if he knew I was considering bargaining my life away to secure his seat as president. It would shake his confidence, and we can’t afford that right now. We need him strong.

Dammit. I fucking hate when Minho does this. Now I have to give them *something*. “Frank’s going to out Rylee to Eastmann if I don’t support the separation.”

Danny is on his feet in an instant. “That motherfucker.”

Unfazed, Minho leans back in his chair. “He can’t rat out Rylee if we bring Eastmann down with Jeremy’s thumb drive before he gets a chance.”

Holy shit, he’s right.

My mind’s been so clouded with rage I forgot about that. “What do you need me to do?”

“First, help me set up my computer so I can figure out what’s on the drive, then we need to get the fuck away from

Lockwood, Pennsylvania. I don't want this charter to influence or corrupt any of our guys."

"If they're corruptible, then they shouldn't be Jackals in the first place," I counter, even though I agree.

"No, he's right," Danny says, pacing by the window. "We have three weeks until the vote, then I'm spreading us out between the other charters. While I agree Lockwood eventually needs to separate, they need to stick around for at least a year or two. Otherwise, losing one of our senior members and oldest charter makes us look disorganized and weak. Not only that, Frank has a lot of dirt on us. If he leaves, what's to keep him from going rogue? I'm putting it on you, Colt. Keep them in line. No separation."

A fucking year or two... I almost laugh. Frank is barely willing to wait a few weeks. Which means this whole situation just got *that* much more complicated.

"Minho," Danny says, "how much time do you think you'll need?"

"Logan's computer is heavily encrypted, so a few weeks, two months tops. If I'm going to do this right, I need better equipment and at least one other person to cover down. There's no way I can monitor all the accounts *and* break into this drive without it self-destructing on me or without something important falling through the cracks. I'll be faster with help."

Danny bobs his head. "Get whatever you need and do whatever you have to. We trust your judgment." He rubs his temples. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but let's keep this between the three of us for now. We can't risk any fuck ups or leaks. We have three weeks to bust Charles Eastmann and take away Frank's bargaining power. We can do this."

Hope barrels into me like a second wind—I should have known my brothers would help me find a way out of Frank's deal.

Unfortunately, the feeling is fleeting. Even if Minho can get what we need off the drive, that only takes away Frank's

leverage on Rylee—leaving the matter of Danny’s presidency still entirely dependent on me.

CHAPTER SIX

RYLEE



Six Days Later

Mid-August

BRRRRING. *Brrrring. Brrrring.*

I don't know what's worse, the bird constantly chirping outside or the horrible noise this phone makes three times a day when Holly checks in. What I *do* know is that if I don't change this ringtone soon, this stupid hunk of plastic is going right out the window.

Brrrr—

“Yes, Holly?”

“Oh good, you're finally awake.”

I wasn't, but it's not like that matters to my sister. I flip onto my back and burrow deeper into the scratchy sheets. “I thought you didn't use phones?”

She snorts. “This is more like an internal intercom system. It's secure.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask through a yawn.

She makes a displeased humming sound, no doubt about to lay into me for how much I've been sleeping—like she does every other time she calls.

“Rylee.”

I roll my eyes. “I know, I know. Get out of bed and *do something.*”

But I don't know what *to* do. My ribs are too messed up to run. If I unpack, it makes the Den feel permanent, and if I go upstairs to the penthouse to visit Holly, I might run into Rick.

Staying in bed and waiting until Colton gets here seems like my safest option.

Holly sighs. "It's two in the afternoon. I'm not trying to nag you, but shouldn't you be prepping for Northeastern? Did you turn in all your paperwork? Do you have your books? Do you have orientation soon?"

My stomach churns and gurgles, possibly to remind me I haven't eaten today, but more likely in guilt over the fact that I haven't told Holly I'm not going to school. I don't know how to explain to her that finishing my degree is the lowest item on my list of priorities now.

"I'm not sure. I haven't had time to unpack or log on to my laptop yet," I lie.

I've actually had nothing *but* time, I've just chosen to spend it sleeping.

"Rylee," her tone is both admonishing and concerned. "You've had those boxes for almost a week and you haven't unpacked? I'm sending Mac in to help you."

I rip off the covers and sit up. "No. I'm good. I'll get up and start right now."

"Promise?"

"I promise. Okay, I've got to go, bye." I click off the call before she has the chance to coerce me into doing anything else.

Groggily, I stumble over to the box with my duffle bag and retrieve a pair of Colton's sweatpants and sweatshirt that somehow found their way into my things. After sliding them on, I bring the collar up to my nose, letting my eyes flutter closed as I inhale.

The fabric smells like him. Like cloves and sunshine. Like safety and warmth.

The tiny spark of life this small olfactory delight elicits is the closest I've come to feeling normal since leaving Eden.

I should've done this sooner.

Dumping out the rest of the box, I look for the cellphone Alex mentioned in his note. It falls out of my running shoes, just like he said it would, but it's dead. I rummage around until I find the right cord and plug it in, setting the phone on my bedside table before proceeding to dig through the remaining contents.

There's nothing I need right away, so after removing my laptop and toiletries, I end up throwing my duffle bag full of clothes and other belongings into the closet without bothering to fully unpack or hang anything up.

The other boxes are full of computer parts: four massive screens, a modded-out computer case, and monitor stands that look like they'll attach nicely to the desk in the corner. The set up is incredible. A dream come true. Normally, I'd be over the moon at the thought of putting this all together, but right now the energy it would take would be enough to put me into a coma.

Closing the boxes back up, I push them against the wall.

Before I do anything else, I need to submit my deferral to Northeastern. Then I'll take a shower so my sweaty pits don't ruin the smell of this sweatshirt. Maybe after all that, I'll feel refreshed enough to put the PC together.

I crawl back into bed with my laptop and the Ghost Rider attachment in tow. I try bringing up the Northeastern portal. It doesn't work. I try my email and then the internet. Still nothing.

What the hell?

I restart the computer, and this time an error message pops up.

Set up the PC I sent you. -M

A small smile tugs at my cheeks. Hundreds of miles away and he's still messing with me.

I miss him. I miss all of them.

The cell phone Alex sent lights up. I snatch it off the table, bringing up the only contact listed, and type out a message.

Me: Alex?

Alex: Hi! I'm so glad you texted. Are you okay?

How do I begin to answer that question?

Me: I'm alright.

Me: I miss Eden.

Alex: Come back. I have an extra bedroom and I could use the company.

My eyes trail to the door. I could do it. Leave now and be there in eight hours, possibly less in Colton's Chevy. The temptation is real, but I made a promise to Holly and to Jack that I'd take care of my nephew. What kind of coward would I be if I left before he was born?

Besides, Rick made it more than clear that everything I do has the potential to hurt the people I love. If I want to keep everyone safe, I need to stay here. At least for the time being.

Me: I can't leave Holly.

Alex: I understand. Have you heard from anyone?

Me: I only have your number.

Alex: Crap, I should have programmed them in before I packed the phone. Let me fix that.

Alex: Contact: Minho Jang

Alex: Contact: Danny Alvarez

Alex: Contact: Colton Archer

The urge to call Colton is so strong I nearly crush the phone. Even once I've convinced myself to finish the conversation with Alex first, my eyes longingly trace every letter of Colton's name before I can force myself to read Alex's next text.

Alex: I just sent them all your contact information, too. I think something is going down with one of the charters, though, so don't be surprised if you don't get an immediate response. Everyone has the same no-phones-in-the-clubhouse rule as we do.

Me: Thanks.

Alex: No problem! I hate to do this, but I'm walking into a meeting with a contractor for the after-school center and I have to go. All the light fixtures come in tomorrow! I can't wait for you to see it. Miss your face. Talk soon!

Clicking on the contact information Alex sent, I add each of them to the phone and bring up Colton's name. My fingers hover over the screen. While I don't want to contribute to his list of burdens by being the needy girlfriend who calls and texts all day, I'm homesick for the sound of his voice.

There's also a part of me, the part I'm not so proud of, that's desperate for him to tell me everything's going to be okay and to hear him say that he doesn't blame me for what happened.

I hit the Call button.

It rings once before immediately forwarding to a generic voicemail, almost like the call was ignored...

My stomach drops, a sudden coldness spreading through my limbs. I quickly hang up without leaving a message. Alex did say they've been dealing with club issues, maybe Colton's just busy?

Reluctantly, I set the phone on the bedside table. At least he has my number now. I'm sure he'll contact me when he can.

I glance around the sparse room, the walls shrinking as the loneliness of my new situation pushes in. Black creeps into my vision but a knock on my bathroom door pushes it away.

“You alive in there?” Mac calls.

Why can't this guy just leave me alone?

“I brought food,” he says.

My hands fly to my stomach to muffle the loud growl. “What kind of food?”

There's a bit of shuffling and then he says, “Hamburger. Extra cheese. Extra bacon. Side of fries.”

Damn, that sounds good. “Yeah, okay, come in.”

The door swings open. “Wow. It's dark in here...and musty.” He sets a to-go box on the bed. “You mind if I crack a window? They don't open very far, but I think you could use the fresh air.”

“Do whatever you want.” I gesture vaguely toward the closed curtains.

“You sure? I don't want to mess with this whole vampire vibe you've got going on.”

“*Ha-ha*. You're a funny one. Is that why Rick keeps you around? Are you the Viper jester or something?”

He pushes the curtains to the side, and I shield my eyes while he attempts to pry open the window. “No, the Den jester is a guy we call Squeaks. I can invite him over if you need a laugh, but he'll probably hit on you.”

“I'm good, thanks?” My answer comes out as more of a question than I intend it to because I legit cannot tell if he's joking or not.

“Suit yourself.” After a grunting crank and a loud *crack*, the sound of chirping birds intensifies and the industrial window tilts open, both the top and bottom sections barely wide enough for a child to wiggle through.

Mac notices my less than impressed expression. “This is as far as it goes without messing with the security locks on the

hinges, but we try not to do that unless we're cleaning. Trust me, a little fresh air will make a world of difference."

He takes a seat at the foot of the bed, and I find myself pulling up my feet to scoot away from him. He frowns when he spots the movement and gets up to sit in the chair by the desk.

"Listen, Rylee, I'm going to level with you about something. Almost all of my other responsibilities have been put on pause so I can concentrate on you and your sister's security."

"Okay? Why are you telling me this?"

He sighs. "The Boss— Your father's trust is important to me—"

"Again, why are you telling me this?"

Mac stands and paces a few steps. "I'm telling you because I take my job very seriously, and for the first time ever, I don't know what to do."

He stops pacing and looks out the window. "Holly told me a little about what happened. I think you need to get out of this room. I wanted to know if you were up for heading to the gym with me?"

The sound of my blinking fills the silence.

"She said you like running. We have treadmills and weight machines..."

I lift my sweatshirt just enough to show him the purplish-green bruising shadowed across my ribs.

He lets out a long whistle. "Right, so working out is off the table for another week or so. Do you want me to show you around the Den instead? Introduce you to a few of the more savory guys?"

I shake my head. "Please leave, Mac."

His brows furrow. "At least let me help you unpack or set up that computer. You don't have to get out of bed or anything. I'll do it all."

It's on the tip of my tongue to refuse and force him to go, but there's something about his expression—an almost familiar look in his eye—that makes me think he might need to feel useful more than I need the solitude.

“Fine. But I'm not getting up. You do what you have to do.” I reach for the burger and take a ridiculously large bite, groaning in delight as the meaty morsel coats my taste buds.

The smile that spreads over Mac's cheeks is pure delight. “It's pretty damn amazing, right?”

Groaning again, I nod and manage to polish off a third of the burger before it loses its flavor. After setting it aside, I pick at the fries while Mac goes to work setting up the computer.

The smell of the harbor filters in through the cracked window while he toils, lighter than my first night in the city but still salty and damp. It has me longing for the crisp earthy scent of West Virginia, but at least Mac was right about the fresh air, it does make the room less stifling and slightly less desolate.

At some point, he takes his suit jacket off and rolls his sleeves, revealing twin guns nestled into a black leather shoulder holster and another viper tattoo coiled around his corded forearm. With muscles like that, this guy might actually give Colton a run for his money.

The thought of Colton sends a pang of emptiness through my middle, but I push it down and force myself to eat another french fry.

Mac and I don't talk, but somewhere near the hour mark—and for reasons beyond explanation—his presence stops feeling like an intrusion. The sound of him tinkering with the computer and his occasional Irish-accented curses actually keep thoughts of Eden away.

It's almost peaceful.

Or at least it was until I fall asleep and wake up screaming in a once again dark and empty room.

My chest rattles with the effort to control my breathing and slow my heart rate. Normally my nightmares are just repeats

of what happened on the night Jack died, but not this one. This time, Sheriff Knott was alive and here in Boston. He was standing over Holly with a gun pointed at her stomach. I was screaming for him to stop, and even though I had a gun of my own, I couldn't bring myself to pull the trigger.

Once again, I was too slow to act.

Crawling out of bed, I drag my feet to the bathroom and splash cold water across my face. Soft light from Mac's room seeps in through the crack under the door and for one crazy second I think of knocking. My hand even raises to his door, but then I remember who he works for and head back to my own room and flip on a light.

The computer set up is perfect.

Mac even took the time to connect the webcam and make sure all the power cords were neatly zip-tied and tucked away.

That was nice of him.

I let out a long sigh. There's no way I'm going back to bed after that dream. I guess now is as good of a time as any to submit my deferral to Northeastern.

I grab the Ghost Rider hook up from my laptop. Now more than ever I need to make sure everything I do online is hidden from Eastmann. Once attached, I flip on the computer and click on the icon before closing my eyes and leaning back in my chair.

The sound of cracking knuckles and a familiar voice fills the room.

"It's about freaking time. I was starting to wonder if you'd ever set up the computer I built for you."

My eyes snap open and my chair flips over backward, sending me careening to the floor.

When I glance up at the screen, I'm greeted by a beautiful face stretched across all four monitors. "Minho?"

"You know it, baby. You ready to work?" he asks with a single lifted brow.

My heart drums wildly against my rib cage. “Absolutely-fuckin’-lutely.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

RYLEE



THE TOP MONITOR flashes with a giant Jackal emblem and Minhó's face minimizes into a small window in the lower right corner.

I throw myself back into the computer chair, amazed at how just the sight of him is enough to bring a little spark of life back into my fog-laden soul.

"God, it's good to see your face. How are you? How is Colton? And Danny?" I'm talking so fast it's a miracle my words don't come out as one garbled mess.

Minhó's chest bounces with a silent laugh. "I'm okay. Things are... Wait, do you have the headphones I sent you? Our system is secure, but I don't want anyone in your vicinity to overhear me. Be mindful of what you say out loud as well."

My palm lands on my forehead with an audible *smack*.

Duh, Rylee.

Leaning over, I rifle through the desk to see if Mac put the headset away. Sure enough, I find them in the bottom drawer.

"These?"

"Yep. They're hackproof, but you'll need to plug them into the tower. Wireless is too risky."

The second the headphones are on, all sound is canceled out. It's eerily quiet until Minhó laughs when my head pops back up from under the desk. "You can adjust them so they actually fit once we're done with this call. I only have a few hours and we have a lot we need to cover."

I bring up my knees, balancing cross-legged on a chair that's clearly not meant to be used this way. "I'm ready, but real quick, can you tell me how Colton is?"

"He hasn't called you?" Minhó tucks his chin and furrows his brow, like he's both appalled and surprised by that news.

"No, he hasn't." My cheeks flush. "I know you guys have been busy."

Minhó glances across his shoulder to something I can't see. "He's in a meeting right now or I'd drag him over."

My stomach churns.

Drag him over.

I try to keep the nausea creeping up my throat from showing on my face. "Is he okay?"

"I guess, as much as any of us are. Things are a little hectic here. We've hardly had a minute to process."

Must be nice. All I've had time to do is think about what happened and to dwell over my failures and their consequences. "I'm here if you ever want to talk," I choke out.

"Thank you." His head tilts as he leans away from the camera, like he's just now noticing my disheveled appearance. "Blink twice if the Vipers are torturing you and you need rescuing."

I reach up to smooth my hair, then blink as many times as I can in quick succession.

"That bad?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No. I'm fine." The last thing I need is Minhó worrying about me. I reach back and tie my hair in a knot. "You said something about work?"

Minhó gives me one skeptical glance and then shakes out his hands and cracks his neck. "Let's get to it."

The screens flash again as he remotely takes control of my desktop. "I need to concentrate on hacking into Logan's computer and accessing the information on the thumb drive. While I'm working on that, our other projects need attention.

That's where you come in. You'll be checking our accounts and poking around in some programming to make sure no one's noticed the siphons and we haven't been hacked. We'll work through a few tonight and then over the next week I'll watch you do them until you're comfortable doing it on your own."

Okay, *damn*. I guess he's just throwing me in. I didn't think I'd be privy to this sort of information until I was officially a Jackal.

I hesitate. "You're sure it's okay for me to be doing this before I've been initiated?"

Minho stops moving and my stomach sinks.

"About that..." He flashes me a too-quick smile. "New presidents can't bring in members during their first year."

My throat constricts as I attempt to swallow the thick disappointment lodged in my windpipe. "Which means I'm not being voted in."

"I know it sucks, but it's a good rule. We put it in place so new leadership can't drastically change up membership and sway voting. As far as I'm concerned, you're already one of us, but I *am* reaching out without the club's knowledge. So, we'll have to keep this on the down-low."

I lean closer to the screen and lower my voice. "Who knows about me helping?"

Minho bites his lip and glances over his shoulder again. "Danny and Colton know I'm working with *someone*, they just don't know who. If they ask us, we won't lie, but I'm not going to offer up the information either. At least not until Danny's position as president is secure. The club has worked with Doves and other non-members in the past, and right now our priority is getting the information off this thumb drive and bringing Charles Eastmann down quickly. To do that, I need you."

That actually makes me feel better. We're doing this for the good of the club, and I like knowing I won't be expected to lie to Colton when he calls.

If he calls, a small voice in the back of my head whispers.

“Okay, I’m in. You were saying something about siphons, is that how the Jackals get their income?”

“It’s one of the ways. These Eastmann-type fucks have so much money coming in and out of their companies on a daily basis, they rarely catch on. We also go to extravagant lengths to make sure the accounts we take from are attached to illegal business ventures. That way, if our hack is ever discovered, no one can report it to the Feds without first outing themselves.”

He brings up another window on my screen, which looks like a transaction list from a bank account of some sort that’s been labeled *Vermillion*. “We’ll go over all this another time, but the main trick is to make our siphon look like any other ongoing payment. Our routing numbers are forged, we rarely have issues.”

Sounds complicated, but I’m following so far.

“We won’t be setting up any new transactions until this president business is settled and the heat from the Logan situation dies down, so basically I need you a few hours a day. After our study sessions this summer, I’m confident you’re prepared to handle this task. Honestly, there isn’t a single other person I’d trust for the job.”

Unpleasant reminder of what I did to Logan aside, Minho’s faith in me is overwhelming, turning that spark from earlier into a small flame. This will keep me busy, but it also means I can finally be useful to the Jackals.

“I’ll be able to give you more than a few hours a day. I’m deferring my admission to Northeastern for at least a semester, if not more.”

Minho squints. “I already turned down your admission to Northeastern and accepted your offer of admission to MIT.”

“You what? Wait, I got into *MIT*?” My heart skips a beat.

He throws his hands in the air, and I bounce in my seat before a sharp pain in my ribs forces me to stop.

“I understand you wanting to defer, but things with the club are messy right now. You might as well knock out a few classes while we figure shit out. Who knows, maybe you’ll end up teaching me something? I’ll respect whatever you choose, but promise me you’ll at least think about MIT a little longer?”

I chew my lip. If Minho hadn’t tutored me all summer, I might have automatically said no. But after all those hours he spent at the picnic table studying with me and helping me apply to schools, the least I can do is think about this decision a little more. “Sure, I can do that.”

He smiles and the tightness in my chest eases.

“Alright, Rylee, ready to learn?”

I take a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

COLTON



Five Days Later

Mid-August

I MUST HAVE LOOKED at Rylee's contact information a thousand times since Alex sent it over. Even now, when I should be in the clubhouse trying to secure Danny's seat, I'm outside, alternating between staring at her picture and phone number.

I'd give anything to hear her laugh again, to feel her soft body next to mine, and I think that's what I'm afraid of—that just the sound of her voice will crack my resolve and I'll forsake my brothers and go running to Boston to be with her.

Love really does fuck up your priorities.

Or maybe it clarifies them...

My thumb hovers over her name. If I was to call, what would I say? It's not like Rylee needs the added burden of Frank's threat hanging over her shoulders. And I don't ever want to lie to her, so how do I explain I can't come to Boston right now without also telling her why?

Swiping back to her picture, I shake my head. I need to take care of this Frank thing first, that way when we do speak, it will be to say I'm on my way.

"Are you going to call her this time or just keep staring at her number?" Ashlynn asks, rounding the corner of the clubhouse and taking a seat next to me on the picnic table.

So far, every time we've seen each other, she's turned and walked the other way. I was starting to think I'd never get the chance to apologize. Or that we'd never talk at all. "Finally decided to stop ignoring me? It's about fucking time."

She smiles and bumps my knee with hers. "As a matter of fact, I have."

Despite the shitstorm I've been living in, I find myself smiling back at her. "Listen, Ash, we beat this topic into the ground in Eden, but I want to say it one more time: I'm sorry for how things went down between us. I abused our friendship and you deserved better."

"Jesus Christ, Colt." Her eyes widen. "This is why I've been avoiding you. I knew you were going to pull some sort of self-righteous, martyr bullshit. We both fucked up, but I'm willing to be friends again if you can stop looking at me like I'm a stray puppy in need of a home."

"It needed to be said, but yeah, I can do that." I extend a hand. "Friends?"

"Sure." She gives my hand a hard slap and flicks the middle of my forehead. "So, what have you guys been meeting about at all hours of the day and night?"

My smile slips as I scan her face for any sign she knows something. "You're Frank's daughter and VP, are you telling me you're not aware of what's going on?"

She bobs her head. "No. You're right. I owe you more than that. Are you really thinking about coming with us when we branch out on our own? When Dad told me...I didn't believe him."

She's asking like I actually have a choice in the matter. *Interesting.* Maybe she doesn't know all the details? If that's the case, there might be time to get her back on our side. Ashlynn is the only person Frank's ever listened to—if I could sway her, then maybe she'd be willing to put pressure on her father to vote Danny in and hold off the separation.

She nudges my knee again. "Come on. It could be fun. Fewer rules, more action."

I bow my head. If she doesn't know, then it's worth a shot. "It's not like I have a choice. Frank threatened to sell out Rylee to Eastmann."

"He *what?*" she screeches before lowering her voice and repeating the question.

I meet her eyes but say nothing.

"Fuck." She shakes her head in disbelief.

"Yeah, my sentiments exactly. Someone needs to get him under control. Do you honestly think separating is a good idea? He's going to get us all caught or killed."

She scoffs. "Jack's death has the entire charter riled up. It wasn't even Dad who suggested splitting off on our own. They're tired, Colt. The people in this town are dying off one by one to cancer or poverty. That goddamn factory is still killing us, just like it killed my mom. They don't want to wait anymore. They want it to stop, and Dad can make that happen."

I hate that I understand what she's saying.

How many times did I go to Jack to express similar frustrations? He'd always insisted we play the long game, make lasting changes instead of going after temporary victories. He was right then, and the same principles apply now. There's no reason to stray from the path just because he's gone.

I lean back, resting my elbows on the table. "I've shut that factory down twice in the past four years. I can't exactly stop new businesses from moving in, but I'll shut this one down too, just like I always do. What else does Frank want?"

"He wants these corporate assholes to be too scared to ever think about coming back to Lockwood or Eden or anywhere else these rich bastards think they can poison. Is he so wrong?"

I shake my head. "Of course not. It's his methods I have a problem with. We're supposed to be the good guys."

A gust of wind howls through the surrounding trees, whipping Ashlynn's hair around and making her look like an ominous Greek oracle. "Sometimes you have to do bad things to accomplish anything worthwhile. You know that better than anyone, Colt. How is this any different?"

THE MOTORCYCLE ENGINE rattles beneath me as I accelerate from 110 to 120 mph. Machines like this aren't built to sustain high speeds for long intervals, but right now I couldn't give a single fuck.

I lean left, taking a slight turn onto another straightaway, and gun it.

When the wind tries to throw me, I crank the throttle and push harder. I have no destination, but after my conversation with Ashlynn, I was too fucking worked up to hang around the club.

A sharp curve in the asphalt appears, and I slow the bike to a speed that won't make me slide out, which is probably the only reason I notice a familiar motorcycle parked on the shoulder.

What's he up to now?

Pulling off the road, I cut the engine and head for the silhouette on the cliff's edge. The stench of stale cigarettes and cheap beer hits me a moment before his voice does. "You thought anymore about my offer?"

Frank doesn't immediately face me, and the overwhelming urge to shove him off the cliff and be done with this whole mess is so strong that it takes all my willpower to keep myself at a distance.

When he does turn, he eyes my rigid posture and the veins I know must be protruding from my neck. "Whatever you're about to do," he says, "I'd think again. I wasn't kidding about there being preparations in place for Danny's vote. Same goes for your girl."

He kicks a pebble and leans over the edge of the cliff to watch it drop. “If I fall off the face of the earth, Eastmann finds out who killed his son. It’s in your best interest to ensure I stay alive. So, I’ll repeat myself. Have you made a choice regarding my offer?”

Unchecked rage coils inside me. “It’s an ultimatum, Frank, not an offer. And it’s not like you’ve given me much of a choice.”

“There’s always a choice, boy. Always. You just have to be prepared to face the consequences.”

I turn away from the viewpoint. Smoke from the factory obscures anything worth looking at anyway. “Why not branch out on your own and leave me out of it?”

Frank won’t glance my way. “Believe it or not, me pushing for this isn’t purely self-serving. We can’t officially separate without Jackal presidential approval. And the Jackals are going to want to make sure they sever all ties from my charter and what we’re about to do. This way, there is a paper trail differentiating my club’s actions from theirs. As far as you joining my team, I’ll fill you in on a need-to-know basis but prepare to get your hands dirty.”

Does Frank actually think he can use my loyalty to play me like a fiddle? There is no way he’s doing this to protect the club.

He looks me up and down. “You still in fighting shape?”

My knuckles flex and ball at my side. “Haven’t thrown a punch since spring. I could easily fix that right now, though, if you’re interested?”

Frank’s wicked grin feels like someone spit in my face. “Nah, I’m good. But you might want to hit up the practice ring again.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

A shadow crosses over his expression. “You’ll see, son.”

CHAPTER NINE

RYLEE



Two Weeks Later

Late August

SLAMMING the Chevy door behind me, I flop onto the bench seat and bury my face in my hands.

What a day.

When I first started up the Chevelle to drive to orientation this morning, the assault of Colton's scent on my senses was so strong I half expected to feel his fingers tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

This afternoon, even after leaving the windows cracked, it *still* smells so much like Colton in here that his absence is a slap to the face—the sting of which reverberates all the way from my cheek to the soles of my feet.

It doesn't help that I've called him an additional two times with no response. Combine that with a full day of fake smiles and forced small talk at MIT's transfer student orientation and now my loneliness is so pronounced it's painful.

Removing my hands, I glance at the little resin marigold hanging from the rearview mirror. It glints in the afternoon sun, still swaying from the slammed door.

Screw it. I'm going to text him.

Pulling out my Jackal-approved cell phone, I mull over what to say: Hi? How are you? Why the fuck haven't you called? Maybe I'll just send a tiger emoji... No, that's stupid.

Why is this so difficult? I'm in love with the guy and I thought he was in love with me. Shouldn't this be easier?

Thirty backspaced messages later, I end up going for something simple and honest.

Me: I miss you.

A combination of nervous anticipation and excitement leaks into every cell of my body as I wait for a response.

After a few seconds, the message status changes from delivered to read, and I forget to breathe waiting for those three little dots to pop up.

I wait a minute.

Another.

Nothing.

My stomach nosedives.

It's official. He's ignoring me.

It was hard enough to keep making excuses for him after I started talking to Minho every night. I've tried reminding myself that he's busy and there's a no-phone rule in the club, but it took Colton all of, what, two seconds to read that text? It would have only taken two more to respond.

The Chevy's ancient steering wheel groans under my palms as I wring it within an inch of its life. With one hand, I turn the key in the ignition and rev the engine, the aggressive purr causing several heads to whip in my direction.

One of them—a grad student with curly, reddish-brown hair and an annoyingly pretentious nose who flat out ignored me earlier when I tried to introduce myself—eyes the Chevelle with significant interest before giving me a nod of approval.

Figures.

I'm tempted to flip him off, but since he's going to be the teacher's assistant for one of my classes, I refrain.

My legs bounce, vibrating with the need for movement. I might not be able to run yet, but maybe if I drive this damn car

fast enough, it will push all these swarming thoughts from my head.

There's only one way to find out...

My palm lands on the shifter, but before I can change gears, a flash of black on my right catches my eye. The passenger door is ripped open, and a very sweaty designer-suit clad Mac slams himself onto the seat next to me with a furious scowl.

Dammit. I thought I'd lost him and the others when I ducked into the women's restroom.

He opens his mouth like he's going to yell at me but takes one look at my expression and stops. "What happened? Did someone say or do something to you?"

I don't respond, and with a less than friendly sigh, Mac unbuttons his suit jacket. "Tell me what happened. *Now.*" His eyes narrow into black slits, and I find myself leaning against the door to escape the fury in his gaze.

This is the first time I've seen this side of him, the Viper lurking within.

I wipe my eyes. "It's nothing. Can you get out? It's bad enough you stalked me all day, now you're invading my car?"

Although I hadn't told anyone where I was going, Mac and three other Viper goons followed me to campus this morning. They never got too close, but I caught sight of them several times throughout the day. Once, I even overheard a group of girls discussing how hot Mac was and debating on whether or not he was a new professor.

I scan his square jaw and the tailored suit he's wearing, noting the way it's pulled taut over his biceps and tapered at his trim waist. He's not *that* good looking. Although, I do suppose he could get away with being a moody professor of sorts.

"I'm *invading* your car," Mac says through gritted teeth, "because I don't trust you not to run off again."

I scoff. “Run off? Buddy, if you think attending a school event that’s only four miles away is running off, then we need to get your expectations in check. Just so you know, when I do decide to leave, there isn’t a thing you or anyone else can do to stop me.”

By the end of my rant, I’m huffing and puffing, but at least I don’t want to cry anymore. Actually, I feel much better.

Mac gives me a sarcastic smile that scrunches up his eyes. “Noted, *buddy*. Now, can you drive back to the Den? The Boss wants to meet with us.”

“Why would I care what Rick wants?”

“Because it has something to do with Mr. Eastmann.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Mac and I are let into the penthouse by a petite, white-haired woman in a gray maid’s uniform. Although I thank her and ask for her name, she keeps her eyes trained on the floor, her only response a small curtsy before scurrying off to the kitchen to fuss over a pot on the stove.

For some reason, I’m reminded of my silent friend Cook, the fry cook at Maggie’s Diner, and how I never got the chance to say goodbye to him or Lana.

Lost in thought, I stumble over a box, and Mac whips a hand out to steady me by the upper arm. “Careful,” he huffs.

I back away and immediately trip over another one.

Damn. This place is a freaking mess.

Unopened packages line the entryway, while colorful pillows and throw blankets now decorate the otherwise white couch. There is also a partially assembled crib scattered in various pieces across the living room and several other half-built mystery items stationed on the floor around my sister like a protective wall...or a minefield.

Looks like Holly’s been nesting.

She glances up at me from the rug where she's assembling a changing table with a radiant grin. "How was orientation? I hope you're hungry because I ordered food from an Italian place a few blocks over."

Mac removes his jacket and kneels on the floor to work on the crib. "Your sister hasn't eaten today. And I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, Holls, but you're never getting that food. All the Italian joints in this neighborhood are run by the Family and we're currently aligned with the Irish."

Holly sticks out her lower lip, a hand rising to rest on her belly. "Seriously? What about that place we used to grab lunch at? JJ and I were really craving risotto."

Mac's gaze drops to her stomach before he rolls his eyes and stands with an exaggerated sigh. "I'll make some calls. Excuse me."

Holly turns to face me again, the smile already returned to her glowing cheeks. "So, what's this about you not eating?"

I fold my arms. After the hunger strike she pulled in Eden, she's one to talk.

"I *am* eating. Campus was just a little overwhelming and I didn't have time for lunch. The transfer student event was right next to the new student one and the lines were ridiculous. Not to mention how I had Viper minions following my every move." I say that last part way louder than necessary, aiming it down the hallway Mac disappeared into.

Holly purses her lips. "Mac told me you've been staying up late?"

Once again I find myself scowling at the empty hallway.

What a freaking narc.

"No later than usual." It's a complete lie. I've been staying up into all hours of the night to train with Minho and comb over the Jackal siphons for any sign of a breach. So far I've been loving every second of it. And although Minho and I barely have time to talk about anything other than what we're actively doing, working with him helps ward off the feelings of isolation and helps keep away the nightmares.

He even found the time to create digital evidence that I've been in Boston all summer and verify there was nothing out there indicating I'd ever been in Eden. Needless to say, it's no longer a mystery to me why the private investigator I hired in Charlotte never found my sister.

Holly looks like she's about to pry further into my late-night activities when Mac returns, saving me from what I'm sure would be an inquisition.

"Food is on the way," he announces.

Holly bounces and then grabs her stomach, gasping as she folds forward.

Mac and I rush to kneel at her side, brawling over who gets the spot next to her.

"I'm fine," she says through a giggle. "He's moving. Feel."

She grabs both mine and Mac's hands, placing them on her belly so all three of our fingers are partially overlapping. I'm about to slide my hand away from Mac's when I feel a gentle flutter beneath my palm.

My chest buzzes with excitement. "Oh my God, that's JJ?"

"I don't feel anything," Mac says with an exaggerated frown.

I grab his hand and press where mine was.

His eyebrows shoot into his hairline. "Holy shit, there really is a little person in there."

It only takes a second for us to all burst into laughter, and the warmth in my chest spreads throughout my entire body. Even my head feels lighter, my thoughts clearer, almost as if the fog is lifting.

It's the happiest I've been since leaving Eden.

"Am I interrupting?" My father's deep, humorless voice rings out, smothering my excitement.

Mac stands abruptly, moving away from Holly and I to take his usual place by the door. "Apologies, Boss."

Holly rises awkwardly to her feet. “Dad, relax. Mac was helping us build the crib when I felt the baby move. Do you want to come feel? JJ is being real feisty.”

When I finally force myself to look at my father, his gaze is already on me.

He shakes his head. “No. I need to discuss something with Rylee. Can you give us the room?”

This can't be good...

I grab onto my sister's wrist, and she promptly pulls herself free from my grip. For one horrifying moment I think she is going to leave me with Rick, but then she links our fingers.

“Anything you have to say to Rylee you can say in front of me.”

I let loose a breath and squeeze her hand in a silent thank you.

Rick's left eye twitches, but otherwise he remains motionless. “Fine. Both of you can have a seat.”

The front door *clicks* open as Mac moves to excuse himself, but my father stops him with a simple backward glance. “Stay. This concerns you, too.”

Mac freezes midstep and makes his way back into the living room while Holly and I take a seat on the sofa.

Rick adjusts the cufflinks on his sleeves until Mac is close enough that he won't have to raise his voice. “Proving Rylee's summer whereabouts is turning out to be more difficult than I anticipated. Although her little hacker friend—”

“Little hacker friend?” I bark. “Are you kidding me? The work he did was immaculate. He even managed to get me a speeding ticket on file with the Boston PD for the day after I left North Carolina. Not to mention the library cards, baseball games, and all the other falsified documents he created for me. The man's a genius.”

I refuse to use Minho's name in front of my father, but at least I can give him credit where credit is due.

Rick glares at me. “The paper trail is fine. What we don’t have is witnesses. Photos. Gossip. Eyewitness accounts. We need to get you out in public.”

He glances over his shoulder to Mac. “Your responsibilities have been delegated?”

Mac folds his hands and inclines his head. “Yes, Boss.”

“Good. Tomorrow you and Rylee need to be seen in the casino...*together.*”

My father’s forked tongue keeps wagging, but I don’t hear a word of it.

In the blink of an eye, I’m back outside of Maggie’s Diner.

Jack is asking me to do a favor for the club.

He’s smiling back at me after I agree to help convince Sheriff Knott that Andy isn’t a Jackal.

I can smell the heat of the day as the sun beats down on us and feel Jack’s pride and confidence in me.

A gunshot goes off.

Now I’m kneeling in the middle of the road with my slippery hands coated in Jack’s blood, trying to plug the wound in his abdomen.

His pulse slows...

No. No. No.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I remind myself that I’m in Boston and this isn’t real.

It doesn’t work, and it’s not until I dig my nails into my thigh that the pain slowly brings the white room back into focus.

I must have zoned out for longer than I thought because the seat next to me is empty and Holly and Rick are engaged in some sort of heated debate. She waves her arms around animatedly as she shouts at Rick that I’m not one of his pawns.

Mac stares at me from across the room, his eyes locked on the nail-shaped cuts on my thigh.

I look away, returning my attention to Holly, who is near screaming now. “Who came sniffing, Dad? You wouldn’t be doing this unless someone was already at our door.”

“Sit down, Holly. When it comes to Viper business, you *will* listen and respect my decisions. I will not be questioned in my own house.” The venom in his words echoes off the marbled floors.

Much to my surprise, Holly obeys, crossing the room and dropping back onto the couch.

“Thank you,” Rick says, slightly calmer now that he’s regained control. “As I was saying, a lot happened while you were away. We cut ties with the Italians and made new deals with the Irish. People who were once our enemies are now our partners and allies.”

Holly nods and makes a circular motion with her pointer finger. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I remember.”

Rick lets loose a disapproving *tut*, and as his voice once again fills the air, it’s hard not to notice the way he can’t look me or my sister in the eye. “In an effort to legitimize my new casino—and ensure Holly’s safety—I needed political connections. As a result, I’ve entered into a business arrangement with Charles Eastmann.”

Icy hatred crystallizes in my veins.

Unfortunately, in true Rick Adder fashion, my father saved the worst part for last.

His left eye twitches so violently it tugs at his cheek. “Charles and several of his business associates will be here tomorrow for the grand reopening of the roulette tables at Sidewinders. Eastmann has specifically requested to meet with Rylee.”

CHAPTER TEN

RYLEE



IN THE ELEVATOR, Mac shoves a silk pocket square from his suit jacket in my direction.

Uncertain as to why he's handing me the swatch of fabric or when we got into the elevator in the first place, I stare at the black checkered pattern without making a move to take it.

"For your thigh," he says, forcefully placing it into my hand.

I glance at the tiny streams of blood trickling down the length of my leg. There's enough of it that the visible portions of my formerly white sock and the top of my boot are now a deep red.

"What happened?" I ask, in a daze.

He lowers his brows. "Your face went blank and you dug your nails into your thigh so hard I thought you were trying to remove a chunk. Has this—"

I wave him off and return the pocket square without using it. "No, not that. What happened with Rick? I don't remember anything after he said Charles Eastmann's name."

"What do you mean you don't remember?" Mac's mouth twists, but it's difficult to tell if it's from concern or annoyance.

"I don't know. One minute he was talking, the next we were in here." My heart gallops savagely as I struggle to fill in the missing moments between those two time points and come up empty.

The gap in my memory should scare me, but with my pulse pounding so erratically, it's like there isn't enough oxygen in my brain for me to feel anything other than the confusion I'm currently experiencing.

Closing my eyes, I dredge up the last thing I can recall. "Rick said something about Eastmann wanting to meet with me, but I don't understand why." *Or if it was real...*

The elevator doors slide open on the ground floor, and Mac holds out a hand, gesturing for me to exit first. "You really don't remember, do you? *Shite*, okay. Mr. Eastmann is claiming he wants to see if his son's ex-girlfriend has any information on where Logan might be. It's clearly an excuse. More than likely he suspects your involvement and wants to intimidate you into incriminating yourself."

"Fuck."

Mac glances down at me from the corner of his eye. "Yeah, *fuck* is right. He's also requested to review some of the perimeter security footage in order to, and I'm quoting, *determine if Logan might have followed Rylee to Boston.*"

He laughs in that humorless way someone does when they know they are being lied to. "In reality, the paper trail wasn't enough, and he wants to see for himself if you were here when Logan went missing, as the Boss claims you were."

Double fuck.

My eyes widen. "But I *wasn't* here. What am I going to do?" Fear finally catches up with me, rearing its ugly head in the form of panic-stricken hiccups.

I stop midstride and grab Mac's elbow. "What if I crack and lead Eastmann straight"—*hiccup*—"to my friends? Rick can't force me to meet with him, right? What am I"—*hiccup*—"going to do?"

Mac places his large hands on my shoulders and gives me a tiny shake. "Hey, relax. I'm going to help you get through this, but you're starting to freak me out. The Boss just went over the plan with us for the better part of ten minutes, and

you nodded along the whole time like you were on board. You really don't remember any of this?"

I shake my head, choking on a new round of hiccups.

He puts an arm over my shoulder, glancing at the curious faces pointed in our direction before leading me to his room. "Alright, we'll figure this out. Let's get inside first."

Mac's room is twice the size of mine, complete with a large sectional sofa and a kitchenette. Two of the walls are painted a deep shade of burgundy while the other two are coated in muted sand tones. It smells distinctly of expensive bergamot-scented cologne and a little like fresh laundry.

Mac gently pushes me onto the couch and returns a moment later with a cup of ice water in hand. "Drink."

I do, and when the water is gone, so are my hiccups. "Thanks."

After taking a seat on the farthest cushion away, he eyes me skeptically, like he's not quite sure what to make of all this. "No problem. If you're up for it, let's talk about the plan for Sidewinders. The Viper casino," he clarifies at my confused expression.

Now that I've calmed down a bit, this whole thing makes even less sense than before. "The plan? First explain to me why I should agree to meet with Eastmann? And if I do, why at a casino of all places?"

Mac hollows his cheeks as he takes a deep breath. "It's public, for starters, but Sidewinders isn't just a casino, it's *our* casino. It takes up levels eleven through fifteen of the high-rise the Den is attached to. Mr. Eastmann financed part of the project and made the political introductions for the Boss to go legitimate. Which means he'll be here tomorrow for the members-only grand reopening of the roulette tables."

He pauses to make sure I'm following along. "The question is, if you were truly innocent in his son's disappearance, why *wouldn't* you go speak with him?"

Okay, I guess he has a point. Refusing Eastmann's request *would* make it look like I had something to hide.

“Mr. Eastmann will try to get you alone, and there is no logical reason for the Boss to intervene that won’t make you look guilty. That’s where the part about you and me being together comes in.”

My legs bounce. “I’m not following.”

“This would have been so much less awkward if I wasn’t the one saying it.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, and I bob my head, encouraging him to go on. “Your father would never let his daughter go anywhere without security, but as you saw on campus today, we normally stay at a distance. We needed a cover story that would give you further justification for being in Boston and also allow me to stay with you at all times.”

He pauses, shaking his head slightly. “In order to accomplish that, the Boss asked me to pose as your overprotective boyfriend whenever we’re in public.”

My head sways. “That’s ridiculous. I already have a boyfriend.”

Mac turns up his palms, glancing around the room. “I don’t see him here, do you?” I flinch, and he softens his tone. “Besides, it’s not like this is real. The Boss threatened to slit my throat if I so much as looked at you inappropriately. I promise, I’m just trying to do my job here. I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, but this is a way I can intercede if Mr. Eastmann tries to get you alone. Let me help you.”

I lean back into the couch and mull over my very short list of options.

I can refuse and put both myself and the Jackals in jeopardy. Or I can go along with Rick’s plan and pray Mac’s presence keeps me from giving myself up.

When I lay it all out, it’s not really much of a choice. Anything that keeps Eastmann from finding out what I did to Logan also keeps everyone I care about safe. “Fine.”

Mac stands, brushing off his slacks before extending a hand to me. “I promise I won’t leave your side.”

I tentatively place my palm in his. “You better not.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COLTON



The Next Day

Late August

TIME'S UP.

After weeks of searching for a way around Frank's ultimatum, I'm out of options. Bitter ash fills my mouth as the last grain of sand falls from the hourglass that's shadowed my every move since arriving in Lockwood.

Today is the day we should have been voting Rylee in as a Jackal. Instead, we're voting to replace our slain president. Worse yet, today is also the day I betray my brother's trust and sign away my life to a demon in a leather cut.

The mile-long list of things I should have done to avoid this moment torments me.

I *should* have realized Knott's resentment was at a boiling point after he smashed my face with a baton the day I gave Rylee a ride home on my bike.

I *should* have seen what happened to Jack and Danny coming.

I *should* have prevented it.

I *should* have been in Eden when Logan attacked Rylee.

I *should* have been the one to kill him.

I *should* have taken care of the Frank problem long before it got to this point, but I guess there's nothing to do now but lie in the grave of my own making.

Raking my hand through my hair, I glance around at the hundreds of Jackals gathered in the parking lot, all of whom came to Pennsylvania for one reason.

To elect a new leader.

An electric current hums through the air as Danny makes his way toward me, stopping along the way to shake hands and clap backs. If he's nervous, he doesn't show it. His posture is strong and confident, and with the new stubble dotting his jaw and Jack's rings securely on his fingers, he looks more like our father than ever.

He's ready for this. I know he is.

When all this Jackal business started, Danny, Minh, Jeremy, and I were teenagers. We knew nothing about leading men or putting our words into action. But we had big ideas and we were mad enough to want to do something about it.

Jack had connections, and he was the only one with the strength and wisdom to control our rage. But the Jackal population as a whole is *our* age, not Jack or Frank's. Most of us never worked in the mines, and in some way or another, all of us grew up with Danny. We watched him work alongside Jack to take our grandiose ideas and form them into actionable plans. We all knew the day would come for him to step up and lead.

Danny was born for this.

His shoulder brushes against mine. "Do we have it?"

We. Because it's always been us against the world. His success is mine and vice versa. We're brothers. Family.

I nod. "The seat is yours."

"Thank you," he says, and as he strolls back into the waiting gaggle of Jackals, I can't help but notice he looks taller, like my words alone lifted some of the weight from his shoulders. Like *I'm* the one responsible for the excited trill in the air.

In truth, despite Frank's poison tongue, the whole club—Lockwood charter excluded—was already behind Danny. I

didn't do this, *he* did. Anytime I opened my mouth to talk him up, another Jackal would already be halfway through singing his praises.

Frank and the Lockwood boys are the only problem—the first one I've ever encountered that I couldn't solve. In the end, it doesn't matter that I persuaded a handful of them that separating is the wrong move because Frank is the one with the final say and his terms are set in stone.

I take a few steps back, hoping to catch my breath before the vote begins, and bump straight into Minho.

Busy tracking Danny's movements, he barely reacts. "You're sure Lockwood is going to vote him in?"

"Positive," I mutter through clenched teeth. At this rate, I'll be surprised if I don't crack a tooth today.

Minho hums contemplatively, eyeing the strained muscles of my jaw. "You're going to propose the separation anyway, aren't you? I couldn't get the information off the thumb drive and now you have to do this. Danny will be pissed."

Goddamn Minho. He's always been a step ahead of everyone else. I should have known he'd see right through me.

There's another *should* to add to the list.

To Minho's credit, he doesn't flinch when my head snaps in his direction with what I'm sure is a murderous glare. "Don't you dare breathe a word of this to Danny. He needs to get past the vote before we give him anything else to worry about."

Minho makes a zipping motion over his lips and pops the knuckle of his ring finger with his thumb. "You really think Frank will sell Rylee out?"

"I know he will."

"But if you don't propose the separation and he goes to Eastmann, the whole club will turn against him. He wouldn't put himself in danger like that... Maybe it's a bluff?" Minho shrugs.

Fuck. I wish I could explain that it's not just about Rylee, how this is the price of Danny's presidency, but then I'd also have to tell him about the other condition...

"Rylee's life is not worth the risk," I say instead.

"Have you called her back yet?"

I glance down at him and look away. "You know I haven't."

In addition to her text, she's called three times now, and each time I've sent it to voicemail.

At first, I'd idiotically clung to the hope I'd find a solution and be on my way to Boston later this week. I thought by waiting a few more days to call, I could avoid burdening her with this mess. Now that I've failed, I'm terrified to tell her I'm not coming.

How do I explain that what I'm about to do will keep her safe when what happened in Eden already proved I'm incapable of that?

Minho gives me a look I can only describe as disappointed. After a long pause he says, "We're all dealing with a heavy load right now, but Rylee is really hurting. If you can't get your shit together and find a way to be there for her, you're going to lose her."

A pressure builds in my chest.

Does he think I don't know that? Protecting her from Frank and Eastmann is the only way I *can* be there for her right now.

The sobering truth is: she would have been better off having never met me. This life is dangerous, which is why most of us stay single. I selfishly thought I could be happy and have it all. Now she's the one paying the price for my weakness.

Minho places a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry I couldn't decode the thumb drive in time, but you don't have to do what he's asking. The three of us can figure out another way to

protect Rylee and keep Frank from going to Eastmann. We're brothers. We'll do this together, like we always have."

Christ. Even in the middle of my betrayal he's still trying to help me.

I remove his hand and silently pray that he still feels the same way when this is all over.

In the distance, the smoke plume from the factory billows in the sky. The wind shifts and gradually the pollution casts our parking lot into shadow.

As the clock strikes noon, Danny and the charter heads move into the center of our circle. The crowd surges, carrying me forward to where Lee, still dressed in a three-piece suit, cups his hands around his mouth. "Jackals," he calls.

The conversations lessen but don't stop.

"Jackals!" he tries again. The mob sways, but their babbling increases once more.

I bring my fingers to my lips and let out an ear-splitting whistle.

Finally, they settle and Lee spares me an appreciative glance before smoothing out his red hair. "Time is precious, so I won't waste yours with a long speech. We're here to elect a new president. There is only one man suitable for the job. I nominate Danny Alvarez. Do the Originals support this nomination?"

The three of us, Danny included, give a resounding "aye!"

Lee grins without showing his teeth. "Then we put it to a vote. The Original chapter will go first. Eden, West Virginia."

A sea of silent fists rise into the air.

"New York," Lee says, raising his hand. His charter members follow suit.

"Cloverville, Kentucky," he says next.

Tate dips his chin, the rest of his charter doing the same.

"Green River, Wyoming."

“Fuck yeah,” Nolan shouts.

It takes less than a minute for four of the five charters to enthusiastically give Danny their votes—and that’s accounting for the extra bout of hoots and hollers from the ever-rowdy Green River boys.

Then it’s Frank’s turn.

“Lockwood, Pennsylvania,” Lee says to a chorus of crickets.

Anxious whispers ripple through the assembly, and like a heat-seeking missile, Frank’s eyes lock onto mine. There’s a clear question written on his raised brow, a threat clinging to his cracked lips.

Fuck.

My mind spins for a last-minute solution, but I still can’t come up with a plan that doesn’t involve gnawing off my own leg. Maybe I should’ve been honest with Danny. Maybe I should’ve tried to call Frank’s bluff, like Minho suggested. But if I’d told Danny the truth, he never would have let me agree to Frank’s terms. Then, on top of covering up Jack and Sheriff Knott’s deaths, we’d still have no president and a Jackal civil war on our hands.

No, that never would have worked.

As far as a bluff goes, that was never a viable option either. If there’s one thing Frank’s good for, it’s following through on a threat. I have every confidence that if he doesn’t get what he wants from me, that’s exactly what he’ll do.

Frank taps the face of his watch, and like the submissive dog I am, I incline my head.

With my throat and compliance firmly in his grip, he leisurely inches his hand into the air. Behind him, his army follows suit, each of their raised fists a hammer nailing the lid on my coffin shut.

Danny is officially president.

Hope crackles through the air like a live wire and then the stomping starts. Booted feet pound against the pavement in

unison as Danny is lifted up onto their shoulders. His resounding laugh is so joyous and pure it's infectious.

Jack would be proud.

After a celebratory lap, Danny is carried over to and placed atop the picnic table. I try to savor every second of this moment—which is likely the last untainted memory I'll have of my brothers and this club—but my eyes are burning and the weight on my chest is so cumbersome it's all I can do to remain standing.

Fingers adorned with Jack's rings, Danny raises a hand and the stomping ceases.

My chest gives another painful squeeze.

"Jackals," he bellows.

"*Haroom*," they respond in concert. My jaw remains sealed.

"To lead such an extraordinary group of individuals is a responsibility beyond measure. I am humbled and honored to serve as your president."

The stomping begins again, each thump followed by a boisterous "*haroom*."

"It's been a month since we lost Jack. He was not the first to be taken from us, but he *will* be the last. The time for mourning is at an end, and the time for action begins anew."

"Haroom."

"As Jackals, we refuse to accept the eye-for-an-eye mentality of days past. We want revenge, yes, but we also want change." He lets the words, so clearly meant for Frank, sink in. "Each day forward, we will honor Jack's legacy with our renewed dedication to the cause. No one is free while others are oppressed. Evil may lurk in every corner of this world, but we will not let the darkness overcome the light. The pack will continue to protect the flock."

"*Haroom*," they chant as one.

Danny extends both palms and gazes out at us with a noble set to his jaw and hope for the future gleaming in his eyes. “It’s time to work, boys. With that spirit in mind, I open the floor up for club business.”

My stomach hardens, and I take a step forward. Those blocking my way wordlessly move aside, leaving me an unimpeded path to the picnic table. Despite their inquisitive glances, my attention stays locked on the asphalt as I fight the rolling wave of doom within.

Once I reach the front, I turn away from Danny and drop the bomb. “I propose the separation of the Lockwood charter from the Jackals.”

Alarmed whispers undulate through the crowd.

I brace myself for the onslaught of arguing and panic that is sure to stem from such a bold proposal, but Danny stops the hemorrhaging before it gets out of control.

“I second the proposal,” he says, not missing a beat.

The grumbling stops.

Pride swells against the crushing tightness in my ribs. With four simple words, Danny not only saved face but reclaimed control of the situation.

“Charter heads and Jackal Originals, step forward.” At Danny’s command, Minh, Frank, and the other charter heads fill in the space around me.

Danny won’t look me in the eye.

“A house divided cannot stand,” he says, paraphrasing Lincoln. “Although we will always remain brothers, the time has come for Lockwood to separate. All in favor of the split, say aye.”

“Aye,” Frank says.

“Aye,” I tack on through the shame threatening to suffocate me.

Minh and the others follow suit, no one willing to appear like they weren’t already anticipating this move. For the most

part, they succeed.

To an outsider, or even the average member, this likely looks like a well-thought-out proposal years in the making. But unlike the others, I can hear the ruffled feathers of the charter heads who were caught off guard and I can taste the bitter tang of betrayal radiating off Danny.

“It’s settled, then,” Danny announces. “Lockwood is henceforth no longer associated with the Jackals. They will have thirty days to remove the Jackal mark, or they will have it forcefully removed by myself or another ranking member of the club. If anyone wishes to join Frank, this is your only opportunity.”

A gust of howling wind rips through the surrounding trees, but no one stirs. I can’t help but be satisfied by Frank’s poorly controlled annoyance when he realizes no one else is joining him. The feeling quickly fades when his black eyes narrow in my direction, reminding me that this shitshow isn’t quite over.

The suffocating feeling increases when I turn toward Danny and clear my throat. “As one of the three remaining Originals and club Enforcer, I’ll stay with Frank to personally oversee the transition.”

For a fraction of a second, Danny’s façade cracks and hurt leaks through the tiny fissures in his confident mask. I almost lose my balance as the bonds of our brotherhood strain and fray beneath the weight of my declaration.

Then his mask mends. His jaw twitches and an angry vein pulses violently in his neck. “Frank,” he roars, with the vibrating authority of a vengeful god. “What do we call your new organization?”

Having won everything he asked for, and damned me in the process, Frank smiles. “You can call us Dead Kings.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

RYLEE



I SHOULD HAVE BEEN VOTED in as a Jackal today.

Instead, I'm hours away from meeting the man whose son tried to murder me and my sister. The man responsible for the death of hundreds in Eden and thousands elsewhere. The man who under no circumstances can find out I'm the one who strangled his son.

The outfit Holly picked for me to wear tonight is borderline obscene. Cut midhigh, the shimmering champagne-colored bandage dress fits like a glove and pushes my breasts together in a way that made Holly's jaw drop when I tried it on. It's not at all my style, but for some reason that gives me more confidence and a strange sense of distance from the situation.

There was a time in the not-so-distant past a dress like this would have intimidated me, but tonight I'll wear it like armor.

I sent a message to Minho yesterday about Eastmann's impending visit, but so far, no response. Which is to be expected, considering he has a massive portion of his calendar blocked off for a club meeting. Still, it would have eased some of my trepidation if I'd been able to talk with him or Danny first.

Or my fucking boyfriend.

At least I won't be going into this alone... Which means I probably need to start cutting Mac some slack.

Across the room, light spills out from beneath the bathroom door, accompanied by a low buzzing noise. I rise to

my feet and give the door a soft knock. “Hey, Mac, when you’re done using your vibrator, do you mind if we talk for a second?”

Humid air cascades across my cheeks as the door swings open.

“Vibrator?” He says, holding up a pair of clippers. “I’m cutting my hair, psycho.”

“You got a hot date tonight or something?” I cringe at my awkward attempt at small talk. It’s weird being nice to him—it almost feels flirty, which it’s obviously not.

I tuck my hands into the pockets of my sweatpants. “I wanted to thank you for agreeing to do this. I haven’t exactly been easy on you since I got here, but I really appreciate your help.”

Mac places the clippers on the counter and puts the back of his hand on my forehead. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, why?” I swat away his touch.

“I didn’t know you had it in you to be so civil. Figured it had to be a fever.”

“*Ha-ha*,” I mock, but when silence falls between us, I find myself searching for something else to talk about to avoid sitting alone in my empty room. “Why are you cutting your hair? It was fine before.”

It’s a flattering hairstyle for him, very Cillian Murphy à la *Peaky Blinders*.

He picks the clippers back up and places some sort of guard on the end before starting in on the top. “I’m just trimming it up. A fresh cut always makes me feel...” he hesitates, glancing over at me from the corner of his eye, “a little more in control of my own destiny, I guess.”

I grab a loose strand of my own copper-blond locks. “Should I do something with mine?”

Lord knows I could use a little more control right now.

Mac switches the guard on the clippers to a smaller one. “Couldn’t hurt. I could call one of the Sidewinders girls to come help. I think Cherry used to be a stylist before she came to work for us.”

When I look back down, the hair in my hand is crusted with dried blood, the exact same way it was on that horrible night. Black creeps into the corners of my vision as the memory threatens to drag me under.

No, not tonight.

I pinch my leg as hard as possible and search the bathroom for anything to distract me.

A glint of silver on the counter catches my eye, and the next thing I know, I’ve lobbed off the chunk of offending hair. I keep going while Mac looks on, horrified as tendrils after tendrils fall to the tile.

Halfway through my frantic sawing, the scissors slip from my fingers, and in my clumsy attempt to catch them, I end up sandwiching the blade between my forearm and palm. Blood trickles down the length of my arm, dripping onto the floor.

Still, I don’t stop cutting.

When I’m done, hair that used to reach my midback now sits at my shoulders. It’s choppy and uneven and I look like I lost a fight with a lawnmower, but I can breathe again.

Mac, wide-eyed and terrified, wraps a towel around my arm and cautiously backs out of the bathroom. “I’m going to give you a minute while I call Cherry to help fix this.”

He shuts the door, and when his footsteps retreat far enough away, I take a good look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are dull, the runner’s tan and freckles I earned this summer already fading, but so are the deep-purple boot marks hidden beneath my tank top. I turn my head left and then right. There’s barely a remnant of the person I was before leaving Charlotte in my reflection. I am stronger than I was back then, and while I may be bruised, I am not broken.

Leaving Eden and coming to Boston was always the plan. I can’t just sit around waiting for Colton to show up or call me

back, and I can't dwell over the fact that I should be a Jackal—not when Minho's already shown me how useful I can be from here.

I need to focus on one task at a time, starting tonight by convincing Charles Eastmann of my cover story and keeping his bloodhounds away from Eden.

REACHING UP, I grab one of the bright-pink strands of my hair. Not only has Cherry colored and cut it into a flattering long bob, she's also spent the last twenty minutes meticulously curling every section.

I needed this change, but I'm less confident in the colorful choice than I was earlier. "How did I ever think I could pull off Barbie-pink?"

Cherry's long electric-blue hair falls forward as she releases the curling iron and clicks her tongue. "You're *already* pulling it off. And for your information, this color is more of a stargazer lily-fuchsia and you look stunning."

The muscles in my back and belly go rigid.

Jack loved lilies.

I wait for a flashback to drag me under, bracing myself for the assault of his bleeding body, but that's not what happens. Instead, I see the stargazer lilies Jack had mixed in with all the other variations growing in his yard; smell their delicate floral scent on the wind like I did the first time I had dinner at his house.

I tug on a curl. *Maybe it's not such a bad color after all.* "You're right. It's perfect. Thank you for your help."

A few finishing touches and a whole cloud of hairspray later, Cherry helps me squeeze into the dress and puts a Band-Aid on my forearm before packing her things. "This was kinda fun. Let me know if you need a touch-up or anything. I live with the other girls over on the tenth floor, below Sidewinders, so it's easy for me to pop back in."

“You don’t live in the Den?”

Her blue locks shake. “Only Vipers live here...and you.”

Interesting. I’ve seen quite a few women in the great room. They’re usually barely dressed and draped over someone’s lap, but I’ve seen them.

Mac appears in the bathroom doorway, clearing his throat in that telltale way someone does before delivering bad news. “Cherry, the Boss wants to see you in his office.”

Cherry frowns, the light in her eyes dimming as she gives my hair one last fluff. “Did you remind him I manage the girls now and I don’t do that anymore?”

“I did. He still wants to see you.” Mac stands frozen in the doorframe, looking more like a deer caught in headlights than a Viper. “If it helps, he has to be at the same event we do, which starts in twenty minutes.”

Cherry closes her eyes, and when she opens them again, the smiling, easy-going woman I spent the last two hours with is back. “I guess the Boss gets what the Boss wants.”

She’s trying to make a joke, but I feel sick to my stomach. “Is there anything I can do for you? I have friends who could help. We could—”

She pulls me in for an unexpected hug. “You are too sweet, but my life is here. I’m okay, I promise.” She turns toward Mac and very seriously says, “You better take care of this girl.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replies, moving aside to walk Cherry out.

“I really am sorry, Cher,” I hear him say before his bedroom door slams shut.

Mac returns to the bathroom more thoughtful and subdued than when he left, his wavering posture giving me the distinct impression of someone being torn in two different directions. I want to hassle him about whatever that shit was with Cherry, but from the look of it, he’s already torturing himself enough.

When he lifts his head, his deep-brown eyes catch mine in the mirror. He gives me an appreciative nod. “You look good, Adder.”

“Well, *you* should’ve tried a little harder.” *Shit*. I forgot I was trying to be nicer to the guy. “Sorry, habit,” I mumble, before pausing to take in his appearance.

Like me, Mac is ready to go. Instead of his usual stark-white dress shirt, this one is black and matches the onyx viper tie clip he’s wearing. His suit, fancier than his daily go-to, is well-fitted with iridescent black piping that gives him billionaire bad boy vibes. Actually, he looks pretty damn good, and for some reason, the Colton-sized hole in my heart shudders an aching thud.

Suddenly uncomfortable with both his reaction to my outfit and my reaction to him, my hand raises to touch my hair. “The pink is going to take some getting used to. Do you think Rick will like it?”

“He’s going to hate it, but you already knew that.” A tiny smile flashes across his lips before disappearing. “That did take a little longer than expected, though. We’ll need to go over a few things while we walk.”

On our way to the elevator, Mac sets a brisk pace that I barely manage to keep up with in these stupid heels. “As far as your alibi goes,” he says. “I know we covered how you came to Boston hoping to connect with your sister after breaking up with Logan. But we’re still unsure how much he may have told his father, which means we have to assume Mr. Eastmann knows you’ve been in contact with Holly. So, what are you going to say when he asks about her?”

“I’ll say nothing. Guilty or not, I wouldn’t offer that information up to a stranger. If he keeps pestering or it sounds like he already knows, I’ll tell him that by the time I got to Boston, Holly was already gone and mention that’s when I met you and we started dating. We’ve gone over this twenty times today. It’s not a difficult thing to remember.”

“Perfect,” he says, pressing the button to call the elevator and giving me a half smirk that I’m sure normally knocks the

ladies off their feet, but it just makes me miss Colton's rare dimple. "Don't forget to mention that I'm the best boyfriend you've ever had."

I mimic gagging. "I agreed we can *fake date*, not that you can be my *fake boyfriend*."

He staggers, his hand rising to his heart like I've mortally wounded him. "You're saying I didn't fake woo you off *yer* feet on our first fake date? Wait, are you fake seeing other people? Oh, the fake agony!"

His Irish accent is heavy, and I have to curb the smile forming on my lips to hide my amusement. "Modern people date and it doesn't have to be exclusive. We want this to be believable. This way, if anyone you've been with over the summer comes forward, we're already covered."

A little voice in my head wonders how many people he was with this summer and if there is a possibility any of them will ruin my cover story, but I can't ask without coming off as nosy.

Mac's smirk slips. "*Eh*, that's pretty good. It also works with the story that we're trying to keep a low profile. Okay, I like it. Now for the ground rules—"

"No kissing. No copping a feel. You can stand close to me and maybe put an arm over my shoulder, but that's it. I am still in a real relationship and I will not jeopardize that."

At least I think I'm in a relationship...

It's been a month now without a word, and Minho's become an expert at strategically changing the subject every time I bring up Colton's name.

Mac rubs his jaw, his gaze lifting to the ceiling. "That's not the type of ground rules I meant, like at all."

My cheeks heat as we enter the elevator, and Mac doesn't clarify until I've stewed in my own embarrassment for six floors.

"What I *meant*," he finally says, "is that the Irish will be here tonight and so will all the other sleazeballs we do

business with. Everyone will want a piece of Rick Adder's daughter. Don't go anywhere on your own. I am not your jailor, but the Boss will have my head if something happens to you."

"Oh." *That makes way more sense.*

Mac stops in the hallway leading to Sidewinders. "One more thing... Please keep your hatred for Mr. Eastmann in check. Right now, he suspects you of having knowledge about his son's disappearance. If he were to find out what really happened or that you are still in contact with Holly, it would make you a threat to him directly. Which would put both you and your sister in danger. I know you and the Boss don't get along, but this delicate business agreement he has with Eastmann—"

"Got it," I say with a huff. I don't need a big speech, and I already have enough riding on this without Mac trying to scare me into submission. "Let's go meet this son of a bitch."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RYLEE



THE MEMBERS-ONLY FLOOR of Sidewinders is significantly more ostentatious than I anticipated.

Gold and crystal chandeliers dot the coffered ceilings while a mix of black marble and deep-red carpets line the walkways. Gold on the walls. Gold on the bar. Gold adorning the fingers, wrists, and necks of the attendees. There is even a gold emblem with a viper stamped into it on the champagne flutes and rock glasses.

The casino has a distinctive smell to it too, like old money laced with bullshit.

Then there's the patrons themselves, either dressed to the nines or barely dressed at all. Although no one's face is physically covered, they all wear masks. I see it in the way their expressions change the moment after stepping away from a conversation; the predatory way they scan the room.

I lean toward Mac. "Who are all these people?"

He offers me an arm, and as an excuse to move closer and keep our conversation low, I take it. "Some are politicians, some business associates," he says. "It would be easier to say who they aren't, but they all have one thing in common: power."

He dips his chin in greeting to a group of gray-suited men at a craps table in the far corner. "That's the Irish over there. The barrel-chested one in the tweed vest is their leader."

I turn my head to follow his gaze. "Who's the man he's meeting with?"

The man in question is dressed in a dark-navy suit with a little flag pinned to the lapel. His salt-and-pepper hair is perfectly coiffed, and he looks absolutely terrified by whatever the Irish leader is saying to him.

“That’s Senator Marwood. The group at the blackjack table behind him are a bunch of oil tycoons. Avoid the gentleman at the bar with his hand up the waitress’s skirt—that’s the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and he’s never met a boundary he didn’t take as a personal challenge.”

Mac leans in closer. “The man with the potbelly and the two underaged women draped on his arms to your immediate right—don’t look now—that’s the governor of Massachusetts. Steer clear of him, too.”

My stomach roils. Politicians and criminals. Every one of them liars and con men. This would be prime hunting ground for the Jackals, but for Rick Adder, it’s a networking event.

As if my thoughts summoned him, my father chooses that moment to make his grand entrance through a set of ornate double doors sporting a carved viper with crimson-jeweled eyes. Cherry is noticeably absent, and I’m struggling to decide whether that’s good or bad.

Several heads turn in Rick’s direction as he makes his way around the room, and several more lean together and whisper. These men may do business with each other, but there’s no respect between them. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were all actively plotting how to bring one another down.

Rick spots us and veers left, course-correcting straight for me. My stomach tightens beneath my already asphyxiating dress.

Here goes nothing. Time to put on a show.

As the distance between us shrinks, Mac removes his arm, but as promised, he doesn’t stray from my side.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispers.

Rick stops a few feet away, his arms opening expectantly as he tries to hide his obvious displeasure at my new hair color. I force myself to step into them. The embrace is quick,

but my skin crawls with the contact—the creeping sensation only made worse by the light touch of his chapped lips to my cheek.

Excluding when I punched him, this is the first time my father and I have touched, let alone embraced each other. Go figure it wouldn't be real.

His eyes roam the room and with his attention elsewhere, it takes every ounce of my willpower not to wipe his kiss from my face. But people are still watching us and, since I'm trying to convince them I'm on good enough terms with Rick to come live here, I can't risk jeopardizing my cover story by accidentally showing everyone just how much I detest him.

How Holly believes our father's charade will never make sense to me. All she'd need to do is look at the type of people he associates with to realize what sort of man he is.

I guess that's the downfall of viewing your parents with the same lens you used growing up. You end up attached to the image of who you thought they were before you were old enough to realize that at the end of the day, parents are just people who happened to create life. The title of mom or dad doesn't make someone perfect or worthy of our love, their actions do.

I have to believe that one day the spell will break and Holly will see Rick for what he really is: a power-hungry snake.

The chatter picks up around the gambling tables as people begin to realize I'm Rick Adder's daughter. With a painted-on smile, he motions for someone behind me to come join us.

My heart pauses for a solid three beats, only kicking back into gear when I realize the newcomer isn't Charles Eastmann.

“Rylee, I'd like to introduce you to Governor Conrad. Governor Conrad, this is my youngest daughter.”

The governor discards the two young women at his side like used napkins and takes my palm in his. “Rick, you've been holding out on us. I'd heard rumors you had a second

daughter, but now I understand why you tried to keep her a secret.”

He plants a sloppy kiss on the back of my hand that lasts several seconds too long. When he pulls his head away, a smear of sticky saliva coats my knuckles.

Despite my best efforts to remain neutral and control my repulsion, my nose scrunches in disgust.

Rick smoothly tries to cover my reaction. “I keep no secrets from my allies. Rylee’s been out and about all summer. In fact, I’ve been meaning to speak with you about getting some speeding tickets removed from her record. Turns out lead-foot runs in the family and the chief of police is currently in the pocket of the Italians.”

The governor, still holding onto me with a clammy hand, gives a hard belly laugh that yanks on my arm every time he leans back. “Consider it done.”

Rick’s displeased gaze bores into me before bouncing back to the governor, like he wants me to say something.

“Thank you,” I manage to squeak out, though my voice sounds less than grateful.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I add as an afterthought, somehow managing to sound even *less* enthusiastic.

Rick sighs and snatches a champagne flute from a passing cocktail waitress before abruptly tearing my hand out of Governor Conrad’s grip. He shoves the glass into my palm, forcefully curling my fingers around the delicate stem until I fear they both will break.

It’s a clear threat. *You’re already fucking this up*, his rough touch says.

Realization drops on me like a sack of bricks. Rick wanted to see how I would handle myself before turning me loose on the real thing. He’s using this introduction as a practice round prior to meeting Eastmann. *Shit*. I need to do better.

After taking a fortifying sip of champagne, I reach down into the depths of my soul for the agreeable, obedient mask I

used when meeting Logan's friends and shove myself into it. It's tight and foreign and it's difficult to believe I ever willingly wore it.

With a demure smile, I bring my shoulders back in a way that puts my chest on prominent display without making it look purposeful, and turn toward the governor. His eyes drop to my cleavage and dilate, my previous transgressions clearly forgotten.

"You know, Governor, I recognize your name and face from the news—how could I not with everything you've accomplished during your last term—but I don't think Rick's ever told me how you two came to be acquainted."

Rick gives me a stern look at the use of his government name instead of *father*, but I ignore him. His ego isn't my target, the governor's is, and judging by the way his chest inflates at my words, I've hit my mark.

"Ah yes," he says. "Though, I suppose that's a story for him to tell, isn't it? It is nice to see a young person following politics. Nowadays, the majority of our youth couldn't identify their state representatives in a line up, but they sure could tell you the name of the newest social media influencer." He gestures to the two vacant-eyed girls behind him, who I suspect are on some sort of mind-altering substance. "Take Tiffany and Beatrice, for example. They have no idea who I am—which is probably for the best."

He chuckles conspiratorially and even Rick can't hide a flash of disgust from crossing his face. Once again, though, he covers it expertly. "Conrad here is the reason Sidewinders exists. When I decided to legitimize the business, Massachusetts was only allowed three gambling institutions. He intervened on our behalf."

The governor steps closer to me, running the back of his index finger over my arm. His smile slips when he touches my Band-Aid, accidentally ripping half of the adhesive from my skin, but that doesn't deter him from leaning forward to say, "Your father made it worth my while and promised to continue doing so."

I should be outraged by his blatant disregard for my personal space, or at least repulsed by the insinuation that my own father would use me to gain favors, but this is exactly what I'd expect from a man like this.

Rick, however, doesn't seem to share my sentiments. His mouth twists and his brow furrows, and as the governor continues to stroke my arm, indignation radiates off my father in heated waves.

"That's enough," he snaps, his voice so low and seething it comes out as a hiss. "Mind your fucking hands in my house or you'll lose them, just like Judge Thomas over there."

The governor snatches back his arm. "I thought Thomas lost his hand in a camping accident?"

"Why don't you run along and ask him what really happened? Tell him Rick Adder sent you." My father's pupils narrow into slits. "Leon," he says, directing his next words over his shoulder without releasing the governor from his sight, "make sure Governor Conrad doesn't get lost on his way to the judge."

A powerful hand locks onto the politician's ghostly white neck, escorting him away, and when he's out of earshot, a laugh threatens to bubble out from my mouth. Of all the things I imagined happening tonight, Rick losing his cool before I did was definitely not one of them.

"That was fun, *Dad*. I can't wait to meet more of your fantastic friends." Amusement shines through each of my words.

Rick pinches the skin between his eyes and exhales sharply. "Is this some sort of joke to you? That was the least dangerous man in this room. Half-assed flattery and flaunting your tits in that ridiculous dress won't work with Eastmann. Who, by the way, will be here any minute. Get your shit together before he arrives, and this time, try not to let all your emotions show on your face."

His chest rises and falls with three quick breaths before he seemingly remembers where he is. He straightens his tie and

then returns to his former calm self. “Rylee, Charles can smell bullshit a mile away. If you can’t handle this, I need to know now.”

I didn’t think my interaction with the governor went *that* bad, but Rick’s question has me flustered just the same. “I already told you, I’ve got this,” I huff, downing my champagne and quickly placing the glass on a passing tray.

“Good,” Rick says. “Because here he comes. Mac, try not to let this one touch my daughter. And I thought I told you to stop cutting your hair like that?”

When Rick looks away, Mac glances down at me and winks.

I almost smile, but before I can, the air in the room turns frigid.

I follow Rick’s gaze across the casino to where a head of white slicked-back hair is barely visible near the blackjack tables. Every cell in my body is telling me to run, but as his angular face comes into view and my vision tunnels, I can’t.

Hard cheek bones, dead eyes, a permanent sneer I once knew all too well—Charles Eastmann looks so much like Logan that he feels familiar. The sight of him is enough to drench my skin in a cold sweat. Logan was always able to manipulate me so easily, I can only assume he learned those skills from the man approaching.

I swallow audibly, all the confidence I had in my skills to convince Charles Eastmann of anything draining away in an instant.

What was I thinking when I agreed to this? No one is ever going to believe I was here all summer. Plus, there is always the risk that with the tiniest trigger, I could slip into another panic attack and accidentally say something that gives up the Jackals or Holly.

I can’t do this...

It will only take me a few minutes to run upstairs and grab my sister. We can be packed and out the door five minutes after that. My eyes race to find the nearest exit.

I've just taken a step backward when a warm hand grabs mine, intertwining our fingers before I can flee. "You've got this. I'm right here," Mac whispers.

The warmth of his palm spreads from my hand into my chest and brings with it a calming clarity. If I run from Eastmann, it will only confirm that I know something, and he'll never stop coming after me. Facing him is my only option.

I have to stay.

By the time I regain control over my breathing, Rick is already shaking hands with Eastmann. While most people near us move away, some step closer, like suicidal insects drawn to a flame.

My father motions me forward. If it wasn't for Mac at my side, I wouldn't have made it the five steps it takes me to get to him without blacking out. Thankfully, Mac doesn't let go of me this time.

"Here she is," Rick says at my approach. "Rylee, I'd like to introduce you to Charles Eastmann. I believe you know his son."

My mouth hangs open as Eastmann takes my shaking hand in his.

His cold stare pins me in place. I remind myself I need to actually speak, but when I glance at our joined hands, a trail of blood running down my forearm and across my fingers freezes my tongue.

I blink, willing the image to disappear and doing my best not to slip into a nightmare memory, but when my blood transfers onto his skin and his hand twitches, I realize my guilty mind isn't to blame—I'm actively bleeding from the cut on my arm.

Dammit, Conrad must have hit it when he almost tore off my Band-Aid.

Eastmann notices too, his expression souring with pronounced disgust, but he quickly recovers. After wiping his hand clean with the pocket silk from his jacket, he orders one

of his guards to take care of the soiled item and fetch a new bandage for me, which the guard promptly does.

Then Eastmann smiles and picks up where he left off like nothing happened. “They more than knew each other, Rick. They dated. Even lived together. From the way Logan talked about your daughter, you and I were well on our way to becoming in-laws. At least we were until she ran off in the middle of the night.”

That’s not true, not even a little bit, but I’m still so thrown by the fact that I just bled all over my enemy that I can’t find the words to correct his lie—especially not when his voice sounds so much like Logan’s.

Mac squeezes my hand, and I know I can’t stand here silently any longer.

“Ran off?” I croak.

Eastmann’s taunting grin flips. “Logan was devastated when you left. He thought you might be *the one*, and you didn’t have the courtesy to call him back or return a single one of his emails. What could he have possibly done to deserve that? What was so important that you had to leave so quickly and break my son’s heart?”

Shit. He knows I left for Holly.

When I don’t answer, his lifeless eyes drop to where my hand clings to Mac’s. “I have to say, I’m a little disappointed. The way Logan spoke of you, well, I guess I expected more.”

“Now, now,” Rick chides. “No one will ever understand the intricacies of young love. There is no need to—”

“You expected *more*?” I spit, my voice coming back to me with a vengeance. “Now I see where Logan got his charming personality from. Just so you know, your son was a complete asshole.”

For a second, I’m proud I stood up for myself, then time slows and the tension around me thickens. I look to Rick for an explanation, but his eyes are locked on Mac in some sort of silent exchange.

Eastmann leans forward. “It’s interesting how you said *was*.”

Oh shit.

My mind flounders to correct the mistake. “I haven’t seen him in months. People change. Who knows what kind of person he is now?”

Fuck. I sound way too casual for the heated rage I was spewing seconds before.

Mac gives my hand another reassuring squeeze, but I know my cover-up attempt was mediocre at best.

“I see.” Eastmann pauses, as if waiting for me to say something else.

The pressure I feel to fill the silence and explain myself is palpable, like a physical presence reaching down my throat to force the words free from my tongue. Then it dawns on me that this bastard is using silence as a weapon, waiting for me to do exactly that.

It takes another uncomfortable thirty seconds for him to speak again. “I’m sure your father informed you, but Logan is missing. Have you heard from him?”

“No.” I shake my head, wishing Mac would let go of my hand so I can take a step back and create more room to breathe.

“Really? Such a shame.” Eastmann makes a *tsking* sound. “You know, I was hesitant to bring this up, but after weeks of no contact from my only son, I had some of my people search his loft. Do you know what they found?”

I shake my head, unsure where he’s going with this and unwilling to step into a trap.

“Pictures of your sister. Everywhere. Dozens of them. What might that be about?” He steps into my personal space, so close I can smell the cologne on his neck, the same smoky scent Logan used to wear.

Before tonight, I thought my father might be the embodiment of evil, but I was wrong. The devil doesn’t have

horns, he has bleach-blond hair and he's here for me.

My vision blurs and, for some reason, the rap song Logan was blasting in the car as he drove Holly and I out of Eden assaults my senses. Eastmann says something else, but the stupid song is all I can hear. It thuds so loud inside my skull that it drowns out the sound of my own racing heart. I reach for the flesh of my thigh, but the dress is too thick and I can't get enough skin to pinch.

My breath comes quicker, and when I glance down at my free hand, it's covered in blood spatter, exactly like it was right after I strangled Logan.

No. Not now. Not here. This isn't real.

I'm jolted to the side as Mac inserts himself between me and Eastmann, the scent of his musky bergamot cologne bringing me back to the moment. The rap song fades, and when I take a deep breath, my vision returns to normal.

"Mr. Eastmann, if you don't have any further questions, and if it's okay with the Boss, Rylee and I have some money on the MMA fight tonight. We need to check in with the bookie and get a good seat before the match starts," Mac says, already pulling me away.

Eastmann smiles. "I enjoy a good fight. Why don't I tag along?"

Rick steps forward into the fray. "I had no idea your interests were so versatile. If you don't mind a little blood, then I'd encourage you to attend one of my fights this winter. I can guarantee you'll find them far more interesting than the professional trash on television."

Eastmann throws his head back and laughs. "You don't get to where I am in life if you're averse to blood or violence. I'd love to attend. It will give me a chance to get to know your daughter better, too. Maybe by then my son will have come home and he can join us."

Mac tugs on my hand, taking a step to lead me past Charles and away from this mess.

We're almost out of reach when Eastmann's spindly fingers wrap around my upper arm. "Enjoy your evening, Ms. Adder. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon." He leans down so that only I hear the next part. "Your sister is a nurse, right? You should have her take a look at that cut on your arm. Say hello for me when you do."

THE SECOND HOLLY opens the penthouse doors, I burst through. "Pack your shit, we're leaving."

"Why? What happened?" She sounds confused but starts gathering up essentials.

"I met Eastmann. He knows you're here. We have to go." I stomp off, ripping open the door to her bedroom and emptying the contents of her dresser onto the bed. Holly doesn't follow, and when I finally pause what I'm doing, I hear muffled voices from the living room.

I march back out to figure out what the hell the holdup is and find her and Mac locked in hushed conversation.

Holly turns toward me with a firm set to her jaw. "Rylee, slow down. Tell me exactly what happened."

It only takes me a minute to recount the story, and when I'm done Holly plops down onto the sofa. "That's not nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be. Eastmann's baiting you. He has no idea I'm here."

She sounds relieved, but I'm still panicking. "Holly, we can't risk it. We're *both* on his radar now. Who knows what a man like that is capable of? Rick can't protect us. We have to go."

One hand on her hip and one on her belly, she stands. "Where would we go? Where else are we safe?"

"We go to the Jackals. They'll help us."

Mac steps forward. "Let's just think this through. Holly is right, he's trying to call our bluff. If you run now, it only

solidifies that you had something to do with Logan's disappearance *and* that you know where Holly is. Besides, your Jackal friends will be here in two weeks. You can at least wait that long, can't you?"

"What?" Holly and I say in unison, our heads snapping to Mac.

He pulls up a calendar app on his phone and turns the screen in my direction. "Leon just updated the Boss's schedule. Look, 5 o'clock, fourteen days from now: Meet with new Jackal leadership."

Tears well in my lower lids as I exhale a shuddering sigh of relief.

He's coming. Colton's finally coming.

I swipe my palm across my eyes to keep the tears from falling. "Okay, we can wait."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COLTON



Two Weeks Later

Mid-September

“HIT HIM AGAIN,” Frank orders.

Chest heaving, I use my sleeve to wipe the sweat and blood from my face. “He’s seconds away from never being able to speak again. How are you going to get any answers if I give him brain damage?”

“I said hit him *again*.”

Gritting my teeth, I do, and the resounding *crack* from this poor fuck’s orbital bone breaking reverberates off the concrete walls of the basement.

“Again.”

This time, I rear back and slam my knuckles into his chin, knowing full well it’ll knock him out. The man slumps in the chair, the duct tape around his wrist, waist, and ankles keeping him upright. I have to shake out my hand to relieve the ache from the impact of that punch, but at least he’s no longer conscious.

“How long before he wakes up?” Frank demands, lighting up his fifteenth cigarette of the night.

“I’m not a doctor, how should I know?” I snatch a towel off the counter to clean the blood off my hands. “Who is he anyway, and what information are you looking for?”

Frank exchanges a look with Ashlynn. “Go ahead and tell him, sweetheart.”

“This is Bill Trighton, the current owner of the factory. He’s the asshole who ordered all their chemical waste be buried by the river,” Ashlynn sneers, kicking the chair with her boot. She winces, her hand rising to the newly blacked-out Jackal mark on her stomach, the bottom portion just visible beneath the hem of her crop top.

My eyes drop to the unconscious Bill Trighton with new understanding—*we’re not looking for answers at all*. “Why make me bust my hands up and film this if you knew he was leaving in a body bag?”

Frank’s belly rumbles with laughter. “Ash, give us the room.”

Ashlynn heads upstairs, and Frank circles the tied-up man like a vulture. “He won’t be leaving in a body bag, he’ll be leaving on a stretcher. When we’re done here, he’ll spend the rest of his days on a ventilator.”

I shake my head. *What a fucking waste of my time.*

It’s not that the guy doesn’t deserve it, I just don’t see what any of this accomplishes. “You always were playing the short game, Frank. This won’t shut down the factory. His board of directors will keep it running or sell it to someone worse. Either way, we’re back at square one by next week.”

Frank stomps out his cigarette, exhaling the smoke with a slow shake of his head. “This man is only one part of the message we’re trying to send. Earlier today, Ash and her team set fire to his estate. As we speak, another team is planting pipe bombs at his offices. If anyone else comes along to take his place, we’ll repeat the process.”

Christ. How am I going to survive this? Even if I do, what will be left of me when it’s over.

Who am I kidding, this will never be over for me. Frank is going to make sure my time with the Dead Kings leaves a stain on my soul that will never wash out. Rylee will see me for the monster I am, and if he doesn’t already, Danny will

think I've abandoned our beliefs—that I've abandoned *him*. I thought I could figure a way out of this, but a few weeks in and I'm beginning to realize there's no walking away.

“The good news is,” Frank continues, pulling out and lighting up another smoke, “once we have the whole factory situation sorted, which should be in less than a week, we'll start your training and move on to the next target.”

“Training?” His metal lighter closes with an ominous *click* that makes my eye twitch in anticipation.

“You're familiar with the Viper fighting Pits?”

I nod. Of course, everyone in our world is. It's how we form introductions and make deals with one another—or at least it used to be.

Frank points to the zonked-out factory owner. “You know how many of my boys would have broken a hand doing that? All of them. We can win bar brawls and gun fights, but I don't have a single trained fighter in my crew. I could hire one, but money doesn't buy loyalty—”

“You can't actually think I'd fight for you?” I scoff. “You'll *never* have my loyalty.”

He shrugs. “I know, but that girl of yours does. You'd do anything for her, including work for me and fight for the Dead Kings. You'll never step out of line or go back on your word because if you did, you'd be signing her death warrant.”

He takes another drag. “Do I wish you'd come around to my way of thinking on your own? Absolutely. Do I hope you'll change your mind and ask for a permanent place with my crew? Sure. That being said, I'm not delusional. Jack may be gone, but you're his son, through and through, which means sooner or later you'll be looking for a way back to her and to Eden.”

I'm aware he meant the comparison to Jack as an insult, but it feels like a compliment, and I have to bite my cheek to hide how much his words affect me.

Frank leans over to blow smoke in the man's face. “Which is why I've come up with another way to ensure you willingly

stick around and fight for me in the Viper Pit.”

My jaw hardens.

“Now that Danny is president, it occurred to me that little girlfriend of yours might not be enough motivation to keep you here. After all, people fall out of love every day. The problem is, I can’t have you running off when you stop giving a fuck about her.”

That will never happen.

“Which got me thinking, what would one of Jack’s sons never forsake? That’s when it hit me: I have mountains of evidence against the Jackals. So, know this. If you leave or step a single toe out of line, it would be all too easy for me to turn those documents over to the Feds.”

I laugh, but a prickle of fear travels up my spine and into my scalp. “That would incriminate you, too.”

“Would it? The Dead Kings don’t have anything to do with the Jackals, remember? You made sure of that with our official separation.” Frank’s smug smile makes my blood run cold. “The way I see it, my club left immediately after realizing what the Jackals were up to. Needless to say, you might want to start training, boy.”

Motherfucker.

Frank planned this all along, and I played right into it.

THE CLAMOROUS CELEBRATION of the bombing of Trighton Industries headquarters renders the paper-thin walls of my room useless. Despite the music blaring in my headphones, the vigorous slapping sound of multiple people fucking and the rowdy cheering from drinking games are so loud that the entire bunkhouse might as well be in here with me.

Removing the ice from my black-and-blue knuckles, I snatch my phone off the table and check my latest voicemail

from Danny.

Sixteen of his messages are already clogging up my inbox, each one saying some variation of the same thing:

What the hell was that?

You blindsided me.

Get the fuck back here. We have shit to do.

I've read through the voicemail transcripts three times and still haven't been able to bring myself to press play. It's one thing to read Danny's words, but what would I hear in my brother's voice if I actually listened? Anger? Betrayal? Or would it be something more damning...like love or forgiveness?

After giving my phone a second to generate the new transcript, I take a deep breath and read.

Danny Alvarez

Transcription:

This will be my last call. I'm headed to Boston tomorrow. There's still plenty of time for you to meet me there. If you don't show...just do the right thing and show. Okay?

Boston? *Fuck*. He must be making the rounds and reintroducing himself as president to anyone we've ever done business with. Damn, that's smart. Bold, but smart. I wonder who he'll bring with him? He needs someone intimidating and unshakable, especially with the Viper crew.

It should be me.

My head snaps toward the window where the front tire of my bike is barely visible in the parking lot. It would only take me six hours to get to Boston, and I could be there to back my brother up. It'd be a horrible fucking way for me to meet my girl's father, but Rylee never cared about that asshole anyway.

With Frank's new threat, I'm stuck in Lockwood for the foreseeable future. This trip would also give me the opportunity to explain what I've done in person to both of them. I need to make Rylee understand why I haven't called,

and beg her to wait for me while I sort all this out. If I'm lucky, I might even get one last moment of peace with her in my arms.

Fuck it.

With nothing on the agenda for the next few days, there's a solid chance Frank won't even realize I'm gone. If I do get caught, he already granted me permission to attend Jimmy and Ethel's court date in West Virginia next month. I'll just tell him I had an emergency pretrial hearing.

A dopey, Rylee-induced grin pulls at the corner of my mouth as I make my way outside. My hands are shaking so badly from the adrenaline-fueled excitement that I drop my keys. I'm bending over to pick them up when the smell of stale cigarettes clogs the air around me.

“Where do you think you're going, boy?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RYLEE



CAPPING MY HIGHLIGHTER, I slam my *Mathematics for Computer Science* textbook closed and rub my temples. MIT clearly missed the memo on easing students into the swing of things. The first few weeks of a new semester are usually a cakewalk, but I am already buried under a growing pile of homework assignments and projects.

The upside to being this busy is I've had zero time to dwell on Charles Eastmann's horrible visit or my frustration that I haven't spoken directly to Minho in two weeks. He's still been updating my daily list of tasks, so I know he's fine, but having a second person in my life abruptly stop talking to me has ramped up my anxiety. The only thing that's prevented me from completely spiraling out was knowing that he, Colton, and Danny have a meeting with Rick today.

My Jackal phone chimes with a message, and I drop stomach-first onto my bed and bring up the text.

Minho: We're five minutes out. Can you ditch your escorts and meet me a few blocks away?

I kick my feet against the mattress, giddy with excitement.

Me: Sure can.

My pulse races as my eyes dart to the closed bathroom door where the faint sounds of Mac working out in his bedroom trickle under the frame. At least I hope that's what that grunting is...

I shake my head to clear the lewd image forming in my mind and scramble to my knees.

Colton is going to *hate* that my room connects to a Viper's room. If I was smart, I would use that to my advantage to make my case for why we need a place of our own as soon as possible. But no matter how disheartening Colton's lack of communication has been, I'm not sure poking the possessive beast living inside him is worth the trouble.

A smile blossoms over my cheeks as I make my way over to my open window to formulate my plan of escape. The top and bottom portions of the glass pane only open about six inches, which means there's no way I can fit. Climbing atop my mattress, I try the window over my bed, quickly discovering that the hinges on this one have more give. If I pull the bottom portion toward me, there's slightly more room, but it's still not enough.

Frustrated but undeterred, I place my hands on my hips. Mac mentioned something about a security lock on the hinges being removed for cleaning, but he didn't show me how they work.

Maybe I can jiggle it loose...

After a little finagling and a lot of elbow grease, the lock releases and the window opens another foot, giving me more than enough room to shimmy out through the bottom.

I land on my feet in the damp earth, letting loose a small *oof* that sends the birds in a neighboring windowsill into hysterics. Their shrill song is so loud, I half expect Viper guards to come crashing through the bushes shielding me from view.

I'm really starting to hate those chirping little shits.

My phone dings again, this time with Minho's dropped location.

Once I've made sure the coast is clear, I take off at a sprint. After so many weeks without exercising, the exertion makes it difficult to draw a full breath. White-hot pain rips through my lungs with each stride, but I don't care. If Minho is here, so is

Colton. The thought of being held in his arms—*after I smack him for ignoring me*—is enough to see me through any amount of temporary discomfort.

When I round the last corner onto the marked street where Minhó's location is pinged, I have to do a double take.

It's empty.

Not a single car or person in sight. Maybe I took a wrong

Someone clamps onto my elbow, their viselike grip dragging me into an alleyway. My mouth drops open in a silent scream right as Minhó's hushed voice sounds from behind me. "We have to make sure none of the Vipers are tracking you. Follow me."

Heart still hammering, I obey.

After an eternity of squeezing between buildings and climbing up escape ladders, the two of us finally stop on the rooftop of an old brownstone across the river.

"I think I'm dying," I wheeze.

Minho chortles and hooks his thumbs into his suspenders, taking a deep, restorative breath of his own. "I thought you lived for this shit. Have you been taking it easy or something?"

"Or something," I reply, unwilling to divulge how Sheriff Knott's kick still hurts when I move and that I haven't gone for a single run since leaving Eden.

"Where are Danny and Colton?" I ask once I regain control of my breathing. I glance around the empty roof like they might materialize out of thin air.

"I dropped Danny off at the meeting with your dad. Figured the Vipers would be so distracted by him showing up early you might actually stand a chance at getting out undetected. Looks like I was right." He snaps his suspenders and flashes me a cocky grin.

I snort. Damn it's good to see him in person.

“What about Colton? Is he meeting with Rick too?”

Minho’s grin slips and he suddenly seems to find my shoes extremely interesting.

I wait for him to answer, but he just wobbles his head in an unsure fashion, occasionally opening his lips before clamping them shut once more.

In the silence, my unanswered question takes on a life of its own. With each passing moment, it creeps closer and closer, like a stealth bomber carrying a nuke.

“Where is he?” I ask, my stomach quivering with sour trepidation.

Minho’s head moves ever so slowly from left to right, and acid bubbles up my throat.

“I don’t know what to say here,” he finally admits.

Understanding tremors through me with the ferocity of an earthquake, flipping my world upside down and battering at my insides.

“Colton’s not coming, is he?” My voice is as flat and lifeless as the cold, hollow pit in the center of my chest.

Minho takes a cautious step closer, his palm outstretched like I’m a frightened animal in need of soothing. I back away.

“The Jackals left Pennsylvania after the meeting,” he says, eyes dropping to the gravel-lined roof. “Colt opted to stay behind with the charter we voted out... He’s not returning our calls.”

Minho winces, like relaying this information causes him just as much agony as hearing it does for me. “You know Colt,” he says, voice cracking. “I have to believe he has a good reason for doing this. He told Danny and I—”

I hold up a hand. “Don’t do that. Don’t make excuses for him.”

Turning away from Minho, I make a flimsy attempt at holding back the tears burning holes in my lower lids, but the harbor and horizon beyond blur anyway.

After six weeks of no contact, I should have seen this coming.

How could I have been so stupid?

Blotting my eyes, I steady my voice. “Did he say why?”

“He didn’t have the chance. The last time we saw each other, Danny was sort of screaming at him. He took off on his bike and we haven’t heard from him since.”

After a deep, painful breath, I give the devastating feeling of betrayal one final minute to smolder inside my cavernous chest before smothering it and reforming it into something I can use—something hard and angry.

I can’t afford to be weak right now, not when danger is so close, and that includes not letting myself be destroyed by Colton fucking Archer.

Shaking my hands out at my sides, I let loose a long, pursed lip breath before turning to face Minho. “I’m assuming that’s not why you asked to meet in secret. What is it you need my help with?”

He takes another step closer, his heavy brow and soft posture hinting that he wants to keep talking about this. But I can’t, not without risking a complete breakdown.

“*Please,*” I rasp. “There’s nothing left to be said. Charles Eastmann is after me and Holly. If Colton doesn’t want to be a part of my life, I won’t waste my time chasing him. We have work to do, and I’m assuming that’s why you went through all the trouble of getting me on my own. So again, what is it that you need help with?”

He turns away from me, moving toward the edge of the roof to clutch the railing, but not before I catch a flash of watery shame in his eyes.

Silhouetted against the orange and purple sky, he shifts his weight onto his toes and then back onto his heels. He continues rocking, stoking the uneasy feeling pebbling across my skin with every second he doesn’t answer.

“I fucked up,” he finally says. Shoulders folding inward, he leans his elbows on the brick and wrought iron railing. “Like, big time fucked up. We went through all the trouble of getting Logan’s computer and I melted the fucking thing. Now we can’t use it to get the data off the thumb drive.”

His voice is full of so much guilt and sorrow that I cross the roof in three long strides to place my hand on his shoulder. He tries to shrug me off, but when that doesn’t work, he lets out a frustrated snort. “Last week, after my nine hundredth failed attempt, the drive started beeping like a goddamn ticking bomb. I barely ejected it before the whole laptop began smoking. There’s a chance the data is gone, but I’m too scared to find out. I haven’t told anyone except for you.”

Shit.

The thumb drive is our only credible lead to bring Eastmann down. If the data is gone...

I squeeze his shoulder, hoping that my touch will convey a comfort my next words won’t. “We have to tell Danny, and we need to figure out if the data is still there immediately.”

Minho’s head drops, bobbing limply like an untethered buoy lost at sea. “I know, but Jeremy was killed bringing that thumb drive home. It’s the reason Colt and I weren’t in Eden when Logan and Knott went off the rails. It’s the reason we weren’t there to save Jack. If my destroying that computer means we can’t get the information...then they died for nothing. I don’t know *how* to tell him.”

If my heart hadn’t already been obliterated a few minutes ago, it would be bleeding for Minho right now. How can he think any of this falls on him? *I’m* the one who told the Jackals about Logan’s computer and sent them to Charlotte. It was *me* who refused to go to Maggie’s Diner with Danny. *I* was the only one who could’ve saved Jack and didn’t.

I wrap my arm around him and lean my head on his shoulder. “We’ll figure it out together. We can always find another computer or build one ourselves.”

“We’d need some hardcore spy-level shit. It could take years to develop the code capable of something like that.”

I’m racking my brain for a solution when something familiar catches my eye, spiking my adrenaline. “Do you see that building over there—the stupid domed one that looks like the Roman Pantheon?”

He lifts his chin and follows the direction of my gaze. “Sure.”

“That’s the best damn tech school in the country. There has to be something, or someone, in there who can help us,” I say confidently, when in reality I’m just making this up on the fly.

Minho gets a far-off look in his eye, as if calculating a new course of action. “You might be onto something. Jeremy used to talk about how MIT sponsors a bunch of experimental research projects for their professors and grad students.”

Lifting my head from his shoulder, I turn him until we’re facing one another. “We can do this. We’ll find a way to access the information on that thumb drive, or tear the world apart trying. Together, we’ll bring that fucker Eastmann down.”

The *pop* of cracking knuckles fills the silence, and Minho’s smile springs back to life just as the sun dips below the horizon. “Don’t tell Alex, but you’re my new favorite person.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RYLEE



AN HOUR LATER, Minho and I are outside my room at the Den, attempting to crawl through the same window that I'd swear was much bigger earlier.

Despite a boost from Minho, only half my body makes it inside, and now the exterior brick grating against my stomach is making it difficult to breathe.

"This is ridiculous. Why can't we meet Danny somewhere else?" I grunt, struggling to bring my knee up as I balance precariously on the ledge.

"Because I already texted him to meet us here. And I need to look something up on your computer." Minho places my foot against his shoulder. "Here, use me as leverage to push yourself through."

Two very bruised elbows later, I flop onto my mattress with a sigh of relief.

Then it's Minho's turn.

"This is harder than it looks," he grumbles, contorting his inked, gangly body through the opening with a surplus of groans and expletives. "Shit, I think my foot is stuck."

Rising to my knees, I give his leg a solid tug, and he tumbles head over heels onto my comforter.

Staring up at me, he blinks before saying, "I can't believe we just snuck into the Vipers' Den like a bunch of teenagers after a night of drinking. This is absolutely unreal."

Throwing myself down next to him, I can't help but giggle.

Minho belts out a laugh of his own, grabbing his stomach as he cackles like a cartoon hyena. The crazy sound sends me into another fit of laughter, and before long I have to wipe away my tears to see.

We only have a moment to revel in the hilarity of the situation before an oversized black box appears above our heads. Without a second to spare, we roll in opposite directions off the bed, watching as the tackle box lands exactly where our heads were moments before.

The box is followed by a jean-clad leg, and shortly afterward by a muscled torso, tanned skin, and a head of dark hair.

Danny.

Despite his size, he maneuvers through the window with much more grace than Minho and I were able to. It's on the tip of my tongue to roast Minho about his lack of agility when Danny climbs down and turns, his deep-mocha eyes settling on me.

Darkness creeps into the corners of my sight, and without warning, I'm back on the road to Eden.

Danny and I have our hands pressed to Jack's abdomen.

Jack is no longer breathing.

It's so real I can feel Danny's scream in my bones. Can smell the iron in the air.

No. Not real. You're in Boston, I chant, digging my thumb into my thigh as hard as I can until my nail punctures the skin and releases me from the memory.

Danny comes back into focus as he takes a step forward, searching my face with a haunted expression, as if he, too, was reliving the same memory. Then he blinks and the shadows on his face disappear.

"Goddamn, it's good to see you," he says, opening his arms. I run into them, smashing my cheek against his chest

and soaking in his familiar citrus-cedar scent.

I'd been so absorbed with Eastmann and school and trying not to obsess over Colton ghosting me that I never stopped to consider how the last time Danny and I saw each other we were kneeling over his father's body.

How is he hugging me? How does he not hate me?

"I'm so sorry. I tried to save him... It wasn't enough." Danny's shirt muffles my voice, making my confession borderline incoherent. "I was too slow. I'm so sorry."

He grips me tighter, crushing me into his chest before pushing away to hold me at arm's length. He bends forward, dipping his head so he can look me in the eye. "You have *nothing* to be sorry for. Not a single damn thing. I'm alive because of you. Whatever story you made up in your head to convince yourself what happened to Jack was your fault is a lie. I was there. I might have been drugged, but I heard how hard you fought for us. None of this is your fault."

A mixture of snot and tears cascade over my lips. He's likely saying all this to comfort me, but I find the burden I've been carrying lightened just the same. Even though he should, it doesn't sound like he blames me for what happened.

"Have you been out here blaming yourself this whole time?" he asks, running a rough palm over my pink locks. "Is that what this crazy hair color is about?"

"Sorta," I squeak.

Chest bouncing with silent laughter, he drags me in for another soul-healing hug. "Jesus, Ry. You, Minho, and Colt should form a scapegoat support group."

I must have flinched when he said Colton's name because he pulls back, his eyes much darker now. "Minho told you, then?"

Extracting myself from his grip, I wipe my eyes and nose. "He told me enough. Colton's not coming. Beyond that, I don't want to talk about it. It doesn't change anything with me and the Jackals. I'm still in this."

Danny's eyes fall accusingly on Minh. "Yeah, about that. I found out just how *in this* you are on the way over. Minh told me you've been taking care of the entire account on your own while he figures out the thumb drive."

I flash Danny a grateful smile for dropping the Colton talk and exchange a meaningful glance with Minh, who's clearly exaggerated my involvement. "Not the whole account. But I'm happy to help. At least I now understand how you guys bring in cash. Rob from the rich, give to the poor. It's genius, really."

Danny's hand rises to his chest in mock astonishment. "Hey now, we're beer brewers, not thieves. Dovetail turns a profit too, you know. But more importantly, you should have said how *we* bring in money, because you're a part of this. I may not be able to vote you in until I've been president for a year, but I swear on my life that's the first thing I'm going to do."

He pats my shoulders, as if to reiterate his sincerity, and continues, "Once we have you marked as a Dove, the club will be informed of the work you're doing with Minh. When the time comes, your membership vote will be a no-brainer."

"You're going to tell everyone I've been helping?" My brow furrows. "I thought I couldn't be involved until I was officially a Jackal? Won't my connection to the Vipers freak people out?"

Having the club think I'm some sort of spy is the last thing I need right now...

Danny swipes at the air dismissively and leans over the bed to rummage through the black tackle box he left discarded on my mattress. "You've more than proved yourself and everyone knows it. Besides, Doves have been doing work for us since the formation of the club. There's some wiggle room in the rules, and we're going to take full advantage. We just need to mark you."

When he turns back toward me, he has cleansing solution in one hand and a dove stencil in the other. "So, where do you want your jackal tattoo? I might be inking you as a Dove

tonight, but this time next year we'll hopefully be back in Eden and I'll be covering this up with the club mark."

A tiny flame flickers to life inside the gaping Colton-sized hole in my chest. *This time next year*. That seems so far away from now, but in a way, having a timeframe makes everything seem a little more manageable.

I glance down at my body. "I don't know. Calf? Shoulder?"

Danny shifts the stencil to his other hand and rotates my arm before dropping down onto one knee to examine my leg. Almost immediately, he locks in on the patch of fingernail-shaped scars and several fresh scabs. His knowing eyes rise to meet my own.

"Let's do it on the side of your thigh. The Jackal mark will go on the front when the time comes, but it will be large enough to cover the dove, even if I put it over here." I cringe as he runs his thumb purposely over the patch of disfigured skin. "You'll have to commit to not doing this anymore or it will fuck with the ink."

I dip my chin. "Yeah, I can do that."

"I mean it, Rylee. No more of this."

"Got it." My cheeks flush with embarrassment. It's not like I want to hurt myself, pain is just the only thing that keeps me grounded in reality. In some ways, it's similar to my body's reaction to running. My thoughts never clear until the mileage starts to take a physical toll. Still, though, I know he's right and I need to find a healthier way to manage this.

Danny continues to stare at me, as if contemplating the sincerity of my words.

"I won't do it anymore," I repeat.

"Okay, good. Let's get started."

The cool shock of the cleansing solution spraying my skin makes me jump, sending my pink hair into my eyes and reminding me of something I thought of while Cherry was coloring my hair. "Any chance you'd have time to do one

more tattoo while you're here? I'd like a lily on the opposite forearm from my marigold."

"A lily?" Danny asks.

"Yeah." I bite my lip in hesitation. "For Jack."

He squeezes his eyes shut, and for a moment I think he's going to refuse or tell me it's a silly idea, but when his eyelashes flutter back open, moisture is pooling in the corners and a small smile graces his lips. "Let's start with that one."

Danny gets to work, freehanding the lily outline while Minho busies himself at my computer. Keeping our voices low, we spend our time going over updates in Eden—the progress with the after-school center, and how miserable Alex has been without us.

I make a mental note to call and text him more often, and then the conversation shifts to Logan and Knott—how the Jackals got rid of their bodies, what they did with Logan's Mercedes, and all the other details I thought I'd never want to know.

It's overwhelming, yet crazy comforting to realize how thorough they were with the cover-up. The information fills me with a spark of hope that we might make it out of this mess after all.

The muscle in my forearm twitches as Danny shades and colors in the leaves of the lily. I try to distract myself by filling them in on Charles Eastmann and his supposed business dealings with my dad.

"We've long suspected them of working together, but until Sidewinders there was no paper trail to prove it," Danny explains while he works. "Your dad is a shady fucking guy, but after our meeting earlier, I'm confident he won't let anything happen to you while you're here."

The conversation eventually ebbs into what happened in Pennsylvania: the vote, the Lockwood charter separating, and everything else they deem important enough for me to know. All of us cautiously avoid mentioning Colton, but his notable absence shadows every topic.

Finally, Minho and I tell Danny about the fried Eastmann Incorporated laptop. He takes the news in stride, assuring us he has every confidence we'll be able to figure it out. I smile as Minho visibly relaxes and mouths a silent *thank you*.

Danny finishes up the first tattoo and lets me take a peek.

Although my skin is slightly red and swollen, the single white lily with light pink and orange accents is beautiful. He was much slower with this one than he was with the marigold, and while there's less color, it somehow stands out more, almost like there's a golden halo around the entire thing.

"Jack would have loved this," Danny says, coating the fresh ink with a light layer of tattoo balm.

"You think so?" I twist my arm for a better look.

"I know so." Danny nods confidently. "Every time you see it, I want you to remember that bringing you in was one of the things he was most proud of."

Tears form anew as the memory of Jack saying those exact words lodges in my throat. I guess Danny really was aware of everything that happened that night. Which means... "If you remember Jack saying that, do you remember what I told him about Holly and Jeremy?"

Danny nods. "When is she due?"

"Wait, what?" Minho whips around so fast he and my computer chair almost flip over.

"The baby's due in December," I answer them both.

This time, Minho really does flip over. Scrambling to his feet, he shouts, "Holy shit, we're going to be uncles?"

"You are," I confirm, a massive smile on my face. "It's a boy. She's naming him Jeremy Jack—JJ for short."

A heavy silence falls over the room while the weight of that name sinks in. The air shifts and excitement morphs into something more poignant as Danny and Minho exchange brief eye contact. Without speaking, Minho settles back down at the computer and Danny starts in on the dove tattoo.

The needle is much more painful than it was on my arm, and the heavy silence makes it hard to concentrate on anything else. I glance back and forth between the men on either side of me, unsure what changed so quickly.

After an uncomfortably long stretch with the tattoo gun making the only noise in the room, I clear my throat. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, you’re fine.” Danny swipes away the excess black ink from my thigh. “It’s just a good fucking name.”

Minho, still scrolling through something on the screen, nods his head. “It’s a great fucking name.” Then he abruptly stops moving and angles one of the massive computer screens in my direction. “Apparently it’s lucky, too, because I think I found what we need to unlock the Eastmann Incorporated thumb drive.”

My focus narrows on the news article on the screen: “Massachusetts Institute of Technology Student Wins Defense Intelligence Agency Contract”

I stumble to my feet to get a closer look at the picture under the article, barely avoiding an elbow and a tattoo gun to the face along the way. “I know that guy, he’s the teacher’s assistant from my Ethical Hacking class.”

Minho looks from the screen back to my face. “He’s building a supercomputer designed to decode encrypted data. It’s exactly what we need. Do you really know him? Can you get him to give you access?”

I glance at the picture again to make sure. It’s definitely my TA. Same curly, reddish-brown hair, same cropped ankle pants. He’s even posing with the same pretentious expression he wears every time anyone speaks to him in class. “Sure, I don’t see why not.”

It’s a gross exaggeration, especially when the only conversation I’ve had with the guy was during orientation and he couldn’t have cared less about me. But he did seem interested in Colton’s car... Maybe I could find a way to use that?

“This guy doesn’t give anyone the time of day, but the Chevelle caught his eye.” I turn toward Danny. “You guys weren’t planning on taking it back, were you?”

He shakes his head, and I sigh. The last thing I want to do is keep driving Colton’s car, but it might be the only *in* I have with the TA, and getting access to that computer is far more important than my wounded pride. Judging by his reaction when I revved the engine, I doubt he’d be impressed by my old Honda. Which reminds me...

“What happened to my car?”

Minho grimaces. “We sent a cleanup crew to Eden a few weeks ago to clear out all traces of Logan from Holly and Jeremy’s bungalow. They got a *little*...overzealous and the whole place, your car included, sorta went up in flames.”

Danny snorts. “Overzealous? Your verbatim instructions were to *burn it all down, if that’s what it takes.*” Danny’s side-eye and tone softens as his gaze lands back on me. “You can keep the Chevy. Jack’s name is on the pink slip anyway. I’ll have it transferred over to you in a week or two, and you can do with it whatever you want. Sell it or let it rust. Give it to this TA guy for all I care.”

There’s an edge to his voice that makes me think it might have been selfish of me to cut off all conversations about Colton. From the sound of it, Danny is just as bitter as I am over the way he left.

Minho proceeds to animatedly relay the details of the rest of the article: projected finish dates, added security measures to the MIT campus, and so on—all while Danny remains motionless. I should be listening more closely to Minho, but my eyes stay glued to Danny, taking in his heaving chest and clenched fist wrapped around the tattoo gun hanging at his side.

“Should we finish the dove?” I prompt cautiously.

“Yes,” he says through the firm set of his jaw, “but you guys need to continue using this time to plan. Minho and I have to hit the road soon.”

An hour later, the tattoo is complete, and Minho and I are no closer to a solid plan on how to gain access to the supercomputer. I rub my temples. “Even if I could get inside with the thumb drive, it has that weird triangular port *and* the computer needs to be finished before we can use it. In the meantime, I guess I’ll concentrate on getting a little closer to my TA. See if he’s looking for volunteers. Although I imagine that’s going to be complicated if the government is involved. This is a mess.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Danny says, wiping the last of the ink from my thigh. “We’re done, by the way. Not shading it in will make the Jackal cover-up super easy, but no more scars. I mean it.”

I dip my chin. “Does this mean you guys have to get going?”

Danny nods, and my heart sinks. I knew it was getting late, but I was hoping they would stay a bit longer...

Minho pops his knuckles and then reaches into his shirt, taking out a long necklace with a boxy silver case at the end. “The thumb drive is in here. It’s yours to carry now. I’ll work on an adapter, but if you can’t gain full access to the computer, let me know and I’ll start working on something else for us.”

I take the necklace and slip it over my head, the weight settling on my shoulders like a boa constrictor.

Minho hugs me, and then Danny steps in to take his place.

“Shit, I almost forgot,” he says, pulling away. After a short struggle, he pries a ring from his pinkie finger and places the warm silver metal with a flat black stone adorning its center into my palm.

“This was Jack’s. The stone is black onyx from an *azabache* my family brought over from Cuba. My grandfather fashioned it into this ring and gave it to Jack. He said it would protect him.” He closes my fingers over it. “I don’t know about all that, but what I do know is Jack wore this ring every single time he went into that godforsaken mine and always came home. To my knowledge he only took it off once, and

that was the day he gave it to me...right before Maggie poisoned our food.”

The day Danny came home and Jack didn't.

“I want you to have it. Regardless of whether you get the data off that drive, make sure this ring brings you home to Eden when all this shit is over, okay?”

I nod, squeezing the sacred piece of jewelry once before sliding it onto my pointer finger.

Minho and Danny slip out the window not long after, and once again I'm on my own.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RYLEE



ALL TOO EARLY THE next morning, the annoying songbird outside my window starts her daily lament. I bury my head beneath my comforter, but it does nothing to drown out the sound, and soon thoughts of Colton burrow inside the blanket with me, effectively robbing me of the temporary peace I'd found in sleep.

I'd been able to stave off the pain while Minhó and Danny were here, but the moment they left reality came crashing down. My heart has been ripped out, and the gaping wound in my chest is paralyzing.

Colton didn't even have the decency to call or break up with me via text. He left me like what we had meant nothing to him. Like *I* meant nothing to him.

Unwilling to face the day, I roll over, pulling my blankets up around my ears and uncovering my calves in the process. As soon as I'm comfortable, a pounding sounds at my bathroom door.

So much for staying in bed to avoid reality.

"Go away," I call out.

After another set of overly aggressive knocks, Mac barges in, scouring the room as if he's expecting to find someone in here with me.

When he's satisfied I'm alone, his eyes land briefly on my exposed legs before he throws his arms in the air. "Fuckin' hell, Rylee. What were you thinkin'?" If *yer* father finds out,

he'll kill me." His accent is so pronounced it's almost difficult to understand him.

"Listen," I say through a yawn, "I'm too tired for this. I don't know what you're—"

"Oh, fuck off. Do you really think I didn't hear the people in here last night?"

I bolt upright. *Shit*. It never occurred to me that Mac could hear every word Minh, Danny, and I said. "It was nothing. We were just—"

He shakes his head. "Honestly, I don't want to know. Just put on some music or something next time. Or better yet, don't have anyone over. I'm not even going to ask how you got them in."

He paces back and forth. Instead of his normal suit, he's wearing gym clothes—*tight* gym clothes. *And he's sort of ripped...*

"I can't believe you snuck people into the Den," he says, continuing his short trek back and forth across the carpet with both hands now on his head. "If one of the others found an outsider in here, do you know what could have happened? Was one of those guys this illusive boyfriend of yours? If so, he's an *eejit*."

Boyfriend.

I tuck my legs under me, fussing with the hem of my comforter. "I don't have a boyfriend anymore."

Mac's footsteps stop. "Shit. Sorry." He hesitates, his entire demeanor changing, like he's giving me the space to say more or vent to him. When I don't, he moves toward the door. "I'm going to hit the gym. Don't sneak anyone else in here while I'm gone. And sorry about...well, you know."

As he presses his palm to the door, I get a direct view of the viper on his hand, and a flash of Colton's rose tattoo tears through my memory with gut-punching clarity.

Fuck this.

“Wait,” I call out. Now that I’m up, I refuse to be left alone in this room all weekend with my depressing thoughts. “Can I come with you? To the gym?”

Mac’s back inflates with an exaggerated breath, and I suddenly feel incredibly vulnerable for asking to tag along. But I have to do something to avoid thinking of Colton, and I need to get out of this damn room. Not to mention how yesterday’s run with Minho illuminated how out of shape I’ve gotten.

“Fine,” Mac says after a long pause. “You have two minutes to get dressed or I’m leaving without you.”

The second he closes the door, I scramble out of bed and throw on a sports bra, a wrinkled tank top, and a pair of running shorts from my duffle bag. About six minutes later, after struggling to find a way to put up my shorter hair, I dash through the door, my nose slamming straight into Mac’s solid back.

My eyes water from the impact, but Mac barely acknowledges me, instead choosing to take off at a near sprint toward a staircase across from the elevators. I follow after him, noticing how oddly calm the Den is.

There are a dozen or so Vipers, draped over couches or passed out on the floor, but they’re too far gone on drugs and alcohol from last night to notice me stepping over them. Well, all of them except for the guy winking at me as he presses down on the back of the topless woman he’s thrusting in and out of by the fireplace.

I try not to gawk, but the sound of their moans and sweat-slicked bodies echoing off the domed ceiling make it challenging to keep my eyes forward.

As the tempo of their slapping intensifies, I scurry ahead to catch up with Mac.

Once I’ve caught up with him, I’m still taking three steps for every one of his. When we hit the stairwell and descend, he moves so fast it’s almost like he’s trying to leave me behind. Which is odd, because Mac’s usually very patient.

Now that I think about it, he's been acting out of character all morning. "Why are you walking so fast?"

"Because I'm trying not to be upset with you," he says, not bothering to slow down as he reaches the bottom of the stairs and pushes through another door into the sublevels of the building. "I bend over backward for your protection, but did you ever stop to consider what would happen to *me* if you'd been caught with people in your room? Now, to top it all off, you made me late."

I stop walking. "I never asked you to bend over backward for me. If you have a problem with your responsibilities as a Viper, take it up with Rick. On second thought, this was a bad idea. I'm going to head back to my room. See you later."

The shitty thing is, he's right. I *didn't* think about him, and now, on top of everything else, I'm also feeling guilty about that.

Mac does an abrupt about-face and lets out a frustrated grunt. "I don't have a problem with my responsibilities, and I didn't mean to sound so harsh. I didn't sleep well and I'm under a lot of pressure right now."

"That's not an excuse to act like a dick. I got dumped last night, and I really wanted to go work off some steam in the gym, but if you're going to just make me feel worse, then I think I'll pass."

He presses on his temples. "I'm glad you asked to come, but like I said, I had a rough night. It's not your fault, but I *am* running late, and my sparring partner is going to think I bailed." He sighs, fidgeting with his hands. "I'm sorry for being an ass. Please don't go back."

I weigh the sincerity of his words and his nervous energy, deciding that I need to be out of my room more than I need to stay mad at him. "Fine, you're forgiven."

He rolls his eyes at the subtle sarcasm in my tone.

"If you don't want to be late, we should run," I say, shoving past him and taking off down the hallway to put some distance between myself and that conversation.

“You don’t know where the gym is,” he calls after me.

“Then you better start shouting out directions,” I huff over my shoulder.

Running feels even worse than it did yesterday, but it keeps me from thinking about anything other than putting one foot in front of the other, so I push through.

“Left,” Mac yells as I approach the first fork in the basement hallway.

I take the turn and quicken my pace, but my muscles are sluggish, like they don’t have the energy reserves to accomplish what I’m asking of them.

“Right!” Mac shouts when the next hallway branches, though I can barely hear him through my labored breathing. I use the corner to slingshot forward, but despite urging myself onward, my pace slows.

“Keep going straight, you’ve got this.” This time when Mac speaks, it’s from right behind my shoulder. He could easily overtake me, but he matches my pace stride for stride until the hallway ends and we skitter to a stop in front of a set of double doors.

Everything hurts and I can barely see straight, but for the first time in weeks my mind is clear. My soul may be tarnished, my heart broken, but the familiar strain of exertion is making me feel a little bit more like myself.

Mac opens the door to the gym, his breathing already under control while I’m still struggling to remain upright. His eyebrows lift and he points to the clear wrapping over the lily on my arm. “While I appreciate you getting us here on time, are you supposed to sweat with that on?”

“You can’t swim,” Colton says from the riverbank near the old mill. “It hasn’t been three weeks since your tattoo.”

I shake away the memory. “Dammit. I always do this.” I pat the clear wrapping on my forearm and thigh, like that will help.

“I’m sure you’re fine. Maybe stick to free weights and skip cardio so you won’t sweat too badly.” He points to a boxing ring of sorts at the far end of the massive warehouse-style gym. “I’ll be in the ring with Leon. Come get me if you need anything, but please don’t go back upstairs on your own.”

Not waiting for me to agree, he slowly jogs over to a lean, muscular man with curly black hair that’s been shaved on the sides. The man, who I assume is his sparring partner, is wearing the tiniest, shiniest white shorts I’ve ever seen. Next to his deep-tawny skin tone, the shorts almost look fluorescent. His outfit today is a far cry from the suit he wore when escorting Governor Conrad out of Sidewinders.

Leon begins to wrap Mac’s hands, and a brief flash of Colton wrapping my hand after I cut it at the diner floods my mind.

I quickly turn my back on the men.

An antsy feeling gurgles in my gut at the sight of the overwhelming amount of gym equipment before me. This was a bad idea. The only workout I partake in is running. I don’t know how to operate any of these death traps. Exactly how am I supposed to do anything in here that won’t make me sweat and ruin my tattoo?

“Smash Shit Up” by Dropkick Murphys crackles through the sound system as I take a lap around the equipment. Deciding to play it safe, I opt for a treadmill, but walking gets old after forty minutes, and my mind drifts to the topics I came to the gym to avoid thinking about in the first place—like how I’m going to gain access to the supercomputer and my naivety for not realizing Colton was ghosting me.

Without anything else to distract me, I latch onto the sound of flesh smacking against the mat in the boxing ring.

Is Mac taking a beating? Or is that his sparring partner?

Another loud *thwack* echoes through the air. Judging by the unfamiliar voice shouting profanities immediately after, I’d put my money on Mac being the one doing the pummeling.

Curiosity gets the better of me and I hop off the treadmill to make my way over to the edge of the fighting ring.

The two of them move like dancers, trading steps and brutal blows with practiced precision that would bring most men to their knees. After a savage punch to Leon's stomach, I get a little nervous the violence might send me spiraling into another traumatic memory, but a few more minutes pass and I realize I'm fine.

Brutality aside, it's mesmerizing to witness two skilled fighters face off against one another. For a moment, I wonder if I could do this—

Mac lands a particularly vicious kick to Short-Shorts Leon's rib cage, and I gasp aloud, clutching my own ribs. *Never mind.* Maybe I'd be better suited for something like self-defense, where I can learn to ward off attacks instead...

Having heard my gasp, Mac catches my eye and gives me a shy smile that before I met Colton would have done something fluttery to the inside of my hollow chest.

Now it just makes me realize how empty I feel.

Taking advantage of Mac's momentary lack in concentration, Leon delivers a hit to his jaw that sends Mac spiraling to the ground in a heap of muscle and sweat.

Fortunately, by the time I walk over to see if he's alright, he's back on his feet. Unfortunately, a fist-shaped bruise is already purpling his jaw and chin. It looks painful, but I'm more appalled by how Leon barely apologizes for the cheap shot before excusing himself from the gym.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to distract you," I say once the door clicks shut behind his sparring partner.

"Not your fault. I know better than to look away during a fight."

Mac's not acting hurt, but every time he opens and closes his jaw, it makes an awful clicking noise. I reach up to touch the bruise and offer to go get him some ice, but the second my fingertips graze his skin, he flinches so badly I almost forget to make the offer.

“Ice?” I mumble, hastily shoving my hand into the pocket of my shorts.

“No, I’m good. I just need to stretch out, then I’ll take us back,” Mac says, his brows heavy with confusion. “Do you mind unmuting the TV for me? Otherwise it’s too quiet in here.”

Oddly embarrassed, although I don’t understand what for, I head over to the wall-mounted remote control he points to and unmute the large flat-screen hanging from the ceiling.

The voice of a blonde-haired news anchor booms throughout the room.

“Business tycoon Bill Trighton remains in critical condition while his company’s board of directors attempts to salvage their dying stock and avoid a buyout.

“There are still no suspects in the bombings that occurred at his home and business headquarters Thursday, but law enforcement would like to assure the public they are working diligently to solve the case.

“In related news, Jeffrey Segretto, the self-titled Bankruptcy Baron known for making his millions by acquiring failing companies, was taken from his home yesterday evening.

“While no organization has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, preliminary reports indicate the incident may be related to Segretto’s proposed buyout of Bill Trighton’s newly acquired factory in Pennsylvania and several other Trighton Industries assets.

“Our news station has procured exclusive footage of the attack. I must warn you, the following video is graphic.”

The news anchor gives one final warning before crystal clear black-and-white security footage appears on the television.

My eyes are glued to the screen as a white van careens through the front gate of a luxurious mansion, barreling across the circular drive. Seconds later, a dozen masked men file out

and rush toward the front entrance with the coordination of a SWAT team.

The camera footage fast forwards and resumes right as a middle-aged man in striped silk pajamas, who I assume is the homeowner, Jeffrey Segretto, is dragged kicking and screaming through his front door.

Very clearly outnumbered, I have to give good ol' Jeffrey credit for putting up one hell of a fight. He lands decent blows to at least two of the kidnappers' groins and manages to grab onto the tallest guy's mask. He nearly rips the whole thing off, exposing part of his assailant's thick, tattooed neck.

My muscles go rigid, and I grip the remote so tightly the battery cover pops off.

There's no way...

Palms slick with sweat, I fumble with the remote, frantically rewinding the news to make sure it wasn't just a trick of the light.

I press play right before the mask is almost ripped off and watch with bated breath as the image of a jackal tattoo flashes across the screen for the briefest second before the fabric is wrenched back into place by a gloved hand.

My pulse pounds in my ears.

I try to rationalize what I just saw, but now that I'm actually paying attention, all I can see are the familiar movements and curves of a body I know intimately. A body I'd recognize anywhere.

Colton.

Half in a trance, I watch Colton throw the homeowner to the ground and grind his knee into the man's spine to zip-tie his wrists. After dragging Jeffrey Segretto to his feet, he tosses him into the back of the van like a sack of trash.

The news anchor begins talking, but the footage continues to play, showing Colton hunched forward with his hands on his knees. My eyes water as he takes several heaving breaths that look like he's in pain, but then a few of the other masked

intruders stride into view to clap him on the back, like they're all best fucking buddies, and his posture straightens.

That has to be the former Lockwood charter Minho and Danny were talking about.

The footage cuts out, and I press the power button, letting the TV fade to black. My own pale reflection stares back at me as my fists morph into clubs.

This is what was more important than calling me back?

This is what he left me and the Jackals for?

Even before Minho confirmed Colton wasn't coming for me, I think I knew something was wrong. But knowing and unexpectedly being force-fed the images of him living his life like the Jackals and I never existed are two *very* different things.

This is a much deeper form of betrayal, bringing with it a new sense of finality. The man I fell in love with would *never* turn his back on his brothers for this horseshit. Which begs the question: did the Colton I thought I knew ever exist?

The chasm in my chest widens, threatening to swallow me whole. I teeter, hanging from the edge, torn somewhere between trying to crawl my way back out and just letting myself fall in.

Footsteps sound from somewhere behind me. "Adder, are you okay?"

Mac's fingers graze the back of my arm like he's going to grab me, but I pull away before he can. I'm not okay, and as I try to keep my emotions in check, my hands tremor so violently I have to cross my arms over my chest to hide it.

Mac sees it anyway and grabs my arm, forcing me to face him. The look he gives me is so full of compassion and understanding that the dam I built to hold back the tears breaks and a flood of loneliness and betrayal rushes in to fill the void as I fall to my knees.

SOME TIME LATER, after Mac finally leaves my room and the weight of Colton's abandonment eases off my chest enough for me to breathe, I crawl out of bed and grab my phone from the drawer. Scrolling down to Colton's number, I wipe the tears from my eyes and type out a message.

Me: I saw you on the news tonight. That's what you left us for? Jack would be ashamed.

After hitting send, I grip the phone in my hand so tightly I think my bones bruise.

It's not enough.

I thought the text would feel cathartic, but a tiny spiteful voice in the back of my head whispers that this is my fault. I didn't *earn* my happily ever after with Colton, and his leaving is what I deserve for killing two men and failing to save Jack.

Fuck that voice.

Maybe the reason the text didn't feel like enough is because it wasn't.

Spinning Jack's ring with my thumb, I bring back up our one-sided thread.

Me: Colton Archer, you're a coward for abandoning your brothers and you're a coward for not being able to face me. I might have loved you once, but when I needed you, you weren't there for me. I will never forgive you for this. I deserve better.

I press send and, before I can talk myself out of it, block Colton's number.

The moment I click the button, the stupid songbird from this morning lands on my windowsill. The details of her tiny feathers blur beneath the tears streaming from my eyes, but even those can't mask the heart-wrenchingly beautiful melody emanating from her beak.

I catapult my phone through the air, and the sound of cracking glass sends the bird flying off, leaving me alone in the deafening quiet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

COLTON



One Month Later

Mid-October

ETHEL SQUEEZES the last of the air from my lungs.

“I can’t believe you did it!” Her bracelets jingle as she jumps up and down with her arms still clasped around my torso. “Tell me again how long it’ll be before they release my Jimmy?”

Pulling away, I place my palm over hers. The fresh ink on the back of my hand stings with the movement, but I welcome the discomfort. “It will take the prison a few days to process his release, but you’ll be notified twenty-four hours in advance. I’ll file the compensation paperwork for his wrongful conviction tomorrow. If they request another hearing, we can make a motion for it to be virtual so you two won’t have to make the trek back.”

“Thank you.” She pats the back of my hand. “Oh,” she says, noticing the raised red skin. “Is that one new? I’m not normally one for tattoos, but it is beautiful. What kind of flower is it?”

I glance down at my hand, my chest pinching uncomfortably as I do. “A marigold.”

Ethel nods. “Just like I thought. You know, I plant marigolds in my garden every year to protect the other plants. They might look unassuming, but those beauties make all the difference. Once you have them in your garden and see all the

good they do, it's hard to imagine how you ever lived without them."

She glances up at the other fresh ink on my neck and her small smile fades. "Try not to get anymore, okay dear?"

My shoulders bounce with a forced laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

Satisfied with my response, she leans to the side, doling out a rather sour glance to what I assume is my babysitter, Ashlynn, lurking in the corner.

"Where's Rylee?" Ethel asks, returning her gaze to the marigold.

"Rylee is with her father."

Fuck. I didn't think saying her name aloud would hurt so bad, but the harpoon jutting from my chest proves otherwise.

"*Hmm.*" Ethel purses her lips. "Well, you tell *Rylee* I say hello when you see her, and make sure to have her stop by one of my cooking classes at the Life Skills Academy when y'all are back permanently."

"The what?"

"The after-school center. Alex held a vote, and we all decided to call it the Life Skills Academy. He told us the entire thing was Rylee's idea, too. I hope you're proud of that amazing woman."

I rub the center of my chest. "Very."

Ethel takes one more narrow-eyed look at Ashlynn. "All right, dear. I'll let you get on with your day, but you take care of yourself. Thank you again for everything you've done for my Jimmy."

Ethel's jingling bracelets disappear around the corner of the courthouse hallway, and I finally drop the fake smile I've been forcing all day. I didn't think seeing Ethel, of all people, would be difficult, but being near her brought on a torrent of memories from summer. Now that she's gone, it feels like the only shred of home I've held in weeks was ripped away.

I take one step to follow her but stop when soft footsteps click on the tile behind me.

“You can’t run off on your own,” Ashlynn says. “It’s not worth it. You remember what happened last month? We both know it’ll be worse if you try to leave again.”

“Remember?” I scoff. “How could I forget?”

The night I decided to go see Rylee and Danny in Boston, Frank stopped me three feet from my door. One second he was reminding me of the consequences for turning my back on my obligations to the Dead Kings, and less than twenty-four hours later, I was in a white van breaking into some rich asshole’s mansion.

Then there’s what happened afterwards.

Don’t get me wrong, Jeffrey Segretto deserved what he got. The self-titled Bankruptcy Baron had more than a few skeletons in his closet—the things he confessed to during the interrogation at my hands was enough to shake even the hardest of criminals—but drowning in your own blood is a rough way to go.

While his death might have been an accident, I don’t think I’ll ever forget the warm viscous liquid spurting from his artery, or the way it splattered across my cheek and chin when Ashlynn mistakenly brought the knife down a little too deep. And I know for a fact I’ll never be able to scrub his last gurgling screams from my memory.

Shockingly, that wasn’t even the worst part of the day. After washing his blood from my hands and face, I’d gone back to my room feeling like the absolute piece of shit I am, only to find new texts from Rylee.

You’re a coward for abandoning your brothers.

You’re a coward for not being able to face me.

I deserve better.

Jack would be ashamed.

I can still hear the echo of her words like she said them to my face.

The thing is, Jack really would be ashamed of me. It's all I can think about each time I do something fucked up for Frank. I've strayed so far from the moral code my father lived by that it feels like I'm betraying his memory.

And Rylee, well, she really does deserve more than a monster, and I *am* a coward for not telling her what's going on.

"Don't worry, Ash, I have nowhere to run off to." I pull out my phone and reread Rylee's messages, reminding myself of the truth of that statement, clinging to the belief that as long as she and my brothers are safe, all this shit is worth it.

Ashlynn frowns. "What time do you need to be back in court tomorrow? Do you have to prepare, or can we grab dinner?"

I slip my phone back into my pocket and adjust the annoyingly tight sleeves of my dress shirt. "Hearing's over. Without Knott to testify, I knocked it out in one day. I have a few post-trial motions to file in the morning, then we can head back to Lockwood. Make sure you tell Frank what a good lapdog I've been."

She shifts her weight onto one leg, stomping her foot in the process. "Come on, Colt, that's not fair. He was going to send someone with you no matter what. I volunteered because I thought it would be better this way, not because I thought you needed me to keep an eye on you."

She reaches for my arm, but I dodge her touch.

"I hate that you're miserable," she says.

"Then why do you go along with all his madness? This is nothing like the plan Jack had for the club. Were you just faking it the whole time?"

"Of course not." Ashlynn eyes the lookie-loos my raised voice garnered the attention of and pushes me toward the door. Once outside, she continues, "He's my father, Colt. What should I have done? Turn my back on him?"

I snort. "For starters, you could've talked him out of threatening Rylee and convinced him not to drag me into this

little scheme. Then, I don't know, maybe burned whatever evidence he plans on using against the Jackals?"

"I already told you, I didn't know he threatened her and I don't know where he's keeping the blackmail." She softens her tone. "But we really do need you. Don't you see what a difference you being here has on the club? You give them hope that what we're doing matters. You fix things that would have gone to shit otherwise. And in a few weeks, when you start fighting for us in the Pit, you're going to give us access to high-level scum we'd never have gotten close to without you."

Christ. She's lost it. Jack should have never let her go back to Lockwood. She's just as far gone as Frank now.

"Why are you shaking your head?" she asks.

"Because for a while I thought it was me who fucked up our friendship. Now I'm questioning if we were ever actually friends to begin with. Was it always about getting close to me and using me?"

Ashlynn takes a step back. "I would never. How could you even think that?"

"Forget it, let's just get this trip over with. I'm sure Frank has a factory to blow up or someone else for me to beat senseless when we get back." I snatch up my helmet and hand Ashlynn hers from the back of the bike.

She hesitates before taking it. "What if we don't go back right away?"

I slam my ass down into the seat, unsure if I want to listen to whatever half-baked plan she's cooking up.

"Dad doesn't expect us back until tomorrow. If we leave now, we can be in Boston and back with more than enough time to file your paperwork at the courthouse in the morning. Dad will be none the wiser, you'll get a chance to see Rylee, and I'll get a chance to prove our friendship is still important to me."

I lift the visor on my helmet, my heart racing so fast it's making my thoughts staticky. "What if I don't come back with you?"

Ashlynn's lips pull tight. "You'll have to. I can't stop Dad from going to Eastmann with the information about Logan, and I honestly don't know where he keeps the Jackal paperwork. A few hours in Boston, back to the courthouse, and then home. That's all I can give you."

I wave my hand in the air, gesturing wildly to the streets and buildings around us. "We're in Marion County, Ash. Eden is twenty miles down that damn road. This is the closest I've been to home in months."

With a fierce, sudden clarity, the falseness of my statement coats me like a bucket of ice. My real home isn't in Eden. It's in Boston with *her*, and with my brothers—wherever the hell they are at the moment.

I run through every possible thing that could go wrong with this plan. My biggest concern that I won't be strong enough to leave Rylee again is easily pushed aside by the fact that I have to protect her from Frank and Eastmann. There is no other option. Especially not with Frank's most recent threat to take out the Jackals. As far as Frank punishing me if he finds out? He was going to do that anyway. What else could he throw at me?

Fuck.

Is this really happening? In just eight short hours I could have Rylee's soft body in my arms... I could tell her how much I love her and beg for her forgiveness. It won't be fair—and I definitely don't deserve it—but I could ask her to keep waiting for me.

I turn the ignition, the engine roaring to life right alongside the beating of my heart. "Hop on."

Ashlynn swings her leg over and tucks into the seat, careful to keep her hands braced on my shoulders.

Rylee, hang on. I'm coming for you. And this time I won't let anything stop me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RYLEE



I WOKE up today feeling like something big was about to happen.

From the moment I opened my eyes there was a tangible current in the air and a tightness in my chest, like my body was warning me to brace for the unexpected.

Naturally, I'd assumed this was a sign from the universe that after a month of failures, I was *finally* going to make some headway with the TA from my Ethical Hacking class. But after five minutes of knocking on the door of the office we arranged to meet at, I'm starting to think that maybe the universe was preparing me to be let down, *again*.

Frantically, I rap my knuckles against the wood, knocking so hard my skin splits open.

"Shit," I yelp, popping the fresh wound into my mouth and kicking the door.

Great. Not only am I bleeding, but it looks like the TA forgot about our meeting, and I'm still no closer to decoding the thumb drive than I was the day Minho and Danny left.

Thanks to the program Minho and I designed, I don't even have to use the supercomputer itself anymore. If I can get close enough, our new Ghost Rider program should be able to download the computer's entire code within a matter of minutes. Which means Minho and I can safely decrypt the Eastmann thumb drive off-site without the added risk of needing to spend hours in the lab. Not that I can actually get into the lab in the first place...

With the government *technically* owning the unfinished supercomputer, there are full-time security guards in and around the experimental labs at all times. Not only is no one allowed in unless accompanied by someone with a badge, but when not in use, the computer is always off, making it impossible for Minhó and I to hack into it. Even if I somehow managed to break into the lab on my own, security would be alerted the second I booted her up to make the copy.

My only option here is to have my TA bring me in on the project or get him to escort me into the room where it's held. The problem is, the man is illusive, and I never seem to be able to catch up with him before he disappears inside.

I've tried everything: making appointments he always cancels; waiting for him outside his own classes; casually walking by the experimental lab in the hopes of catching him on his way to his car.

No fucking luck.

Most recently, I even failed a test knowing it would mean mandatory remediation with the TA. But judging by the fact that he's not here, apparently that's not going to work either.

Through my shirt, I palm the thumb drive hanging from the chain Minhó gave me. The healed lily tattoo on my forearm flexes with the motion, the subtle reminder of Jack's faith in me fortifying my resolve.

I whip around, bringing my fist up to knock one last time, but the door cracks open and my hand freezes midair.

"Jesus," the TA says, ducking away from my balled-up hand to hide behind the doorframe.

"Sorry," I murmur, trying to keep my amusement over his cowering at bay. "I'm Rylee, from Professor Gage's Ethical Hacking class. We have a remediation session today?"

Curly reddish-brown locks and an annoyingly pretentious nose stare back at me from the opening. "I know. I saw it on the schedule," he says, glancing left and right, as if to make sure we're alone.

I step into his line of sight. "Should we get started?"

He leans left, peering down the hallway once more. Apparently satisfied that it's just me out here, he pulls the door open. "My time is limited so let's get this over with."

Forty minutes later, Korey, who finally decided I was worth introducing himself to, lowers my practice test, revealing comically large eyes and a shocked expression. "How in the world did you fail Gage's test? You got every question on this practice sheet correct, including the bonus portion most of the Masters students can't solve."

His brow scrunches, like he doesn't quite understand what he's seeing, and then his gaze narrows accusingly on me.

Shit. There's a chance I did a little *too* well.

"I was super sick on the day of the test," I offer as an explanation. "Professor Gage didn't seem to care that I could barely walk or see the questions I was reading."

Korey's expression softens, so I keep going. "That man would break me if I was his TA. I don't know how you do it." I flutter my lashes in a way that I hope looks like I'm flirting, but probably just looks like I'm having a seizure.

I absolutely hate acting weak and demure, but after weeks of trying to have a conversation with this guy, I can't afford for him to be wary of me. Still, the fake flattery and lies taste sour on my tongue.

Korey glances down at my test one last time and gives me a commiserating nod before taking a seat in the wooden chair next to me. "Gage made me come to the final when I had mono last year, so I get it. He can be a bit of a jerk, but he pays his TAs better than the other professors, and at least you'll come out of his class having learned something. You said your name was Rylee, right? You're the transfer with the sweet ride?"

Bingo. I fucking knew that stupid ass muscle car was my in with this guy.

Korey may have succeeded in evading me over the past few weeks, but during that time, I've been watching him like a hawk. He's intelligent and arrogant, and after digging into his

background, I learned he has a passion for classic cars and he's absolutely horrible with money.

Despite attending MIT on a combination of scholarships and grants, during his undergrad he took out a loan for not one, but *two* old muscle cars—both of which have since been repossessed.

As a grad student, all his free time is spent in the lab, so there wasn't much else to dig up. But after asking around, I was able to find out that since winning the government contract for his computer design, Korey's once thriving social life has taken a massive hit and he hasn't been on a date in over six months.

Here goes nothing.

“Yep, that's me. Listen, I don't want to take up too much of your time, but do you think I could ask you for a favor?”

He makes a cocky *get-on-with-it* motion with his fingers.

You have one shot at this, Rylee. Don't fuck it up.

Dropping my eyes to the table, I curve my shoulders inward. “I'm sure you've seen the bodyguards following me around...”

Korey shifts uncomfortably in his chair. “Yeah, I think we've all seen them.”

“My dad is a little overprotective.” I squeak out an awkward giggle, doing my best to sound apologetic. “He likes to check up on me, and if he knew I failed...well, I don't even want to think about what would happen. Do you think you'd be willing to keep my test score between us?”

I force myself to shudder and lean toward Korey, biting back a laugh at how ridiculous this whole thing is.

Oblivious to my inner struggle, he puffs his chest and places an arm around my chair. “Sure, we can keep this between us. No problem.”

“Thank you,” I coo. “How can I repay you? Do you want to borrow my car or something? You seem like the type of guy who'd appreciate American muscle.”

Is he actually buying this? Because I am about to make myself vomit...

Korey leans back, his arm still draped over my chair. “You’d really let me take her out? That car’s got to be worth at least eighty grand. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. It’s the least I can do after taking up your time like this.”

Korey lets out a low whistle. When his eyes glaze over, I know he’s imagining himself taking the Chevelle for a spin.

Got him.

Then his eyes clear. My stomach plummets as he frowns and scoots his chair away from me. “I just don’t have the time for a joyride right now. Between my job and the lab, I hardly have enough time to eat. I’ll keep your test score a secret, but unfortunately, I can’t take you up on the offer.”

He stands, and I almost reach out to pull him back down into the chair.

“There has to be *something* I can do to thank you?” My offer sounds way more suggestive than I intended, but at least it stops Korey in his tracks. His pupils flare before he drags his eyes across my collarbone and down my chest, his eyebrows raising with what looks like newfound appreciation for the scoop neck sweater I wore today.

“My schedule clears up after Christmas break. How about you swing by the lab the Friday before the new semester starts and I’ll take us out for dinner in that car of yours? Who knows,” he says with a wink, “if you play your cards right, I might even show you what I’ve been working on in the lab. You’ll have to promise to keep it hush-hush, government secrets and all that.”

My pulse pounds as I nod my enthusiastic agreement.

Judging by the goofy smirk that spreads over his cheeks, and by the lingering hug he gives me when we say our goodbyes, I’m not sure which of us is going to have a harder time waiting for our meet up. But I do know the first person I’m going to tell.

CHAPTER TWENTY

RYLEE



ON THE WALK back to my car, not even the students going out of their way to avoid interacting with me can dampen my mood.

The new semester is still two and a half months away, but at least Korey and I have a “date” and I finally have a way into the experimental lab.

I freaking *knew* something exciting was going to happen today.

I shoot Minho a quick update.

Me: I have a way into the lab in January. I'll keep working on getting in sooner.

Minho: Nice. If you already have a safe way in, don't push too hard. After waiting this long, what's a few more weeks anyway? This is a huge win.

Movement in my periphery has me quickly pocketing my phone—which Mac *still* hasn't realized I have. Minho is right. Eastmann has been quiet, and I shouldn't risk messing up our chances by alerting anyone what we're up to. I need to be patient.

Up ahead, another student takes a sharp turn away from me, casting furtive glances at the four Vipers trailing me in the shadows. Although Mac finally agreed to wear street clothes instead of suits, he and my other guards still stand out like sore thumbs. After nearly three months of this charade, I hardly

notice them anymore. I only wish I could say the same thing for the other students.

I stop midstride, suddenly remembering Korey's awkward inspection of the hallway and what he said when I mentioned my guards. *I think we've all seen them.*

Holy shit. It's the damn Vipers. Their intimidating presence must be why Korey avoided me like the plague. How did I not realize this before?

The shadow on my right darts forward, and Mac is at my side in the blink of an eye. "What's wrong?"

I jam my elbow into his kidney, a move he showed me last week when we were working out in the gym. "*You're* what's wrong," I chide, but my voice is too cheerful for him to actually think I'm mad. After finally having something go my way, realizing that he and the other Vipers are the reason I've had such a hard time making friends and cornering my TA doesn't bother me as much as it normally would.

"Ouch. You're not supposed to use my own moves against me, Adder." Mac pats his side like I actually hurt him and grins down at me. "Really, though, why'd you stop?"

He throws an arm over my shoulder and proceeds to walk us down the path. He never takes the fake-boyfriend thing too far, but he has been finding more and more opportunities to touch me in public. *In case Eastmann or anyone else is watching*, he'd said when I'd asked him about it.

At this point, human contact of any sort is kind of comforting, so I haven't brought it up again. I'd never admit it to him, but these small moments together during the walk to my car are almost always the best part of my day.

Actually, everything is a little better when Mac's around. His laid-back nature and easily earned smiles make even my loneliest days more tolerable. And while I still find it baffling that he chooses to work for my father, over the past month we've formed a friendship of sorts. I've come to appreciate his constant company...even if he does torture me at the gym.

I dig my fingers into the soft skin above his collarbone—another move he showed me.

“Ow, stop doing that.”

“I’ll stop when you and your goon squad quit scaring everyone off.” I gesture to the new guy stopping on a dime to sprint away from us. “See what I mean?”

Mac snorts. “They’re intimidated by your beauty and this ridiculous faded-pink tint to your hair. These nerds don’t know how to talk to pretty girls.”

When we pass the experimental lab, the two armed guards at the door straighten, eyeing Mac with caution and mistrust.

Crap.

Having Vipers trail me when I go on my “date” with Korey might prevent him from showing me the lab. I’m going to have to fix that, and if there is one thing I’ve learned about Mac during our new friendship, it’s that honey always works better than vinegar.

“Seriously, you have to admit four intimidating Vipers following my every move is a bit excessive. Everyone is so scared of you guys that I can barely get my TA to tutor me. What if I fail a class?”

He searches my face before rolling his eyes and sighing. “Fine, I’ll talk to the Boss about cutting back.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “*If* you agree to do sprints with me tonight.”

I smile triumphantly. “Deal. I’ve got to check in on Holly and then I’m all yours.”

Mac’s grip on my shoulder tightens, his eyes flaring wide before his brow pinches in confusion.

“What?” I ask.

“*All mine.* This whole fake-boyfriend thing must be going to my head because I’m not gonna lie, I kinda liked the sound of that.” His Irish accent, normally well concealed, leaks through every syllable.

My heart gives a painful thump. “Mac...are you flirting with me?”

He stops midstride, his face ghostly pale. “Oh shit. I think I am. Please don’t tell the Boss.”

Tiny moths take flight in my belly. And as we start walking again, a small light blossoms somewhere deep inside the chasm of my chest.

Today has been the best day I’ve had in weeks.

When we stop at the driver side door of Colto— of *my* Chevy, Mac’s arm is still loosely draped over my shoulder. He’s holding me much closer than he normally does, and there’s a new energy between us that wasn’t there moments ago, like the static charge before a storm.

All of a sudden, I’m *very* aware of his toned body pressed against my side. For some reason, it makes me feel almost shy. I also can’t seem to wipe the smirk from my lips, which, after a month of dwelling over my breakup and struggling to gain access to the supercomputer, is surprisingly nice.

Mac opens the door, his massive hand pushing on the top of my head to shove me into the seat. “Stop smiling, Adder. Don’t let a little harmless flirting go to your head.”

He slams the door with comically exaggerated annoyance, leaving me grinning from ear to ear. Then I turn the keys in the ignition and the air conditioning sends a potent wave of cloves blasting through the cabin, extinguishing any happiness I felt moments before.

To make matters worse, the setting sun chooses that exact moment to refract off the crack Colton left when he punched the window the night of my Jackal loyalty test, making the resin marigold hanging from the rearview mirror light up like a Christmas tree.

I rip the stupid flower from its perch and chuck it into the back seat.

“YOU DIDN’T TELL me *Rick* was going to be here,” I whisper-yell at Holly.

“Yeah, well, now that I’m getting closer to my due date, Dad’s been *hovering constantly*.” She overemphasizes the last two words, adding volume and snark to make sure our father hears it from his bedroom down the hallway. “It’s getting ridiculous. He had the doctor set me up with a meal plan and sleep schedule. He also booked out a private hospital for the delivery, even though I already explained I want a home birth.” She rolls her eyes. “He’s treating me like I’m just an incubator for *his* grandson.”

I give my sister a quick once-over. Her glow has intensified lately, which I guess could be her new diet and pregnancy hormones, but there’s something else different about her that I can’t place. Maybe it’s just the result of being seven months pregnant, but she looks scrunched and uncomfortable.

“Besides Rick’s hovering, are you okay? You seem...*off*.”

Holly nods, running a hand over her belly in a large circular pattern. “I’m fine. Dad’s just different than I remember. Yesterday, I found out he put a hold on most of the projects I started when I was here. He kept a few of them going, but I think that’s more to keep up appearances. I’m not sure how to explain it...but it’s like everything he’s doing is so selfish and calculated. For the life of me, I can’t remember how I ever thought I could do any good here.”

She inhales deeply, her face sagging as she tries to force a smile and fails. “I don’t mean to burden you.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re my sister, if you can’t talk to me about this, who else can you talk to?”

Her gaze drifts briefly over to Mac, then she leans forward, her voice so quiet I have to strain to hear her. “I just don’t know what’s wrong with me. Too much time with the Jackals, maybe? Or maybe I’m not the same person I used to be? Either way, the thing that’s been bothering me the most is Dad working with Charles Eastmann. I know he says it’s to protect us...but I don’t know if I believe him.”

No fucking shit.

“We can leave whenever you want. I’ll take a sabbatical from school and finish later. Just say the word and we’ll go.”

She reaches for my hand, but then her cheeks blanch and her posture abruptly stiffens—like someone remembering they forgot to do an important task. Her eyes dart to the smoke detector above us, and she shakes her head. “Thank you, but I think we should stay for now. Is it getting any easier for you to be here?”

I shrug. “I finally unpacked the rest of my bags and hung up my clothes. That’s something, I guess.”

Her mouth pulls into a tight line. Holly and I haven’t talked about it in detail, but she’s smart enough to discern it was my breakup with Colton that finally drove me to accept I’d be staying in the damn Vipers’ Den for the foreseeable future.

“Are you and Mac at least getting along? Is Dad still making you do the whole fake-dating thing in public?”

My gaze flitters to the door where the man in question is stationed just out of earshot. He crosses his eyes when he catches me, and I smother a laugh. “Yeah, but it’s not so bad. We’re getting along fine now.”

Holly glances over her shoulder. “Good. Try to go easy on him. Mac is a good man, loyal and smart, generous and kind. He’s a freaking golden retriever. People like that are hard to come by. When you do, you have to hold on to them before they slip away.”

We both pause, no doubt thinking of Colton—or I suppose Holly must be thinking of Jeremy.

Either way, I need to steer us both away from that depressing train of thought. “You and Mac were pretty close before you left for Eden?”

Holly shrugs. “I hated him when we first met, but when I started working for Dad, we had to spend a lot of time together. The man grows on you.”

My cheeks heat. “Yeah, I guess he sort of does.”

“Has he told you how he ended up here? Or that Dad wants him to take over the organization?”

I shake my head to hide my shock. “We don’t really talk about anything personal. Mostly he just acts as my boyfriend-bodyguard at school and we work out together.” Holly doesn’t need to get the wrong impression, so I leave out that Mac and I watch movies together every other night and that he’s been teaching me a little self-defense in the gym.

“He and his parents came over from Northern Ireland in the late 90s. They were living in the seediest part of Boston, a territory highly disputed between the Irish and the Italians. They tried to stay out of the turf war but got caught up in it against their will. The Boston Irish refused to work with his mother, whose family had connections to the Ulster Volunteer Force, and the Italians refused to work with anyone of Irish descent. Eventually his parents had to make a choice. Out of options, they formed a crime syndicate of their own.”

My eyes dart from Holly to Mac and then back again.

“Not long after, Dad took over the disputed zone. Mac’s father joined forces with him and quickly moved up the ranks. He basically ran the Vipers while Dad tried to make things work with Mom. Mac’s dad was his right-hand man until the day he died. Renal failure, I think.” Holly smiles fondly at Mac, who shifts on his feet, eyeing us warily as if somehow sensing we’re talking about him. “Mac was thirteen when Dad took him in and raised him like a son.”

I snort. “Sounds about right. Why bother raising your daughters when you can groom a son and heir?”

Her mouth drops open, like she’s about to jump to Rick’s defense, but before she can, a bedroom door slams and the man in question storms into the room.

“Dad, I thought you were changing?” Holly eyes his wrinkled suit, where something dark and red is splattered across his collar.

“Not now,” he huffs, tugging at his tie.

Mac bustles over to the wet bar, taking the tie from my father before pouring scotch from a crystal decanter into a rock glass. Rick snatches the drink and downs it in one go before lowering himself into a white leather chair. “It happened again,” he announces.

“Which account?” Mac implores, much tenser than he was a second before. He remains standing until *his boss* gestures to the other seat.

“The Vermillion account.”

My ears perk up. I know that name... I monitor the Jackals’ siphon on a Vermillion account every single night. Yesterday, I had to alert Minho that someone was digging around, but he’d assured me it was nothing to worry about.

It can’t be the same account, can it?

“No one can trace where the money is going?” Mac asks.

Rick’s expression turns murderous. “Do you think I would —”

“What’s the Vermillion account?” I chime before Rick can tear Mac a new one.

“It doesn’t concern you,” my father snaps at the same time Mac says, “It’s the Sidewinders account we use to launder money from our fighting ring.”

Holly gives me a significant look and clears her throat. “*Someone* has been siphoning money out of the account on and off for years. Our best tech guy can’t figure out where the money is going. Dad’s not sure if the leak is internal or not.”

I suck in my lips, struggling to hide my giddy excitement. It has to be the same account. Which means I’ve been helping the Jackals steal from my own father...and interestingly enough, Holly might have already known.

Rick spares me one glaring glance before returning his attention to Mac. “We need to play this close to the chest. If any of our new associates find out the Pit finances have been compromised, they’ll panic about the possibility of being publicly tied to an illegal fighting ring and gambling. Now

more than ever, I need to keep our payouts minimal. We do that by winning at the Pit.”

In an uncharacteristically caring gesture, my father leans forward and pats Mac’s shoulder. “You’ve proven to everyone you can run the organization. I’ve shown them that I not only trust you with my business dealings but with my own daughter. Now they need to witness what happens when someone stands against you. You need to obliterate the Italian, Russian, and Irish fighters, as well as anyone else who thinks they can challenge us. I need a Viper winner this year. I need you.”

I snort humorlessly, but of course no one notices.

With the added insight from Holly, it’s all too clear to me now. Parading me and Mac around Sidewinders wasn’t actually about protecting me *or* about providing a cover story to give Eastmann. It was about Rick using my situation to his advantage in a calculated move to set Mac up for leadership.

I should have known.

“Mac, I need you one hundred percent on board with this. We can’t show an ounce of weakness. Will you be ready?” my father prompts.

Mac bobs his head, but his shoulders remain stiff and unmoving.

“Good,” Rick says, standing. “Take Rylee back to her room. I need to speak with Holly.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RYLEE



MAC and I ride the glass elevator back to the great room without exchanging a single word. The air between us is uncomfortable, a far cry from the playful demeanor we left campus with.

I take in Mac's slumped shoulders, noting how his head hangs just a little lower than it did a few hours ago. I want to ask him what's wrong, but learning my father expects him to lead the Vipers one day has thrown me for a loop.

I was already struggling to understand how he could act as my father's second, but if Rick trusts Mac to run this place, maybe he and my father are more similar than I thought? My stomach twists. What if the only reason he's been so kind to me was because he needed me pliable?

If Mac's capable of that, then I was wrong about him...*just like I was wrong about Colton.*

The elevator comes to a halt, but when I try to dart out, Mac's arm blocks the exit.

"I didn't know that's why he wanted me to fake date you," he says, sounding dismal. "I *thought* I was helping to protect you because that's what the Boss told me I was doing." We lock eyes. "Rylee, I swear I didn't know he had ulterior motives."

A hundred-pound weight lifts off my shoulders. I actually believe him. *Thank God.*

Ducking under his arm, I exhale a sigh of relief. "Rick uses everything to his advantage. Don't worry about it."

I'm not sure if I fully appreciated it before today, but Mac's been the only speck of light in a very dark time in my life, and the fact that he was caught so off guard by Rick's true nature only endears him to me further.

We file through the great room, avoiding the clusters of rowdy Vipers as best we can along the way. While my steps are lighter, Mac drags his feet, his head angled toward the floor like he's lost in thought.

"So that's what you've been training with Leon for?" I ask, bumping his arm with my shoulder. "To represent the Vipers in the Pit—or whatever it's called?"

"The Boss thinks I need to be seen as a force to be reckoned with." He holds the door to his room open for both of us. "I thought my actions and reputation would be sufficient, but he says in order to lead, I have to take the Pit."

"Is that what you want? To be in charge of the Vipers?" Try as I might, I can't see him in that role. Mac is patient and thoughtful, and while I know he's capable of violence from watching him train, I can't see him being selfish enough to take over Rick's role.

He looks at me for a long minute. "This is all I have. I don't expect you to understand, but after my dad died, the Boss took me and my mother in. He kept her in a nice townhouse on the North End until she passed. Never asked for a dime. *This* is how I repay him."

"You were a kid. You don't owe him anything." I reach out to grab his hand, but before I can, he smashes it over his face and lets out a frustrated grunt. The mannerism reminds me so much of Colton that for one second I'd swear he was in the room with us.

Dammit.

I generally try not to think about my ex at all, which makes the fact that he keeps popping up today incredibly frustrating. It's not a healthy way of coping...but after the initial anger from our breakup faded, not thinking about him is the only way I've been able to keep the deep emptiness at bay. I'm

pretty sure this is called *avoidance* and there's a high risk of it backfiring on me, but for the time being, it's the best I've got.

Mac glances from my face to my outstretched hand, his expression drawn, like he's the one torn up over Colton instead of me. Then he closes his eyes, and when he opens them back up, the look is gone. "Go change. We're still doing sprints tonight, and I want to fit in an extra self-defense session at the gym. I go back to full-time training for the Pit next week, which means our sessions will be shorter. Your upper body strength is still pitiful and I want to get you to the point where you can practice some of these moves on your own."

That's an obvious change of topic if I ever heard one, but I'm not quite ready to let this one go. If he keeps letting himself feel obligated to Rick, my father will continue to take advantage.

"Fine, I'll meet you outside in ten minutes, but we're not done with this conversation. We spend every single day together, it's about time we start talking about the real stuff." I mean for it to come off as fun and playful, but my tone sounds a little accusatory.

An almost hurt look crosses over his face, and I instantly want to explain or take it back, but he shuts the door between us before I get the chance.

AFTER CHANGING, I head to the brick and cobblestone alleyway outside the Den where we start our runs. That same excited current in the air from this morning is back, and all of my senses are firing off at once, making me jittery and a little on edge.

I try to brush off the odd sensation by shaking out my legs and doing a few lunges to loosen up, but that only makes me more hyperaware.

The smell of the harbor at low tide is potent, but the evening breeze carries other scents too, like smoke from the

nearby restaurants and something earthy and a little piney that gives me fleeting images of a forest and an old sycamore tree.

In the distance, the deep rumble of a motorcycle traveling at high speeds echoes off the alley walls. It sounds aggressive and gives me the distinct impression of a freight train barreling straight toward me, but like I did with the forest, I push the image from my mind.

When I reach Mac, he's pacing. It isn't until he turns that I notice the hard set to his posture and the strain in his flexed forearms.

"Are you okay?" I ask cautiously.

"You said you want to talk about the *real stuff*? Let's talk."

I take a step away, unsure what's gotten into him or if I still want to have this talk at all.

"For months now, you've made your disdain for the Vipers clear as day," he says with a wounded laugh. "The things we do and the people we associate with are hard to stomach, I get it, but some of us are doing the best we can with the hand we were dealt. How dare you judge me for playing those cards to my advantage?"

I open my mouth to apologize, but he keeps going.

"Then there are your friends and their little club, which you don't have a problem with. Why do you make an exception for them but not for me?" He looks years younger when he asks. And instead of a thirty-something-year-old, I see a glimpse of the young man my father must have taken in—the one with a mother to take care of and nowhere else to go.

I may have a thousand arguments on the difference between the Jackals and the Vipers, but none of them specifically apply to Mac. As far as I can tell, he might actually fit in well in Eden. Who knows how differently his life would've turned out had Jack been his mentor instead of Rick?

The roar of the approaching motorcycle booms in my skull as I wonder how many of the other Vipers have a similar story.

Instead of trying to show them a different way, I've been content to condemn them with my thoughts.

"You're right, that's not fair of me. I'm sorry." Ashamed, I take another step away from him to create some distance, but he follows.

"And another *ting*," he shouts, his accent on full display. "When are you gonna get over this ex of *yers*? I'm sick of seeing the light go out of *yer* eyes every time you think of him. I thought you were doing better, finally healin' from all the shit that happened before you came here, then that asshole had to go and fuck *yer* head up again." Mac is yelling now and closing the distance between us until he's right up in my face. "He's not even here and he's still hurting you. I *hate* that he's hurting you."

The motorcycle grows louder, the thunderous rattle of its engine nearly drowning out the shrill beat of my heart. Mac's demeanor softens and I shiver as he runs a gentle hand down the length of my arm.

An odd tugging sensation in my chest seems to be pulling me backward, toward the rumbling sound at the head of the alleyway, but with Mac's hand on my arm I can't move. More importantly, I don't know if I *want* to move. It's nice to be touched; to feel *anything* other than emptiness.

His tone softens further, and goose bumps erupt under his caressing thumb. "I've been the one left behind before. You can't stay stuck in the past thinking about what you could have had while the rest of the world passes you by. You don't have to do this alone," he whispers into the night.

His voice is low and sultry, and it makes the thoughts in my head all muddled. I lift my eyes to meet his. "W-what do you mean?"

The rumble of the motorcycle draws closer, and despite the already limited space between us, so does Mac.

He grabs my hand and places it over his racing heart. "Do you feel that? Before I met you, I forgot what it felt like to have my heart race. I don't know what this thing is between

us, but you reminded me that there's more to life than violence and greed. You reminded me there's still good in the world. Give me the chance to do the same for you."

Somewhere close behind me, the motorcycle revs its engine. The sound is ear-splitting as it echoes in the narrow alleyway until the engine finally cuts out. The sharp scent of motor oil invades the air around me. Whoever this jerk is, he's parked so close to us that I can hear his kickstand locking into place.

I try to turn my head toward the rider, but Mac, who hasn't bothered to look down the alleyway, stops me with a soft hand in my hair. "I'm right here."

Motorcycle temporarily forgotten, my attention falls on the man in front of me. Something inside my chest awakens, pinching and fluttering in a way that's both painful and a little thrilling.

Despite the footsteps behind me and the fact that every fiber in my body is telling me to turn around and find out who is in this alleyway with us, I force myself to take a mental step back and really look at Mac.

Since I came to Boston, he's been nothing but kind and attentive. He's ridiculously handsome and, most importantly, he's been there for me. When I needed someone the most, it was Mac bringing me a hamburger, Mac accompanying me to meet Charles Eastmann, and Mac spending his free time with me at the gym or in a movie marathon. If I'm ever going to move on, shouldn't it be with someone like him?

His heart-shaped lips part. "We could be good together. I know you see it." His voice sends shivers down my spine, and after months of darkness, I'm struggling to remember if this feeling is lust or fear. I close my eyes to see if it helps, but the only thing I can concentrate on is the tug in my chest pulling me backward.

When I open my eyes, Mac's lips are impossibly close. My heart thuds as his nose brushes across my cheek. I tell myself to turn away, but I can't, and before I fully understand what's happening, his mouth is capturing mine.

Mac's kiss is soft and patient, and after a moment of standing there like a dead fish, I finally bring my hands up to his chest and kiss him back.

It's different from anything I've experienced before. Gentle and unhurried, so delicate it makes his full lips feel pillowy and silken. Part of me craves for him to be rougher, to slam me up against the wall and deepen the kiss until I can't think clearly, but another part of me appreciates how cautiously he's moving.

He increases the pressure of his mouth against mine, running his tongue across my lower lip and tilting his head, and as I do the same, the cavity in my chest begins to fill with something foreign, something liquid and bright that almost feels like hope.

All too soon the feeling dampens, making room for doubt to cram its way between Mac and I.

Is it too soon after having my heart pulverized to be kissing someone else?

Why isn't there any of the mindless passion I had with Colton?

Am I broken?

Every kiss I ever shared with Colton flashes through my mind like a tortuous highlight reel. I squeeze my eyes shut against the assault, doubling my efforts into Mac. I run my hand through his short hair and make little noises of appreciation, but it's mechanical, and after a few fumbling attempts to heat things up, I somehow manage to clank our teeth together.

He laughs huskily, smiling against my lips and urging me to keep going with a soft hand on the back of my head. "It's okay."

I regroup and move to change our angle, but this time our foreheads bang together. Hard.

We pull a few inches apart, me holding my mouth and Mac holding his head.

“I’ll admit, that didn’t go like I thought it would,” he says, his chest bouncing with silent laughter. But his bright eyes never leave mine, even as he smiles and places his palm against his lips to check for blood.

“No, it really didn’t,” I agree a second before bursting into laughter. The kiss was so bad it’s comical. Despite the fumbling mess, Mac doesn’t appear the least bit upset. Actually, he’s smiling again.

There’s some sort of commotion going on behind us, a woman’s voice yelling for someone to calm down, but I am too embarrassed to turn and look. When the motorcycle roars back to life, my embarrassment morphs into annoyance.

What’s this dickhead’s freaking deal?

I’m about to turn and yell at the jerk when Mac’s soft laughter draws my attention. “We have plenty of time to figure this all out. But I definitely don’t feel like doing sprints anymore. Do you want to watch a movie instead?”

The motorcycle peels out of the alleyway like an angry beast, the tugging sensation around my ribs finally dissipating as it speeds away.

I bring my eyes to Mac’s. “Yeah, a movie sounds nice.”

Walking hand in hand toward the Den, I pause in the doorway, looking back into the alley and then up into the starless sky while the sound of the furious engine retreats into the night.

A sharp pain rips through the center of my chest and then it’s gone.

I knew something big was going to happen today, I just had no idea that something was going to be Mac.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

COLTON



TWO AND A HALF months of pining for my girl—two and a half *fucking* months of selling my soul to protect her—only to find her in the arms of someone else?

I should turn around and slaughter the motherfucker who had his hands all over her.

Hell, I almost killed him on the spot...but then Rylee laughed, and the sound broke something inside me.

I had to get out of there.

Fuck.

No matter how fast I drive, no matter how much distance I put between me and Boston, I can't seem to take a full breath.

Now I'm nauseous and the world has this awful blood-red tinge to it.

"*FUCK!*" I scream out into the night, the wind ripping the anguish from my lungs and tossing it into the black sky.

If Ashlynn wasn't on the back of this bike, I'd drive it right off a fucking cliff.

Instead, I floor it, cranking the throttle until the bindings rattle from my speed.

"Colt, slow down," Ashlynn pleads, although I can barely hear her over the sound of the wind racing past.

I ignore her.

“Colt,” she screams again. “I’m sure it wasn’t what it looked like. Go back and talk to her. She has—”

“Shut the fuck up, Ash, or so help me God, I’ll put this bike down.”

The threat of death seems to do the trick because she tightens her grip and ducks her head behind my shoulders to reduce the impact of the wind.

Finally, some quiet...

Fuck. Now it’s *too* quiet and the whole thing is just playing over again in my head.

The worst part is, it’s my own fucking fault. Minho said I would lose her, and that’s exactly what happened.

Everything is so beyond fucked.

Without Rylee, what else is there for me to live for? How do I keep going with the Dead Kings knowing there’s no light at the end of the tunnel?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

I accelerate, moving so fast I can smell the burnt rubber of my tires.

As soon as we’re far enough away that the lights of the past three cities are only a dim flicker in my rearview mirror, I pull over at a dive bar, spraying gravel and dirt onto the nearby cars.

Ashlynn trembles as she scrambles off the back of the bike. “What a-are you doing? Why d-did we stop?”

The raucous sound of clinking glasses and drunken laughter from inside the bar ring out into the desolate night. I toss my helmet at her feet. “We stopped because I need a fucking drink.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RYLEE



SOME MORNINGS you don't have to open your eyes to know it's going to be a horrible day. For starters, my mattress is lumpy, I'm way too sweaty, and my sheet is wrapped so tightly around my body it's like I'm trapped in one of those mummy sleeping bags.

The only thing about this morning that feels somewhat normal is that, once again, I was woken up by that stupid bird tweeting her freaking beak off. Intent on throwing something to shut the feathered demon up, I flip over and roughly jam my hand under the large pillow at my side, startling when it moves.

"*Ack,*" Mac mumbles groggily with his heaviest Irish accent yet.

I freeze, his voice jarring me fully awake.

Bergamot and fresh laundry floods my senses, but when my eyes rip open to take in my surroundings, it's too dark to see much of anything. We're not touching, but I can feel Mac's grounding presence in front of me—solid and comforting.

"I've heard you scream in your sleep before," he says through a yawn, "but punching too? If I'd known that, I wouldn't have let you stay."

It takes me a minute to recall the events of last night. The fumbling kiss, Mac and I curling up on the couch to watch a movie, him falling asleep ten minutes in...and me sitting in the dark for the majority of the night, unable to concentrate on

anything except for the feeling of being a human piece of garbage, which is beyond asinine.

This is exactly what's supposed to happen. You get dumped. You find someone new and amazing. You move on. *You heal.*

The problem is, instead of mending, I feel guilty for kissing Mac. I am aware that it's ridiculous and a little pathetic—Colton left *me*, and it's been months since I've seen him—but nevertheless, the emotion is there.

I should be happy I am living my life and exploring the idea of someone else, but am I really moving on if the overwhelming emotion I feel is a deep ache? Shouldn't the small ember of excitement from kissing Mac be pushing out the darkness? Is it fair to Mac to move forward if it's not?

Ugh. I shouldn't have let myself stay up most of the night dwelling on this because now I'm all in my head over what to do.

I place my hand on Mac's shoulder. "I think we should talk."

His chest slowly deflates as he exhales. "You need time."

There is no judgment in his tone, only understanding, and an immense sense of relief douses the worried cinders stoking in my belly.

"There's just so much going on up here," I slide my palm down his arm and grab his hand, moving it up to my temple before bringing it to the space over my heart, "and in here."

My pulse beats steadily against his palm, the pressure of his hand alleviating some of the ache inside. "It's not fair for me to be with you and still be thinking of someone else." He starts to pull his hand away, but I press it more firmly to my chest. "I don't *want* to be thinking of him."

"I understand." Mac takes a deep breath. "What do you need from me? Space? A new room?"

Troubled thoughts and shitty mattress aside, it was nice not to be alone last night. I enjoy my close proximity with Mac,

and the idea of a new room or returning to my empty one sends a jolt of panic up my spine. “No. I like this, and I like being here with you, if that’s okay?”

Mac yawns and settles back into his pillow. “You can sleep here as often as you want.”

My heart rate kicks up a notch. It would be such a relief to wake up next to someone when a nightmare rips me from slumber. “Are you sure? Is this enough for you?” I hesitate, uncertain if I’m asking too much of him.

He keeps holding my hand but moves it into the space between us. “It’s more than enough. I know I came on strong last night, but I’m a simple guy, and I really can respect that you’re not ready. If that changes, I’d like to be the first to know, but until then, I’m content with this.”

I smile, feeling a little less guilty already.

Mac acts so differently around Rick and the others. Cold, hard, emotionless even, but this version of him—what I think might be the *real* him—is far better to me than I deserve.

“I can hear you thinking,” he says at my silence.

“Are you happy here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes it’s like you’re two different people—the person you are with Rick and then the person you are with me and Holly.” Pausing, I try to come up with an example. “Every time we walk into the great room, it’s clear the other Vipers fear and respect you. But when you’re with me it’s like this...” I squeeze his hand. “You understand what I’m saying, right?”

“You calling me a softy, Adder?”

“No, of course not. I mean...I guess I kind of am, but in a good way.”

He sighs and rolls onto his back. “The Boss thinks I’m *too* soft. He said he’ll replace me with Leon if I don’t perform well in the Pit this season.”

The incessant chirping of a bird outside his window fills the heavy silence until I muster the courage to ask, “Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Leon and I came up together. He doesn’t want to be second-in-command, and he definitely doesn’t want to run this organization one day.”

I can’t tell if he purposely misunderstood the question, so I try again. “But is that what *you* want?”

Now that my eyes have acclimated, I can just make out Mac’s faint outline as he turns back over to face me. “The only thing I want is to stay in this room all day.”

There is a sharpness to his tone that lets me know it’s time to drop my line of questioning. It was nice to worry about someone else’s problems for a minute instead of my own, but I have to respect his subtle request.

I scoot closer to him and burrow into the sheets. Even though his body heat quells the emptiness in my chest, the tweeting from the window has somehow amplified, and there is no way I could fall back asleep now. “Staying in bed sounds nice. If it wasn’t for that god-awful bird making all that noise, I think I’d have to take you up on your offer. Why is the chirping so much louder in your room than it is in mine?”

“Are you talking about my summer sparrow?”

“Your *what?*”

“Let me show you.” He pulls the covers off, and a moment later light pours in from the now-open curtains.

I shield my eyes, blinking until I adjust to the brightness enough to see Mac peering at the upper corner of his window. He gestures for me to join him.

Still in my running clothes from last night, I crawl out from the sheets, wrapping my arms around my shoulders to ward off the chill as I make my way over.

With a ridiculous grin on his face, he points toward a plump brown bird perched atop a tiny birdhouse roof. When the tiny thing sees us, her head cocks to the side before she

resumes her song. While the melody makes me want to cover my ears, it makes Mac's smile grow.

"She started coming five years ago. We had a horrible storm that summer that knocked down her nest. I bought a birdhouse, placed the nest inside, and now she comes back every May to lay her eggs and brighten each of my summer mornings. It's my favorite part of the whole year."

I'm half tempted to tell him birds don't live very long and it's likely a different bird every time, but instead I opt for being supportive. "She's beautiful. Shouldn't she be headed south soon? Are you going to be sad when she leaves?"

"This is the latest she's ever stayed. I think she knew *someone* needed a little brightness in their life." He looks down at me pointedly. "But yeah, I suspect she'll be headed south any day now. And to answer your other question, no. I get her for the summer and that's it. It's not like she was mine to keep in the first place, so I don't let the fact that she's gone taint the times she made me smile. What kind of life would that be, if I only dwelled on the things I lost?"

My chest hitches as images of Colton's sun-drenched face tear through my memory.

He was mine for the season, but never mine to keep.

My summer sparrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

RYLEE



Ten Weeks Later

Early January

JEREMY JACK “JJ” Alvarez was born on a misty December morning.

He came into this world kicking and screaming, which Holly said was only fitting because that’s exactly how his father lived his life.

Actually, the very first thing she said was how much JJ looked like Jeremy, but all I saw was Jack.

I was initially nervous the resemblance would send her spiraling, but it was the opposite. She’d kissed his tiny button nose, and as he wailed up at her with his pink little mouth, I saw the fragile fibers of her heart stitching themselves back together.

It was beautiful, and Holly letting me be a part of his birth mended some of the frayed edges of our own relationship as well.

Much to Rick’s disapproval, my sister got her home birth—smack-dab in the middle of the penthouse living room. He was graciously absent, and Holly, aided by the midwife and I, was able to bring JJ into a peaceful, welcoming environment, despite the fact that he was literally born on top of a criminal empire.

Mac was there too, standing by the door with his back to us. He was the third person to hold JJ and I’ve never seen a

grown man melt so fast in my life. My lips curve into a smile just thinking about the joy on his face as he stared down at my nephew.

It's been almost three weeks since that foggy morning when JJ brightened our world; three weeks since Holly or I got any sleep. Thankfully, I'm still on winter break.

Every morning after monitoring the Jackal siphons and assisting Minho with any new issues, I go straight to the penthouse to help Holly. I make lunch and watch JJ while she showers, and we spend the next few hours together until Mac borrows me for a run or a short workout in the gym, then I go right back up and make dinner.

Mac absolutely dotes on JJ, bringing him new toys he's not nearly old enough to play with—like a frog plushie that's almost as big as my nephew himself—and carrying him around like they're attached at the hip.

Each time I catch sight of them, I find myself grateful for my Viper bodyguard's presence and his patience. Lord knows Holly and I don't have an ounce of it, and JJ needs a male role model.

Mac is perfect. He's everything I should want in a man. Hell, if I'm honest, even the fact that he's a Viper makes him more appealing. It means I never have to explain my weird relationship with Rick to him or try to hide my association with the Jackals. This is his world too, and he already understands those things implicitly. But after weeks of sharing the same bed almost every night, we still haven't gone further. We haven't even kissed again.

It has to be grating on him, being so physically close while I keep him emotionally at arm's length, but if it bothers him, he never lets on.

With the Pit now open, Mac's been busy with training or out of town for the occasional fight, which are apparently held all over the eastern seaboard. He always returns victorious, albeit bruised, but I suspect the weight of my father's expectations are taking a toll on him.

Today, for instance, after his sparring session with Leon, he walked into the penthouse sporting a brand-new black eye. After bouncing JJ on his knee for a minute—and without ever touching the sandwich I made for him—he proceeded to promptly fall asleep, my nephew still curled safely in his arms.

The two of them have been zonked out for an hour now. Something about the adorable situation is making Holly uneasy, but neither of us have had the heart to wake them.

“What were you saying?” she asks, turning away from the dozing duo and refocusing her attention on me.

“I was just explaining how companies pay big bucks for experts to come in and test their systems for weaknesses, but I was able to do it as part of my course curriculum,” I say with a sigh.

She was the one who asked me about how hacking could ever become a real career in the first place, and I try not to sound annoyed as I repeat myself. “I was the only one in the class who broke through the security walls of every single organization that volunteered.”

“And these companies just let you do this?”

“They beg us to, and why wouldn’t they? We figure out how their systems work, determine where they’re vulnerable, and provide feedback. And, because we’re students, we do it for free. They’re stronger because they willingly seek out their weaknesses and eliminate them.” I lean back, a grin tugging at my cheeks. “Therein lies the true brilliance of ethical hacking—we do the *wrong* thing for the *right* reason.”

“There was a lot of *we* in that sentence, Ry. It sounds like you have significantly more experience than someone who hasn’t even started their second semester at MIT should.” She scans the exposed surfaces of my skin, which are limited due to the chilly winter weather. “Do you have a jackal tattoo you’re not showing me?”

I frown. “Just the dove. Same as you.”

She hums, and then returns her attention to JJ and Mac.

I roll my eyes. “Do you want me to go grab him?”

She nods a little too enthusiastically, and when I return my nephew to her arms after cautiously extracting him from Mac's, she visibly relaxes.

“You know Mac would die to protect that baby, right?”

“Of course I do,” she says sharply. “It's just that JJ looks more and more like his father every day, and seeing him next to Mac is confusing. Those two worlds have never collided for me before, and knowing how much Jeremy disapproved of this place and how much he would have hated us being here is making it difficult for me to justify staying under Dad's roof.”

Not knowing how else to respond, I nod. Since JJ's birth, Holly's been uncomfortable in the penthouse. To my knowledge, she's only let Rick touch his grandson once, and that was because she fell asleep on the couch and didn't wake up in time to stop him.

I've been mulling over ways to bring this up with her, but I guess there's no time like the present. “I was talking to Alex last week. He thinks the Jackals will be heading back to Eden soon. Knott's death was ruled an accidental overdose months ago, and with the exception of the creep Mac caught trailing me on our run, even Eastmann has been quiet for a few weeks... We could go back.”

“I don't want to go back,” Holly says so forcefully it echoes off the marble floors. “At least not long term.” My heart sinks, but then she glances at the smoke detector on the ceiling and leans closer to me, whispering, “Do you have a Jackal phone on you?”

I hesitate, unsure if I should lie or not, but she *is* my sister. I reach into my boot and hand the cell to her. Tilting the screen so I can watch, she taps on the Ghost Rider program and opens an app I've never used before.

“This is a signal jammer,” she explains. “Dad has mics all over the place, but before you freak out, the computer Minhó gave you has a jammer running constantly. He does it with every PC he builds.”

I stare at her, slack-jawed.

“Listen, we don’t have long.” She gives Mac a sidelong glance to ensure he’s still sleeping. “Something weird is going on. I’ve only picked up on bits and pieces, but from what I’ve gathered, Dad thinks the Feds are building a case against him for the payoffs he made to get Sidewinders up and running. More than likely, that’s just an excuse to get them in the door. Once they’re in, Dad will be brought up on extortion, murder, and a bunch of other charges. Everyone here will be implicated.”

Holly rocks JJ. “If this blows up, we need to be ready to go at the drop of a hat. You still have a year and a half left of school, but—”

I laugh. “I can always finish later or switch to an online university. We should be somewhere we feel safe. Why wait? Let’s go now.”

The thumb drive on my neck grows heavy. *Dammit*. I can’t leave yet—not when I’m meeting with Korey the day after tomorrow. “Actually, I have a few things I need to finish up here first, but I can meet up with you in a week or two?”

She shakes her head. “Let’s wait it out, but if shit goes south and we’re separated, we can meet in Eden and decide where to go from there.”

HOLLY AND JJ go to bed shortly after dinner, but instead of heading down to my room, I opt for dimming the lights and letting Mac sleep while I clean the kitchen and mull over the conversation with my sister.

If we do have to flee, would I warn Mac before we left? Would he try to stop us?

My gut tells me he’d do whatever was best for me, JJ, and my sister, but I can’t know for certain.

After finishing up in the kitchen, I hover in the dining room, watching the slow rise and fall of Mac’s powerful chest.

He's packed on even more muscle during the past few weeks of training, and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't noticed. He looks good—*like really good*—and the way his sleeves are rolled up over his forearms, exposing his corded muscles and coiled viper tattoo, has me wondering what it would be like to be wrapped up in those arms.

My gaze travels to his slightly parted mouth, lingering at the sight of his full lips on prominent display. I bring the pad of my pointer finger to my own lips, trying to imagine melding them with his. The thought isn't unpleasant. There is confusion there, sure, but also curiosity and a spark of excitement that quickens my pulse.

What if it was too soon the first time? Don't I owe it to both of us to try again? Maybe the trick is going all in. No more stolen touches during a movie, no lingering hugs or soft kisses to the forehead.

All in.

Next thing I know, I'm walking towards the couch.

My knees sink into the stark-white sofa on either side of his legs as I straddle him and lower myself onto his lap. He doesn't wake.

"Mac," I whisper against his ear.

"*Hmm?*" His hands stir first, finding their way to my thighs. My pulse skips a beat.

"Maaac," I murmur again.

With his eyes still closed, a lazy smile spreads over his cheeks. "Adder, I don't know if you noticed, but *yer* sittin' on top of me."

"I noticed." My husky voice sounds sultry and suggestive, but really I'm just nervous.

Mac's muscles tense beneath me and his eyes crack open. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

I answer by settling more of my weight into his lap and grabbing his hands, sliding them around my waist. "Is the offer you made in the alleyway still open?" I bite my lip.

“You know it is.”

“Then yes, this means what you think it means.”

“Thank God.” He leans up and kisses my neck, his grip lowering to my hips and tightening as he slams our chests together for better access. Outside of the gym, it’s the roughest he’s ever been with me, and that tiny show of dominance sends a zing racing down my spine.

His tongue darts out to trail across my pulse, and I moan softly.

Mac smiles against my neck at my response, his teeth grazing my skin in a way that makes me wish he’d bite down. He doesn’t, but my disappointment is quickly erased when his hands slide under my shirt and up the bare skin of my back.

All in, Rylee.

Breath heavy, I inch my lips toward his, my insides trembling with anticipation. Footsteps sound from the hallway and our heads snap in their direction. I’ve barely registered the noise when Mac extricates himself out from under me and darts away so abruptly that he’s resumed his usual position by the door before my ass lands on the cushion.

I blink as blinding light illuminates the penthouse and my sister standing by the switch, her eyes volleying between Mac and me.

Holy shit. What was I thinking doing this in Rick’s living room? Holly just finished telling me about the listening devices up here, and Mac would be in serious trouble if anyone besides my sister had walked in on us...

“Is everything okay, Holls? Did JJ wake up?”

She stares long and hard at Mac before her eyes settle back on me. “Dad called my landline trying to get a hold of Mac. I figured he was still sleeping out here—”

“The Boss needs to see me?” Mac almost sounds nervous and my brow quirks in confusion. Holly would never rat us out, so what’s got him all worked up? And why are his cheeks so red?

“He actually requested both of you in his office. It’s something about Eastmann.” Holly turns to walk back to her room, casting each of us a tentative glance over her shoulder before departing.

As soon as she’s out of sight, Mac lets out a long exhale. I walk to his side, but he doesn’t put an arm around me like he usually does.

“Let’s go,” he says, sounding a bit too eager for my comfort as he pushes open the door. “It’s never a good idea to keep the Boss waiting.”

My stomach twists in a tangle of uncertainty. “Yeah, okay.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

RYLEE



THE RIDE to Rick's office is hands down the most awkward almost-caught-dry-humping interaction I've ever had. Possibly the only one, but that doesn't make it any less awful.

Standing next to Mac in the close confines of the elevator and not talking or touching is making me fidgety.

Did I come on too strong?

He seemed into it... Maybe I'm the one making this weird?

Once the elevator doors open and we've made our way down the hall, Mac pauses to straighten his suit. Instead of waiting for him, I march past, blowing through the double doors like I own the place and leaving Mac to scramble into the office after me.

Rick is sitting at his ornate desk, his appearance significantly more disheveled than usual. Several errant strands of his normally perfect pompadour are hanging limply to one side and his tie is askew, like he's been tugging at it. Much to my surprise, he's also not alone. Cherry is here too, looking absolutely miserable as she reclines on a chaise in front of a full wall of security camera feeds.

Her once vibrant electric-blue hair is now a fried shade of blonde, and she's wearing an extremely provocative black dress that's wrinkled at the sides—like it was recently hiked up around her waist and hastily shoved back into place. The racy outfit is nothing like what she wore the first time we met, and her expression is so vacant that I hardly recognize her.

Something bitter coats my tongue.

While there's nothing wrong with dressing however you want to or doing whatever the hell you want with your body, that's *only* if the people participating in either activity are consenting. Something tells me Cherry didn't choose Rick for herself, the same way she definitely didn't pick out her outfit.

I try to catch her eye but she ignores me.

"Cherry, give us a minute," Rick orders.

A momentary flash of bright-eyed relief passes over her otherwise bland expression, and as she makes her exit, the only thing that stops me from going after her is the tiny wink she gives me when she passes by.

As soon as the door closes behind her, I whirl on my father. "Keeping women against their will and forcing them to have sex with you is called rape, Rick."

"*Fuck*," Mac chokes out, unsuccessfully attempting to cover up his reaction with a cough.

My father ignores him, casting an annoyed glance in my direction. "Cherry is one of my employees. I pay her to— Wait, why am I explaining myself to you? We have things to discuss and Mac needs to rest before his fight tomorrow."

That's right, I almost forgot. Don't fighters usually abstain from sexual activity before big matches? *And here I was trying to seduce him...*

"I called you here because tomorrow is our first home territory fight of the season. Rylee, this means you'll need to be there," my father says, garnering my full attention. "I've also received word that Charles Eastmann will be in attendance, so I expect you to be on your best behavior."

"Absolutely not." I cross my arms over my chest and scoff in disbelief. "Why would I ever agree to be in the same room as that evil man again? And as my *father*, why would you subject me to that?"

Rick vibrates with poorly concealed anger. "You will go or you'll lose access to the penthouse."

I rear back. "What does that mean?"

“You are my daughter, and as such you’re expected to make certain appearances. I would also remind you that as part of your alibi, we set the narrative that you and Mac are seeing each other. If you like spending time with your sister and nephew, then you’ll be at the Pit tomorrow to support him. Otherwise, you won’t be allowed to see your sister. End of discussion.”

Mac shifts beside me but doesn’t say a word.

I stare my father down, but he glares right back. Fuming, I scramble to come up with a way out of this, but Holly can’t risk being seen and there’s no one in this building that will go against Rick’s orders. She needs my help with JJ right now, which means Rick has me cornered.

“Fine, I’ll go.”

He rifles through a drawer, looking rather pleased with himself. “Excellent. That’s all I needed. You’re dismissed.”

My tongue burns with the fierce desire to snap back at him, but sometimes revenge is a dish best served cold. I’ll go to this fucking fight, but I’m going to make damn sure Rick regrets threatening me into cooperation.

Once in the hallway, I head for Cherry, who’s leaning against the wall by the elevator.

“I’ve never seen anyone walk out of the Boss’s office with a smile that big before,” she says at my approach. “Either you’ve lost your mind or you’ve got something up your sleeve.”

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder, making sure Mac’s out of earshot. Thankfully, he’s still in the office talking to Rick. “My *father* just blackmailed me into something I’m less than excited about. I agreed to it, but I never said I’d go quietly.”

A coy smile blossoms over Cherry’s ruby lips. “Well then, if you’re going to give him hell we might as well make sure you look good doing it. Fill me in.”

THE NEXT EVENING, twenty murdered-out SUVs are parked out front of the high-rise. Their black paint, black chrome, and blacked out windows make for quite the imposing motorcade.

We could have easily left from the underground parking structure, but despite the stealthy appearance of the vehicles, it's almost like Rick wants to be seen. It's completely unnecessary and a blatant—

“It's a show of force,” Mac says, placing a hand on my lower back and guiding me toward one of the SUV limousines in the middle. My steps falter as I wonder if the touch is because he wants to or because my father ordered him to act like my boyfriend when we're in public.

His fingers splay, the pressure increasing with each step toward our idling ride. “It's important for the Boss to show up to these things looking powerful and respected.”

Pushing aside the thoughts of how this is the first time Mac's touched or spoken to me since Holly walked in on us last night, I take another quick glance at the cars and the army of Vipers coming with us. I shake my head. My father has no idea what real influence looks like.

My mind drifts to Jack, to his beat-up pickup truck and the way he commanded a room without saying a word. True power isn't loud or forced, it's quiet and understated.

Dressed head to toe in cream, except for the gold viper cufflinks adorning his dress shirt, Rick carves a path from the front door to the motorcade, passing up our car for the G-Wagon in front of us and thankfully sparing me from spending any more time with him than absolutely necessary. But this also means Mac and I will be traveling in our ride *alone*, which gives me more pause today than it would've yesterday.

Cherry and I spent the evening refreshing my pink hair and planning out an outfit for tonight. By the time I crawled into

bed, Mac was already asleep...or *pretending* to be asleep. I'm almost positive he was just trying to avoid me, but I don't understand why.

Wrapping my borrowed oversized coat tighter around my shoulders, I climb inside the car with Mac right on my tail. When our ride lurches forward and the partition wall closes to separate us from the driver and guard, he unbuttons his jacket and slinks down into his black leather seat. His muscles remain tense, but his face sags the second we're safely out of sight of the Vipers up front.

He looks exhausted and a little anxious.

Maybe I've been overthinking this whole thing... Doesn't he at least deserve the benefit of the doubt? "Are you nervous for the fight?"

He glances at me from the corner of his eye with a drawn, almost weary expression. "Never."

I put my hand on his knee, sliding my thumb back and forth across the fabric of his suit in an attempt to convey my sincerity. "You don't have to pretend with me."

After a long look at the cars passing outside the window, he unclenches his fists and places his hand over mine. "Sorry, force of habit. The Boss laid into me pretty hard after you left his office about the importance of tonight. I have to win, but not knowing who I'm fighting ahead of time makes it difficult to prepare mentally, you know?"

I don't know, but while I have zero interest in Rick's violent circus, I want to support Mac. And at least he's talking to me normally again. "How does it all work?" I ask to keep him going. "If you don't know who you're fighting in advance, who does?"

"Jesus, Adder. If I don't have to put up a brave front, then neither do you. I was there, I know the Boss is forcing you to do this." He leans back, staring at the dark sky through the moonroof while shaking his head. "And I just stood there and let him coerce you. I was so ashamed, I couldn't even look at

you when you came to bed last night... How pathetic is that? Maybe I really am soft.”

Just like that, the tightness leaves my muscles. “Rick has that effect on everyone. Even though I didn’t want to come, that doesn’t mean we can’t make the best of it. I’m excited to see you fight.” I squeeze his hand and he squeezes mine back, his eyes lighting up.

“Good, because I’m excited to have you with me.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks, and I scoot closer, pressing myself into his side. My overly large coat falls open with the movement, and Mac’s eyes turn to saucers when he sees what I have on underneath.

“Holy hell... What are you wearing? Is that—”

I smirk. “Cherry’s dress from last night? Sure is. Look, it has a secret pocket near the bust line.”

Mac looks both turned on and shell-shocked as his eyes travel the very short length of the dress, hovering on my cleavage.

He draws in his lower lip and bites down. “The Boss is going to lose his goddamn mind,” he says, reaching out to touch the fabric.

Then he cringes. “I hope you washed it.”

I did, *twice*, but I don’t want to think about that right now. Mac needs a way to relax and I could use a confidence booster before I’m thrown into the Viper Pit to confront Eastmann again. I grab his hand and bring it to my waist. “Is that what you want to talk about?”

“No. Not really. Open your coat a little more,” he says breathlessly.

I take the whole thing off, revealing the sheer corset-topped dress that fits me more snugly than it did its previous wearer in a way that only adds to the allure.

While the noir gossamer appears almost translucent, the cups are triple lined and the skirt has some creative ruching so

you can't actually see my lady bits. At first glance, though, you think you can—which I'm pretty sure is the entire point.

I don't know how Cherry felt in this dress, especially since she confirmed Rick bought it for her and insisted she wear it, but I feel like an absolute vixen. The miniscule length shows off my dove tattoo beautifully while the delicate boning in the corset gives it structure and makes my tits look freaking awesome. Even the off-the-shoulder sleeves give me an added sense of confidence, like plates of armor.

It also doesn't hurt that Mac can't take his eyes off me when he barely gave Cherry a second glance.

His hand on my waist flexes, and my belly stirs. "I'm gonna have to kill someone tonight. There's no way in hell we'll make it out of the Pit without this dress causin' a *fuckin'* riot." His Irish accent is back with a vengeance, and just like every time he lets it slip, it's like I'm seeing the real Mac. I wish he didn't hide it.

I lower my voice. "It's a good thing someone taught me how to handle myself if anyone gets too handsy. Speaking of handsy..." I run my palm down his muscular thighs and push his knees apart, making room for me as I position myself between them.

We might have been interrupted yesterday, but tonight we have a forty-five-minute drive ahead of us and a privacy screen blocking us from the Vipers in the front seat.

We need this.

I need this.

Partially to make sure I'm still capable of feeling something other than the hole inside my chest and partially because after months of testing the waters, it's about time we jump in with both feet.

Mac leans forward to kiss me, but with my knees on the floor it's too odd of an angle. Instead, he motions me forward, bringing his hands to my hips as I rise, and gently pulls me up to straddle one of his thighs. I can feel the heat of his thick corded muscles through the thin cloth of his dress pants and

the even thinner fabric of my thong. The rich scent of his cologne is intoxicating as I scoot closer to him, my most intimate area grinding across his leg. The friction makes my core clench.

Colton had me in a similar position once. I still remember the way he rocked me back and forth as he teased me, nipping at my lips and ears, kissing my neck, plundering my mouth with his tongue, all the while bouncing his leg and encouraging me to ride his thigh to keep my needy pussy occupied.

Heat rushes to the apex of my thighs and my nipples peak just remembering it.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Why did I let my mind go there? Here I am sitting on the perfect man's lap and I'm stuck thinking about the one who left me? It's shameful.

An overwhelming sense of guilt coats me in a thick sheet of ice.

Mac reaches forward, weaving his hand into my hair. "Where did you go? I lost you for a second there." The heat drains from his expression when I don't immediately answer. "You were thinking about him, weren't you?"

My muscles lock up, but I force myself to be honest. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me or why this is so hard."

He puffs out his cheeks and falls back into the seat with me still sitting on his thigh. "Nothing's wrong with you. You're only one piece of the puzzle here and you're not the only one with uninvited guests in your head. So the better question is, what's wrong with *us*?"

With the exception of last night's odd reaction to almost being caught, I thought it was only me struggling to move forward. But if he's been dealing with ghosts of his own... maybe that explains his saint-like patience with me?

"We're a hot mess." I shrug.

“We sure are something.” Mac’s shoulders bounce with a chuckle and I find myself laughing too.

With the heat of the moment passed, I lean forward and rest my head on his shoulder. Mac wraps my coat around me, taking special care to keep his hands respectfully on my upper back.

When I finally pull away to look him in the eye, he smiles before his face grows serious. “I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you laugh in weeks.” He brushes his finger across the smile line on my cheek, and I lean into his touch.

“Yeah, it felt good. Thank you.”

“Laughing is not my first choice of ways to make you feel good. I’ll wait as long as you need, but I still want to give you more. You deserve more.”

I deserve more—the exact words I said to Colton.

I tear my face from Mac’s hand. How can he still be willing to wait for me to get my shit together? It’s not fair. “I owe you more than—”

“You owe me nothing. If I’ve ever made you think otherwise, then I’m an even bigger ass than I thought.”

“Of course you haven’t. You’ve been perfect.” I grab his face when he tries to look away. “You’re hotter than hell and the sweetest man I’ve ever met...”

“But you’re hung up on someone else,” he finishes for me. “I don’t want to stop trying with you, but I will if that’s what you want.”

How is he being so amazing about this...

A tear spills onto my cheek at the earnestness of his offer. “Part of me wants you to keep trying, but that’s not fair. You’re free to see other people, or have a one-night stand, or do whatever you want with whoever you want while I sort myself out.”

Even though it hurts me to say it, I do mean it. Who knows when I’ll be whole enough to try with someone new. The only thing I know for sure is I can’t keep stringing Mac along.

He laughs, the quiet sound tinged with sadness. “I’m not going to do any of those things, but you’re free to do the same. I won’t be the one to hold you back from being happy. Ever. Even if it’s not with me.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to at least yell at me or something? You’re being way too nice about this. I’ll understand if you want me back in my own room, or if you don’t want to run and work out with me anymore. We can just be seen together when Rick forces us.”

Mac’s brows narrow. “Hold on. Was this whole thing an excuse to get out of working out with me? Am I pushing you *that* hard? I mean, I knew you sucked at fighting, but—”

I recoil. “What? No? Wait, I don’t suck.”

He stares at me long and hard before pinning one of my hands behind my back and the other to my thigh. “Sounds to me like someone is tired of getting their ass kicked.”

I try to pull my arms back, but he holds them in place. “Mac, come on, we’re having a serious conversation.”

“Nah, serious part’s over. We can’t walk into the Pit looking depressed. Show me what you’ve learned. How are you going to get out of this?”

“Are you crazy? We were having a moment,” I shout, squirming to break free of his hold and trying to remove myself from his lap. After a fairly brief struggle, I manage to land an elbow to his ribs and another hit dangerously close to his groin.

“I yield. I yield,” he says, playfully shoving me into the seat next to him. “Cut it out. I have a fight tonight, remember?”

“You started it,” I respond indignantly, doing my best to straighten my dress and make sure my hair still looks okay. I don’t know if he let me get out of that hold so easily on purpose, but I definitely feel better.

He does the same for his own suit and flashes me a dazzling smile. “I’m in your life for the long haul. Nothing has to change between us. We can take it slow or we can be

friends, but we'll figure out the rest together—as long as you stop using my own damn moves against me. Do we have a deal, Adder?”

I smile back at him. “Deal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

COLTON



ASHLYNN STARES at me with a mixture of fear and grief—the only way she ever looks at me since our little trip to Boston.

Her face pinches as she sniffs the air. “Are you seriously drunk again?”

I haven’t had a drink in over twelve hours, but the expensive whiskey I’ve been guzzling courtesy of Frank’s business dealings has a way of seeping into your pores and lingering on your skin long after it’s out of your bloodstream. The good stuff always finds a way of reminding you it’s gone.

“Colt, are you drunk or not?”

“Does it matter? I’ll win this fight either way.” I blink, wishing she’d stop talking.

Frank motions for Ashlynn to step aside. “He’s right, sweetheart. Give it a rest. Eastmann’s here again, and we need Colt on his toes.”

I glance up at the gathering crowd around us. “Why don’t we just shoot him tonight and be done with it? We could smuggle in a gun if we all worked together.”

Charles Eastmann is virtually untouchable, always traveling around with an impenetrable entourage of highly trained security—*except* for when he comes to the Pit. Here, he’s limited by the Viper rules. Here he’s most vulnerable.

It would only take one second—*one bullet*—and I could avenge my parents.

I scan the smoke-filled room, which is full of the worst type of filth, myself included, imagining what it would be like to take Eastmann out. There's a very high chance I'd eat a bullet in the process, but after almost five months with the Dead Kings I'd gladly make that trade.

The problem is, I already tried sneaking in a firearm at the last three Pit fights and security always found it. As much as I hate to admit it, I need Frank and Ashlynn's help if I'm going to pull this off.

Frank takes out his cigarettes, packing them against the heel of his palm. "No. Eastmann's time is coming soon, but I am not too keen on the idea of dying during a failed attempt to take him out here. We stick to the plan. Our target tonight is Governor Conrad. He's the one responsible for pushing toxic businesses out of Massachusetts and into Pennsylvania. Word on the street is he's a child fucker, too. He's a weak excuse for a man with a lot of connections, and he'll be easy to manipulate. As soon as we get our hands on him, that pedophile's going to sing like a bird."

He lights a cigarette. "The only thing you need to worry about, son, is winning. As long as you continue to decimate the competition, we'll keep getting invited back. Be patient and I promise you we'll bring these fuckers to their knees one by one."

Be patient. I don't think Frank realizes who he just quoted.

A wave of revulsion churns my stomach. "You don't see the irony in all this, do you?"

"Go ahead and enlighten me," he says, smoke wafting into the air around him.

"You left the Jackals because you didn't agree with the path Jack laid out for us. It wasn't fast or violent enough for you. Not only did you just regurgitate his *be patient* line, but tonight will be your third opportunity to take out Eastmann and you're doing nothing about it. Why is that, Frank? Are you scared? Or have you grown a little too accustomed to the power of being president?"

A shadow crosses his leathered features.

“Son of a bitch,” I spit with a humorless laugh. “That’s it. Isn’t it? You’re afraid that if you take out the big bad too soon, the Dead Kings have no reason to continue following you.”

Frank’s jaw clenches, and if it wasn’t so fucking loud in here, I bet I’d hear the grinding of his back molars.

Ashlynn’s eyes dart back and forth between us, like this is the first time she’s heard any of this. Which is impossible, since I’ve been planting seeds of doubt regarding Frank’s true motives within the Dead Kings’ ranks for weeks. More than a few members are starting to whisper their concerns over why we haven’t gone after Eastmann.

They were freaked out enough after Ashlynn accidentally killed Jeffrey Segretto, so it was easy enough to rile them up. Now that they’ve seen first-hand how the only thing blowing up buildings and kidnapping rich white dudes is good for is attracting the attention of the FBI and ATF, even those unconcerned with Frank’s lack of action on the Eastmann front are starting to realize that if he keeps leading them down this path, they might not be around long enough to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Five members have already abandoned ship. In a few months, I’ll have even more of them turning their backs on Frank. He has to know it’s me, but he hasn’t done anything about it, further demonstrating exactly how fucked up his reasoning skills are.

Eyes narrowed and jaw still rigid, he stomps his cigarette out on the concrete floor. “I’m gonna go ask around to see if anyone knows who you’re fighting tonight and check if Conrad’s arrived. Stick to the plan.”

As he hurries away I call out, “You do that, Frank. Tell Eastmann hi for me when you see him.” I don’t know if he hears me over the roar, but at least I feel fucking better.

Ashlynn’s hands fly to her hips. “Why do you antagonize him knowing full well it will only make your life harder?”

“Harder?” I hold my hand out so she can tape it. “I’m already at rock fucking bottom. As long as he keeps our agreement, I couldn’t give a single fuck what he does to make my life *harder*.”

She cuts the tape and moves on to my next hand, the one with the marigold on it. “I don’t know if I like the person you’re becoming, Colt. I hardly recognize you anymore. Sometimes I wonder what Danny, or Jack, or even Ry—”

“Don’t you *dare* say her fucking name,” I growl. “Don’t say any of their names.” I already know what they would think, what use is there in Ashlynn voicing the question aloud?

Jack would be ashamed.

I rip my hand from hers and finish taping it on my own. Right as I cut the last strip with my teeth, an excited murmur ripples through the building, no doubt marking the arrival of the Viper King himself... Which means his little puppet shouldn’t be too far behind.

Every face in this damn place belongs to a monster, but there’s one in particular I need to settle a score with. One I’ve been dying to get my hands on. I scan the arena, squinting through the haze and low lighting to try and spot him.

Ah. There he is, the motherfucker who stole my girl.

One glimpse and I’m back in that damn alleyway watching him put his filthy Viper hands all over *her* perfect body. He stole what was mine, the only thing that made me feel alive, the only thing that gave me a sense of belonging in this fucked up world.

And apparently he didn’t come alone. A snarl twists my lips at the sight of the tiny, almost entirely hidden woman at his side who’s way too thin to be Rylee.

I spit on the ground, watching as they stroll a step or two behind Rick Adder.

The dainty thing tucked under his arm uses her bright-pink hair and a ridiculously expensive-looking coat to shield herself from curious eyes. I can’t see her face, but that doesn’t stop

me from noticing the beautiful set of legs on her—legs I wouldn't mind sinking my teeth into.

Judging by the way he's protecting this one, he obviously cares for her.

Maybe I'll fuck *his* girl, just to give him the tiniest taste of what I felt.

My fists ball at my sides. This asshole is the only other fighter, besides myself, who's won every match. He has to be the one I'm going up against tonight. I *need* it to be him. I need to hurt someone who's actually earned it because without my brothers, *and without her*, I'm starting to lose myself.

Some fucking Jackal I turned out to be.

Violence raging in my veins, I pull my hoodie over my head and prepare to coat the Pit with his blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

RYLEE



MAC and I enter the converted warehouse at midlevel with our Viper guards forcing us to follow a pace or two behind Rick.

The sharp tang of rust and the musky aroma of hundreds of men packed tightly into a confined space is an assault on my senses, but it's the sheer amount of unfamiliar faces tracking my every move with ravenous curiosity and unrestrained hunger that robs me of my ability to breathe.

With twenty-something rows of bleacher-like seating above and another twenty leading down into the sunken fighting ring below, there is absolutely nowhere for me to hide and no way to escape my leering spectators.

I keep my head down, letting my hair fall in a curtain around my face as I wrap my coat tighter around me and wish I was anywhere but here.

Noticing my unease, Mac drapes a comforting arm across my shoulders. I can't tell if it's a help or a hindrance to my lack of oxygen situation, but we have a role to play, so I lean against his side and use him as a shield.

"I should have prepared you better for this," he grumbles, tucking me closer.

I peer up at him, noting the hard lines of his jaw and the promise of violence in his gaze as he glares at our gawkers. Gone is all trace of the softness he shows when we're alone. Here, among these people, he's every bit the Viper he's expected to be.

“A warning would have been nice.” I want to sound confident and playful, but my voice is squeaky and I trip when I try to jab my elbow into his ribs.

At least my nervousness earns me a rare public smile. “Keep your chin up and never let them see you sweat. Everything that happens in here is about power. Who has it. Who wants it. Who’s willing to take it. You’re strong. Stop hiding.”

Dammit. He’s right. I need to take control of this situation and if these idiots are going to look, I might as well give them something to look at. I shrug off my coat and the moment Cherry’s dress is out in the open, the leering gives way to raised eyebrows and intrigued whispers in a variety of languages.

“Tá sí go hálainn.”

“Merda...”

“That’s Adder’s youngest daughter?”

“Jesús Christo.”

“Whore.”

The words “Viper alliance” and “marriage” are tossed around equally as much, along with some Russian phrases I couldn’t begin to decipher.

Mac gnashes his teeth, snaking the arm he had on my shoulder around my hip and tightening his grip possessively. “Okay, I was wrong. You can hide if you want.”

Another man whistles and calls out, “Do you think he shares? I love a good spit-roast.”

Mac curses again. “Someone is definitely leaving in a body bag tonight.”

Not willing to risk him getting in a fight over me, I wrap my arm around his waist to keep him close. “Please don’t commit murder on my behalf. As long as we can avoid Charles fuc—” The words die on my tongue, my airway tightening at the sight of Eastmann’s bleach-blond hair headed straight for us.

Rick turns, motioning me forward before his eyes drop to my dress. Judging by the confused set of his eyebrows, it takes him a second to recall why he recognizes my outfit, but when he does, his face twists in a mixture of rage and disgust.

I smile, and a vein in his forehead begins throbbing.

His reaction almost makes this whole Pit visit worth it... *Almost.*

Unfortunately, my victory is short-lived when I feel Eastmann's repulsive gaze locked on the curve of my hip. Painstakingly slow, his eyes travel up the length of my body while I struggle not to fall into the memory of Sheriff Knott doing the same thing.

I almost pinch my leg, but a combination of Danny and Mac's voices echo in my head:

No more of this. You're strong. Stop hiding.

Instead, I snap my fingers in Eastmann's face. "It's impolite to eye-fuck people."

Eastmann raises his eyebrows, giving me the distinct impression of a man not used to being called on his bullshit. "Your daughter is feisty tonight, Rick. Hopefully your fighter is too."

When he finally looks at my face, it's with the same nonplussed annoyance as someone noticing a fly on their coat sleeve. "Rylee, how nice of you to *finally* join us. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Victoria."

A lanky body draped in a loose-fitting gray suit and black turtleneck appears from behind Charles, expression souring at his use of the word *daughter*. "Just Vic is fine."

Just Vic extends a hand in my direction.

All I can do is stare.

It might be the slightly longer version of Logan's hipster haircut, or maybe it's Vic's androgynous, makeup-free vibe, but for a second, it's like I'm staring at a ghost. Which is why it takes me longer than it should to shake their hand.

“*Hmm*,” Vic says after fierce scrutiny. “You’re not at all what I was expecting from my brother’s murderer.”

Horrified, I try to let go, but their grip on my hand only tightens. Vic’s voice lowers threateningly as they lean closer. “How did someone like *you* get the upper hand on Logan?”

I tear my arm away and take a step backward, slamming into Mac.

Vic gives their father a lopsided smirk. “Are you sure it was her? Even if she does know something about what happened, she’s not big enough to dispose of his body on her own. Maybe Logan really is fine and he’s off gambling and whoremongering like the police suggested?”

“Now, now,” Eastmann chides. “There’s no need for those sorts of accusations. Of course I don’t think Rylee was involved in your brother’s disappearance. I’m sure the Adders have shared all the information they have on Logan’s whereabouts. Rick wouldn’t jeopardize our business dealings, would you, Rick?”

My father doesn’t miss a beat. “Never. Especially when I know firsthand how hard it is to have a missing child. Thankfully, we still have our youngest to bring us comfort during the absence of our eldest.”

“Yes, your *eldest*.” The muscle in Eastmann’s jaw pulses. “What’s it been, six years? How could I have forgotten?”

There’s a long moment where Rick and Eastmann lock eyes in a silent standoff, but it’s Charles who recovers his composure first. “Given our partnership. I suppose Victoria and Rylee should become better acquainted. Let’s leave the women to their gossip and you can introduce me to the Russian we’ve been discussing while your man goes and warms up.”

Mac clears his throat. “Boss, Mikail and the other Russians arrived just before we did. They’re up in the box and have already been searched twice for weapons. I’ve got Vipers stationed outside.”

Rick dips his chin. “Good. Go change and warm up. Remember what I said, we need a win tonight.”

“Yes, Boss.” Mac gives my waist a quick squeeze and jogs off in the direction we just came from.

“You know, clean energy is on the rise,” Rick says to Eastmann while holding out a hand in the direction of the stairs leading up to the private boxes. “I’d be cautious about investing too much capital in the old industries. There’s a reason Mikail is unloading the equipment in the first place.”

“Just make the introduction and I’ll worry about the rest,” Eastmann replies with a devilish smile painted across his pale lips.

When all three men are gone, Vic and I are still flanked by guards, but they keep their distance.

“It’s about damn time,” Vic’s tone is light and so nonthreatening that if I hadn’t seen their lips moving as they said it, I’d think someone else joined the conversation.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” they say in response to my disbelieving expression. “My father expects me to act a certain way in public and most of the time it’s easier if I just go along with it.”

I snap my jaw closed to hide my shock.

Vic leans against the staircase railing, the picture of nonchalance. “Honestly, I couldn’t care less whether or not you killed Logan, I’m just glad he’s gone. And, for the record, I don’t care that your sister’s little data leak caused our stocks to plummet either. It’s all water under the bridge as far as I’m concerned.”

Trying to appear calm, I force myself to control my breathing. “We didn’t do any of those things—”

Vic holds up a hand. “You did, and like I said, it’s fine. My father is a piece of work and so was Logan. Don’t waste your breath trying to convince me that my brother is alive, not when he hasn’t touched a single penny in his bank account in months. You know as well as I do that he couldn’t survive for

an hour without the family's money. He's dead. We both know it. I should be thanking you for eliminating the problem."

I draw back, wincing as I remember the way my wrist felt pressed into *the problem's* throat and the blood speckles he left on my forearms. "Why would you thank me for that?"

A lazy grin spreads over Vic's thin mouth as I rub my wrists. Then it dawns on me why: An innocent person wouldn't have asked my question. They would have denied the murder accusation altogether.

Shit.

Thankfully, Vic doesn't gloat for long. "By taking my brother out of the picture, you've made it easier for me to destroy Eastmann Incorporated and finally get even with my father."

The wheels in my head grind to an abrupt halt. *Bring down Eastmann Incorporated?* This can't be real. It has to be an elaborate ploy to trick me into a confession... But if there's a chance someone on the inside might help, don't I owe it to the Jackals to find out?

"Okay, I'll bite," I say cautiously. "Get even for what?"

One of Vic's eyebrows lifts, their head tilting to the side like they're deciding how best to answer my question. "Take your pick. Maybe I want payback for not being treated like a part of the family until Logan was out of the picture and I was the only option left to inherit the family business. Or maybe the kid in me wants to get even for my father refusing to let me eat dinner until I put on a dress and shaved my legs."

A shadow crosses Vic's already gaunt features. "I also imagine I'd like a little retribution for the hundreds of unnecessary hours spent in religious counseling and conversion camps where my father let strangers use all sorts of experimental and *illegal* therapies on me—all because of his idiotic belief that my lack of gender conformity and absence of sexual desire made me some sort of abomination. After all, what good is a child you can't marry off for political alliances?"

I must look horrified because Vic adds, “I don’t want your sympathy—not when people all over the world deal with much worse. The only reason I’m telling you all this is to explain that, despite my little performance earlier, I’m not your enemy. If anything, our mutual dislike for my father should make us allies.”

Battling my desire to offer Vic my undying support in their quest to destroy Charles Eastmann, I cross my arms and force myself to look at the situation objectively. “I never said I disliked your father and I have no need for an ally. And even if I did, how do I know what you’re saying is true? Logan never mentioned any animosity between you and him or your father when we were together.”

Vic shoves their hands into their trouser pockets, scuffing their leather loafer once across the concrete floor. “Generally speaking, the topic of *Vic Eastmann* is avoided at all cost with anyone except our immediate relatives. Logan wouldn’t have shared anything about our family dynamics—not when that would require him to admit he spent his childhood torturing me. And especially not when he was only using you to get to your sister.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

“As far as why I’m telling you all this,” Vic continues, “the truth is that a year ago I wouldn’t have bothered to explain at all. I was content to keep my head down and fly under the radar. Then I met someone who changed my way of thinking. He showed me that when you speak up about injustices, sometimes you find other like-minded individuals, and together you can do something about it.”

For the first time in our conversation there’s an edge of sadness to Vic’s voice where before there was only anger. “I thought he was going to be the one to take care of my father, but it looks like it has to be me after all.”

I must be insane because I think I actually believe them, but for the sake of the Jackals, I need to be skeptical. “If you hate your family so much, why did you agree to work for

Eastmann Incorporated? Why not branch out on your own as soon as you turned eighteen and get away from it all?”

Vic shrugs. “You don’t seem to like your father, yet here you are. We all have our reasons. I couldn’t shake the idea that if my own family treated me like a pariah, why wouldn’t the rest of the world do the same? I may have been the Eastmann black sheep, but at least I was safe and good enough to work for the family business. Or so I thought. As soon as I finished college, dear old dad shoved me down in the basement to run a department he couldn’t give a shit about. Long hours, limited public visibility, all just to hide the family’s embarrassing little secret. Of course, that’s all changed now that I’m the only Eastmann heir. Now I have a nice new office on the top floor.”

Sucking their teeth, Vic takes a step into my personal space. “We don’t choose our families, but we can choose what we do about them. We’re running out of time and I need to know once and for all if my brother is going to show up anytime soon and ruin my plans.”

Motherfucker.

That’s what all this was about? Did Vic seriously think I would confess so easily? They probably have a wire on under that turtleneck, just waiting for me to admit to killing Logan.

Fat chance, pal. I have to hand it to them, though, for one second I let myself imagine us standing on the same side of this fight.

“Sorry. I wish I knew, but your brother and I haven’t spoken since I left Charlotte.” I squint and smile, hopefully conveying that I am done with this conversation and won’t be saying another word.

Vic sighs. “I suppose this wasn’t the right place to have this conversation. But remember, you and I aren’t so different from one another. One of us took a son from my father and the other took a daughter. Trust me when I say he won’t stop coming for you.”

Vic hands me a business card. “If you ever need help, my number is on the back. Use it. And one more thing... I really

do hope you killed Logan. Otherwise, he's still coming for you and your sister."

I shove the card securely into the secret pocket inside the bust of my dress before hurriedly walking in the opposite direction. There's an alcove not too far away, and I beeline for it, my ridiculous heels clicking in time with my racing pulse. As soon as I round the corner, my hand flies to my chest.

In all likelihood, this was just a clever ruse to get me to out myself, but if a kernel of what Vic said is true—and if they aren't a lying piece of shit like every other Eastmann—then they might end up being an asset to the Jackals. It's a big *if*, and an even bigger risk, but definitely worth exploring. Minh and I are going to have to do a deep dive to see if we can validate anything they told me.

I reach for the thumb drive around my neck before remembering I left it securely back in my room at the Den. We might not need Vic anyway, since I'll be gaining access to the supercomputer tomorrow before my "date" with Korey.

Leaning against the wall, I mull over the plan for tomorrow until harsh whispers grab my attention. Silently, I peek around the corner and find Mac and his sparring partner warming up in the hall. Mac looks sweaty and drawn. If I didn't know him better, I'd almost think he was scared...

"This changes nothing," Leon says forcefully, taking a punch to a padded mitt. "This is what you've been training for. Better that you face him tonight instead of weeks from now when you could be injured."

Mac shuffles his feet and then punches the boxing mitt twice more. "If I lose this early in the season..."

"You won't," Leon says, catching the next punch and wrapping an arm around Mac's head. "But remember, you need to be able to defend yourself after this, no matter the outcome. If you're going to lead the Vipers one day, it's important to keep up appearances. No one will remember you walking away from a single fight, but they will remember if you get your ass beat by an unknown syndicate."

“The Boss will take everything from me if I walk away.”

Leon frowns. “Then you’ll just have to win. But remember, this guy’s organization is desperate to prove themselves. *Do not* let them use you as a way to do that and do not let yourself be laid up in a hospital bed like the first Russian fighter. If it looks like things are headed south, walk away and fight another day.”

I knew the Pit was a big deal for Mac, but I don’t think I fully understood the political implications of his success and failures until this very moment.

Why Rick would ever put him in a situation like this is beyond me.

Mac hangs his head, and I take that as my cue to step in and try my hand at cheering him up. Moving out from the shadows, I make my heels click extra loud to announce my presence. “Do I have to pay extra for you to take your shirt off? And how long does a girl have to wait to watch you put some scrawny rival-gang dude in his place?”

Mac’s shoulders pick up. “Shirt comes off for free, psycho, and you only have to wait about five more minutes.”

He’s trying to put on a brave show, but he’s spooked in a way I’ve never seen before and don’t quite understand.

“Does that mean you found out who you were fighting?”

“He did,” Leon answers, using the momentary pause in their warmup routine to retape Mac’s hand.

“Who is it?” I ask, though the answer won’t make a difference to me either way. This is obviously important to Mac, and I want him to know I’m on his side. Maybe talking about his opponent will humanize them and remind Mac he knows what he’s doing.

Leon answers for him again. “We don’t do names here. Everyone’s been calling him *The Wolf*.”

It’s clear by his tone that I should find that nickname intimidating, but instead my eyebrows pinch together as I try not to laugh.

I step forward, bumping Mac with my hip. “The Wolf? What do they call you? Venom? Snake Eyes? *Sir Hiss?*”

He says nothing.

“What? It can’t be that bad, can it?” I prod. He sure is making it difficult to cheer him up.

Mac grunts, ripping his hand away from Leon. “They call me Puppet. Rick Adder’s prized little marionette.”

Ouch.

Way worse than I thought.

“You have plenty of time to prove them wrong.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “Start tonight by flattening your opponent, and tomorrow I’ll let you borrow this dress. It worked really well for me earlier in showing Rick he doesn’t own me.”

That earns me a small smile and a nod of approval from Leon.

“Now, why don’t you point out the big bad wolf you’re going to be fighting so I can comment on how small his arms are and laugh at his tiny dick.”

That one earns me an even bigger smile and a small chuckle. “I’m glad you came tonight,” Mac says, before taking my hand and leading me back out into the bloodthirsty crowd.

“Why *do* they call him The Wolf?” I ask over the deafening roar. It seems odd to give an opponent an intimidating nickname, especially when someone like Mac, who is undefeated, was given a moniker like Puppet.

Leon scans the bleachers below. “Because, just like a wolf, he takes down his opponents head on and always finds their weak spots. He is absolutely unrelenting and even managed to put a fighter in the hospital on his first day in the Pit. He’s an animal.”

Mac rolls his eyes. “If you wanted a little less of a fangirl explanation, he’s also got a big wolf tattooed on the side of his neck and another one on his back.”

Goose bumps prickle down my spine.

Mac grabs my elbow and uses his chin to point down toward the ledge above the sunken Pit. “There he is. The one with his back to us and his hood up.”

I follow his gaze. At first glance, all I see is a muscular man in a hooded sweatshirt doing some warmup stretches and talking to two people. Then I notice how every inch of this place is jam-packed with bodies, but *The Wolf* and his companions have a clearance of about five feet on either side of them, like no one dares to get too close.

Even clothed, it’s easy to see he’s massive. Big shoulders, big arms, a trim waist... My body electrifies, reacting to the physical form of a faceless man in a way I haven’t felt in months. When he reaches up to pull his hoodie off, I keep my eyes glued to his back.

In slow motion, inch by painstaking inch, his tattoo is revealed, effectively ripping the oxygen from my lungs. I stumble backward, recognition and searing pain tearing right through me.

It can’t be.

“There,” Mac says. “See the wolf on his neck and the other one on his back between the words?”

Of course I see it, but I could also describe every one of those tattoos with my eyes closed in perfect detail.

My heart races. This has to be another one of my panic attacks taking on a new form... But even if this isn’t real, it doesn’t change the fact that something is crushing my chest and I can’t breathe.

I have to get out of here.

My head swivels back and forth as I desperately search for the exit. I only manage to take one step before Mac grabs hold of my arm and whips me around to face him.

Sporting a stricken expression of his own, he scans our surroundings. “What’s wrong?” he demands.

But my eyes are already back on *him*. And all at once, my limbs turn heavy before going completely numb.

Across the room from me, the man I loved—the man who wasn't there when I needed him—prepares to fight the man who was.

Mac grabs my shoulders. “Rylee, say something. You’re scaring me. I need to know what happened. One second I’m pointing out the wolf tattoo, the next you’re—”

I shrug out of his grip. “It’s not a wolf. It’s a jackal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

RYLEE



A WARBLING BUZZER ricochets off the concrete walls, followed by a scratchy voice announcing that betting will close in two minutes. A second later, keyed-up Vipers drag Mac down the stairs before I have a chance to explain further.

“I need one more minute,” he yells, struggling to get back to me, but there are too many of them.

I reach for him...and hesitate. If I let Mac enter that fight distracted, Colton will destroy him. Ever so slowly, I curl my fingers and lower my arm. He’s going to need everything he’s got to make it out of this. So, bottling the raging storm of emotions surging inside of me, I force a smile and nod reassuringly. Once I’m sure my voice won’t quake, I cup my hands around my mouth and call out, “I’m fine. I promise!”

That settles him a bit, but he keeps tossing odd, heavily browed glances over his shoulder in my direction.

A group of men speaking rapidly in a language I don’t recognize hustle past, bumping into my arm as they head for their seats. Leon takes this as his cue to step to my side. “It’s out of our hands now. Come on, let me walk you up to the Boss’s box.”

“No.” I plant my feet. “I’ll watch from wherever you’re sitting.” My voice quivers with the effort to maintain eye contact while ignoring the tug in my rib cage.

Leon shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. It’s rough down there. All the blood and sweat flying around can

make it feel like you're sitting in the splash zone at an amusement park."

Appalled, I gape at him before recovering my composure. "That's fine, just show me where."

His eyes lift to the balcony where Rick, Charles Eastmann, and my new pal Vic must be watching us. Unwilling to give Leon the opportunity to say no, I brush past him. "Rick told me to support Mac. I can't do that if I'm sitting all the way up there. Let's go."

During our descent, the clamor of the crowd intensifies. Hair-raising electricity pulses through the arena as people rise to their feet and block my view of Colton, which only makes the invisible tug in my chest feel twice as urgent.

I increase my speed, flying down the steps until I'm pressed against the railing right above the six-foot drop into the Pit.

On my left, talking to two people I can't quite see behind the broad expanse of his chiseled back, stands a sweat-slickened, shirtless Colton. The all too familiar contours of his body call out to me like a siren song, begging me to drag my nails across the words inked into his flesh.

NO ONE IS FREE WHILE OTHERS ARE OPPRESSED.

My heart heaves a painful thud, and I grab the railing to steady myself.

After months spent wishing he would appear, the sight of him now is jarring.

My head is telling me to march over and slap him, while my body demands I throw myself into his arms and run my hands all over his face and muscled torso to make sure he's real.

"Colton..." His name falls from my lips before I can stop it. Despite the ear-splitting cadence of the room, his chin tilts like he heard me. His profile alone accelerates the rampant beat of my heart. My breath hitches with anticipation, but after a dismissive shake of his head, he returns his attention to the conversation in front of him.

My stomach lurches.

I take one wobbling step forward when another loud buzzer rings out. Colton vaults himself over the railing, leaving behind him a vaguely familiar sun-bronzed man in a leather cut and a wide-eyed Ashlynn staring right at me.

Judging by the way she mirrors my arched eyebrows and startled jolt, I'm not sure which of us is more surprised to see the other. Her lips part, her gaze bouncing from me to the Pit and back again. Then, as if resigning herself to do something painful, she straightens her posture and calls out to Colton.

He ignores her.

When she calls his name again, he gives her the finger.

I smother a laugh.

Minho and Danny told me where Colton was, and I knew Ashlynn's father was the one who ran the charter that separated but, somehow, I never put two and two together that Colton was with Ashlynn.

I brace myself for old jealousies to bubble to the surface, but they don't. She and Colton may have been in the same place all this time, but that brush-off was ice cold.

Not that it matters. He's no longer yours, remember?

I lose sight of Ashlynn as the Pit empties of everyone except the two fighters—*my* two fighters.

This is an absolute nightmare.

The fight is seconds away from starting, and I can't find the courage to call out to either of them. I wring the metal banister until blisters form on my palms, only releasing my grip when Mac's familiar walkout song, "Smash Shit Up" by Dropkick Murphys, booms through the loudspeaker.

Just like he does in the training ring at the Den, Mac circles the pit while Colton remains motionless in the center. Soon, half the room—the Irish excluded—is singing along with Mac, throwing themselves into one another like they're at a concert instead of a fight.

This track never quite fit the Mac I've come to know, and I've often wondered why he picked it, but seeing the effect it has on everyone, the Vipers in particular, I think I finally understand. It's not his theme song, it's theirs. *This* is who they expect him to be.

My head snaps back to the Pit as a noise like a record scratching cuts through the air and another song starts—this one slower and infinitely more intimidating. It takes me a moment to recognize, but when I do, the message is clear.

“Forfeit” by Chevelle rattles through the loudspeakers, and the rowdy crowd falls silent. Colton doesn't resort to pageantry the way his opponent did. He just stands there, refusing to look at Mac or anyone else—as if all of this is beneath him.

When the song finally fades, he rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck.

My insides flip and tighten, my torso leaning over the rail of its own accord.

Mac approaches to bump knuckles, but Colton slowly shakes his head.

No one in the audience makes a sound, which is the only reason I hear Colton say, “I hope it was worth it.” A bell chimes and he rears back, slamming his fist into Mac's face with so much force that the impact sends ripples through both their bodies.

I gasp and Mac stumbles backward.

He's dazed but quickly collects himself.

Every muscle in my body strains as they circle one another, moving around the Pit like two trained warriors. I can't breathe and I don't dare blink. When one swings, the other ducks. When one lunges, the other dodges. Their reactions are so quick and precise, it almost looks choreographed.

Relieved at the lack of physical blows being exchanged, some of the tightness in my limbs and stomach uncoils. Unfortunately, no one else seems to share my sentiments.

“Stop fucking with him!” someone above me yells.

The call is echoed throughout the room, and each time it’s repeated, the command becomes more frenzied.

Colton turns to face them, finally giving me the first full view of his face.

My breath shudders as he tosses his sweat-slicked hair back, looking just as beautiful as the first time I saw him. I lean farther over the railing, my insides vibrating with the desire to be closer, then a shadow creeps over his face, transforming his expression into something cold, empty, and unfamiliar.

He might look similar, but this is not my Colton.

This man is a predator, and he’s on the hunt.

The muscles in his core tense, and then he’s on Mac, pummeling his face with a speed I didn’t know possible, making it painfully obvious he’s been holding back.

Crimson sprays the air, but it’s hard to tell if it’s from Mac’s nose or mouth. He tries to evade the next blow but slips in his own blood and ends up taking most of the impact to his shoulder.

Colton laughs sardonically, barely allowing Mac to right himself before he’s on him again—this time attacking his flanks. The blows are ferocious, and after thirty seconds of the assault, Mac crumbles, falling to one knee.

Colton feints left, like he might let Mac get up again, but then changes course, bringing his fist down with the full force of his body weight.

At the last second, Mac raises his forearm to block, and a sickening crack rips through the air. He hunches forward, cradling his left arm. “Fuck,” he screams. “I yield.”

Just like that, the fight is over.

Loosening my grip on the rail, I take my first full breath since the starting bell. Mac may be hurt, but broken bones can be mended. If this fight went on much longer, who knows what could have happened.

Bickering erupts in clusters around the warehouse. Some are disappointed, but many are downright outraged. From the sound of the grumbling, there was a lot of money riding on this fight and no one anticipated a forfeit. Several heads turn toward my father's balcony to gauge his response, or maybe to see if he'll force the fight to go on.

Rick puts his hands on the banister, an emperor deciding the fate of his gladiators. "The rules are clear. While frowned upon, a yield ends the match. Queue up the next fight."

Angry shouts echo all around as the spectators realize they're not getting the bloodbath they craved. The tempo of their frustration builds with each shout until they sound like an angry mob.

My scalp prickles, the hair on the back of my neck rising.

Leon sucks in a sharp breath, like he senses the same shift in the air that I do. "This isn't good. He yielded too soon."

"His freaking arm is broken, what do they expect him to ___"

Leon holds up a hand to silence me and points back down into the Pit. "What's he doing?"

I follow the direction of his gaze to where Colton is circling Mac like a rapacious hunter mapping out a death blow.

The angry mob begins to quiet as others notice the same thing.

"Stand up," Colton growls.

Mac stares at him, brow wrinkling. "I tapped. The fight's over."

Colton laughs, the sound so dead and empty it makes my skin crawl. "The fight's over when I say it is. Get up."

When Mac doesn't move, Colton spits on him, and everyone watching lets out a unified "Oooooo."

Colton's fists clench and unfurl. "I *said* stand the fuck up."

Mac slowly rises to his feet. His left wrist hangs limply at his side, but there's a flame dancing somewhere in the depths

of his eye. “I don’t know what your problem is—”

“My problem is that you fucked my girl”—Colton raises his arms to gesture around the room—“and now this fucking mess is all I have left.”

Mac’s eyebrows lift in understanding, his gaze momentarily falling on the jackal tattoo on Colton’s neck before darting to me. My stomach sinks, or maybe falls out of my body completely, when Mac tucks his broken arm across his abdomen and bounces on his feet. “Alright. You wanna go? Let’s fucking go.”

Mac strikes with the agility of a cobra, landing a single kick to Colton’s thigh that sends him sprawling across the floor. Within seconds, Mac is straddling him, delivering a skin-splitting blow to Colton’s temple.

I flinch and close my eyes, only peeling my lids back open when a collective gasp scares me into looking again.

The two of them have switched positions, with Colton on top hammering his fists into Mac every two seconds like a speed bag. Over and over he pummels Mac’s face until the only noise in the entire warehouse is the sound of their flesh and bone connecting.

I’m going to be sick.

Mac stops fighting back, but Colton doesn’t let up.

Oh God, he’s going to kill him...

I search for the referee, but there isn’t one. “Someone has to stop this,” I plead, but Leon only shakes his head.

“Mac technically instigated the fight. Breaking it up is against the rules.”

“Fuck the rules,” I yell back, kicking off my heels to fly down the stairs. Guards grab for me and attempt to block my path, but I’m too quick. By the time I reach the center of the Pit, Colton is pacing around Mac’s inert form with a murderous gleam in his unseeing eyes.

I scream his name, but he doesn’t react. It’s almost like he can’t hear me.

I tug on his arm, but he flings me away like I weigh nothing and keeps advancing.

Out of options, I throw my body over Mac's upper torso and head, holding out my arm. "Colton, stop. *Please*," I beg, tears streaming down my cheeks.

He stops midstep, the cloudiness in his eyes clearing.

"Rylee?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

RYLEE



THE SOUND of my name on Colton's lips is a dagger to the heart.

There is so much agony and longing in his voice that it cleaves me in two. For one moment, the sharp twinge in my chest makes it feel as if it was *me* who hurt *him* instead of the other way around.

Mac groans beneath me.

Colton follows the sound, looking first to Mac's bruised and bloodied face, then to the crimson gore staining his own taped hands. He steps back, his eyes once again locked on me, his head subtly swaying like he can't believe this is really happening.

We stare at one another—me watching the blood drip down his temple while trying to decipher if he's still a threat, and him thinking whatever the hell it is that's making his face pale as a ghost—until a torrent of Vipers flood the Pit and block us from one another.

I can't see Colton any longer, but the tug in my chest returns full force as he moves farther and farther away from me.

Mac groans again. "Am I dead?"

I laugh, wiping the tears from my eyes and forcing myself to stop tracking Colton's departure. "No, but if you move one single muscle before a doctor gets here, I'll make you wish you were."

He chuckles and then mewls in pain. “I have to get up. They need to see me walk out of this Pit on my own if I ever stand a chance at being taken seriously again.”

I might hate it, but I know he’s right. “Can I help you?”

“Please don’t. But grab my hand if I look like I’m going to fall. I’m dizzy as shit.”

I laugh because that’s what he expects, but nothing about this situation is funny.

He rises unsteadily to his feet, every Viper in the arena cheering as he does. When he wobbles, I grab his hand. “I don’t know where to go from here,” I whisper.

Thankfully, Leon appears before I can stress too much, clearing a path to a hidden door near the stairs. “Follow me, the locker rooms and medical wing are through here.”

The moment the door slams behind us, Mac slumps against me, and if it wasn’t for Leon grabbing onto us at the last second, his bulky weight would’ve taken us both to the floor.

We make our way down the hall toward a line of rooms marked with red crosses where we’re greeted by a medical team. Mac is loaded onto a stretcher in one of the exam rooms, and they dive in to treat him, shining an unnecessarily bright light in his eyes while asking him a series of complicated questions.

As I take in the swollen bruises and cuts on his face and body, guilt gnaws at my insides. I knew from Colton’s reputation what he was capable of. I never should have let Mac walk into that fight. The way Colton attacked him almost seemed personal.

My problem is that you fucked my girl.

He must have heard the cover story about Mac and I dating... It serves him right for never calling me, but also means that him beating the shit out of Mac is sort of my fault.

Mac bleats weakly, and I refocus on him. “He’s going to be okay, right, doc?”

The doctor finishes palpating Mac's torso before responding. "At a minimum, his arm and ribs are broken. He likely has a concussion, too, but that's based on a superficial examination. I'll need to run more tests."

I draw in a ragged breath and, as if sensing my worry, he tacks on, "He is walking and talking, which is a good sign he'll recover quickly, but you'll have to step out while I X-ray and cast the arm."

After a quick squeeze of Mac's hand, I reluctantly see myself out and plop down onto the floor outside his room. Leon leaves to update Rick, and within minutes, a dozen Vipers are crowded into the hallway. One of them, I don't see who, hands me my shoes, which I somehow find the energy to slip on.

Even though Mac lost, you wouldn't know it by the excited way the Vipers recount every detail of the fight. They speak about Colton like he's a god, which only makes me more agitated.

Needing a minute alone to sort through the absolute fuckery of the last half hour, I head down the hallway, only making it ten steps before I hear *his* voice. It's muffled but close, and once I see a ruffled nurse burst through a door, I know exactly where it's coming from.

I stomp inside, not bothering to knock or wait for permission.

"I already told you," Colton says from his perch atop the exam table facing the wall, "I'm not interested in getting stitched up. Go tend to the other guy."

I cross my arms. "Oh, so now you care what happens to him?"

Colton flinches, but doesn't turn to face me.

"Is he okay?" he asks the floor.

"No, he's not okay. What the hell was that? You could have killed him!" I seethe. After all this time, I can't believe *these* are the first words I'm saying to him, but what's more shocking is the way he says nothing back. He won't even look

at me, forcing me to scream at his profile while he stares straight ahead.

“Really, Colton? You don’t have *anything* to say?”

The muscle in his jaw feathers, and I close the distance, bracing for the assault of his proximity on my mental fortitude. I allow myself one tiny breath, my heart sinking when I catch his scent and find that he smells like whiskey when he should smell like sunshine.

“Are you drunk?” That would explain his actions in the Pit and his lack of a reaction now, but somehow blaming alcohol makes this worse.

He shakes his head, still refusing to look up.

My insides harden. “So that’s it? First you ghost me and now you won’t even look at me? I’m standing right in front of you. Don’t I at least deserve an explanation?” My voice cracks as old wounds tear back open.

“Talk to me,” I plead, but it barely comes out as a whisper.

Colton’s shoulders tense, his mouth twisting. “What do you want me to say? That I was so blacked out with rage I didn’t know what I was doing to that guy? Do you want me to admit that even before the fight started, I *wanted* to hurt him?” He laughs, but there’s no trace of amusement in it. “I hope you’re not expecting me to apologize for fucking up your new boyfriend’s pretty face and putting a damper on your happy little life here in Boston without me... ’Cause that’s not gonna happen.”

My jaw drops. “*Without you?* Are you kidding me?” He shakes his head, the blood from the cut on his eyebrow dripping onto the floor between us. I get right up in his face anyway. “And whose fault is that?”

Colton pushes back his sweat-dampened hair and finally looks at me with those icy blue-green eyes that haunt my dreams.

“It’s my fault, clearly, but *you* were the one who couldn’t wait a few lousy months,” he spits.

Mesmerized by the intensity in his gaze and confused by his words, my heart hiccups. “What are you talking about? It’s been half a year since we left Eden.”

He snorts. “Well it’d only been two and a half months when I caught you and your new boyfriend making out in the alleyway. A *Viper*, Rylee? Are you fucking serious? I thought you were smarter than that.”

My mind whirls.

Mac and I have only kissed once. Is Colton saying he was here in Boston when it happened? No. He can’t be...because that would mean he actually came for me. It would mean that Danny and Minho were wrong and *I* was the one who fucked this all up.

Colton rises to his feet, forcing me to retreat a step. Once again, I can smell the whiskey and sweat on his skin, but there’s something else there, too, something feral.

“You want me to talk?” he says through clenched teeth. “Fine. I have some fucking questions. Why did you do it? Why couldn’t you wait for me? It hadn’t even been three fucking months, Rylee. People have work trips longer than that. Was he just *that* good of a fuck?”

His gaze runs up and down the length of my body, lingering over the rise and fall of my heaving breasts. “No, that can’t be the reason. ’Cause from where I’m standing, you don’t look satisfied at all. If you were, you wouldn’t be breathing so heavily, and you definitely wouldn’t be in here with me while your little boyfriend gets patched up a few rooms over.”

I open my mouth to defend myself, to explain to him that Mac and I aren’t together and that I’m not breathing *that* heavily, but I stop. Colton is the one who left *me*. He’s the one who couldn’t be bothered to call or text me back. I don’t know what this *three months* bullshit is, but I don’t owe him a damn thing, especially not an explanation.

He steps closer, and although I step away, he keeps advancing on me until my back slams into the wall. Colton’s

so close his bare chest bumps against my dress and I have to crane my neck up to look at him as he glares at me. I stare right back, meeting his gaze with equal defiance...until he trails his fingers across my collarbone and up to the pulse point on my neck.

I shudder, my eyes fluttering open and closed in a desperate attempt to think of *anything* besides how incredible the smallest contact of our skin feels. Like tiny fireworks exploding just beneath the surface.

Colton moves his hands to the wall, boxing me in and making my heart race wildly. Then he leans forward, his lips grazing the crest of my ear, the stubble on his cheek grating against my temple. "Tell me," he whispers, "can the snake make you come? Was he able to figure out how you need it *just* rough enough to get you out of your head, or did you have to show him?"

His palm slides up the length of my arm and across my chest to cuff my neck, the sensation sending a flight of butterflies straight between my thighs. Chuckling darkly, he rolls his thumb back and forth over my erratic pulse. "Your heart is beating so fast. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were turned on. Maybe the Viper isn't such a good fuck after all?"

His voice is so dangerously low, it vibrates inside my chest...and lower. Much lower.

My eyes shoot open, taking in the sadistic sneer tugging at the corner of his mouth, but I still can't move. Every cell in my body is awake, and after such a long slumber it's exhilarating to feel alive. I want more. I *crave* more, but I refuse to let Colton know the effect he's having on me.

"I'm not turned on," I say breathlessly.

Real convincing, Rylee.

Colton trails his nose across my cheek, and my head tilts automatically to give him free rein. He growls at my response, the heat of his breath sending a cascade of shivers absolutely *everywhere*. "Liar," he taunts. "I bet if I slid my hand up those

pretty thighs into your dress, I'd find your needy little pussy nice and slick for me."

Fuck.

I almost lose my footing.

The combination of his closeness and his hand on my throat makes my legs tremble with desire and my knees weak. I'll never understand how my body can react this way after he shattered me, but when Colton bites his lip, I find myself inching my legs apart.

I'd like to say the move was me calling him on his bluff, but it feels more like I'm daring him to act on his threat.

His brows lift, pupils blowing as he shifts to the side and plants a rough hand on the inside of my thigh. He squeezes, hard, and I gasp, melting at the contact.

"Is this what you want?" His voice is rough and raw as he slides his palm higher, brushing his thumb across the sensitive bundle of nerves beneath my lace thong with featherlight touches.

"I don't want anything from you," I say breathily. Despite my words, I rock my hips against his fingers and press my throat more firmly into his hand. Heat pools in my core, and I stifle a moan, but my poor attempt at concealing the extent of my desire makes it sound like more of a breathy whimper.

"Tell me you don't want this," he demands, nostrils flaring. "Tell me to stop."

I say nothing, and in one violent movement, Colton spins me until my back is flush with his solid chest. His grip on my neck tightens, and I push my ass into his growing erection. He groans, grinding into me before reaching around to roughly hike up my dress.

"Last chance," he warns, only waiting a second before diving his calloused hand into my thong.

"Fuck," he growls against my ear. "I was right. So fucking wet for me." He cups my pussy, and I rotate my hips against him, begging for more movement and crying out when he

oblige. His skilled digits slide back and forth across my opening, teasing and dipping while his thumb flicks my aching clit. He takes two steps, pushing us toward the exam table—the feel of his rough palm between my thighs as we walk making me moan.

“Don’t stop,” I beg.

I expect him to continue walking, to keep up the furious tempo of the last few seconds, but at the sound of my voice, he pauses. Nestling his nose against the soft skin behind my ear, he breathes deep.

My eyes water.

This is too gentle. Too familiar. *Too much.*

I bring my hands up and clasp the back of his neck to steady myself, digging my nails into his flesh as hard as I can before thrusting my hips backward. I wiggle until the ridge of his cock is positioned perfectly between my ass cheeks, and then bounce on my toes.

Colton shudders and growls. Crushing me tighter against his length, his fingers resume their exploration, delivering delicious friction exactly where I need it. When he starts moving his hand in a quick circular motion, I close my eyes and groan—*loudly.*

He lets out a satisfied puff of hot air onto my collarbone. “Always so fucking responsive,” he purrs, his grip on my throat tightening. The pressure in my low belly builds, and right when I start to feel light-headed, Colton drops the hand on my throat down to massage my swollen breasts through my dress, kneading and pinching in that exquisite way that I love.

I’m already dangerously close to coming when the hand on my pussy picks up the pace. Bolts of lightning shoot down my thighs, my breaths growing ragged as he brings his hand back to my neck while slipping a finger inside of me. He pumps once, twice, then adds a second finger.

He moves harder, faster, the heel of his palm slamming into my clit while he squeezes my throat with just enough pressure to make my inner walls flutter around him.

“That’s it,” Colton pants against my ear, making my entire body coil with heat. “Come for me, Tiger.”

It’s the nickname that does it. My world erupts in an explosion of stars and fire, my orgasm hitting me so hard my knees give out. Colton is there to catch me, holding me flush against him, our bodies perfectly aligned.

For one brief second, it’s like the past six months never happened.

Gently, he pulls his fingers from my underwear, and with one corded arm still wrapped around my waist, he nips at my ear and slides my dress back into place. We stand motionless for a moment before he softly rests his cheek on the top of my head, leaving it there until he regains control over his breathing.

Out of everything that just happened between us, *that’s* the thing that catches me most off guard. The orgasm was incredible, rough and perfect, but this...

This feels like vulnerability.

Why isn’t he slamming me into a wall or bending me over to finish the job?

His erection is still pressed into my ass, rigid and ready to go, but when I turn and reach for him, he catches my wrist to stop me. Confused, I lean up to kiss him, but he dodges that too, ripping his head away as if disgusted, refusing to look at me.

“No,” he says, entirely devoid of emotion.

Just like that, I’m coated in an icy blanket of self-doubt and self-hatred.

His fingers still glisten with the evidence of what he just did to me, and he can’t man up and find it in himself to meet my gaze?

Coward.

My fists ball at my sides.

I can’t do this again, not when I’m finally starting to heal.

“You know what, Colton Archer? Fuck you.” And with that eloquent tell off, I storm out of the room.

Once in the hallway, I straighten my dress. I can either beat myself up over the fact that I just let my body’s physical needs overcome my rational thoughts or I can move on and leave Colton in the past where he belongs.

Closing my eyes and counting to ten, I allow myself to feel everything: hurt, fear, and elation; lust, longing, and disappointment. All of it batters around inside until I open the floodgates and let it wash away.

What I’m left with is a vague sensation of emptiness and an urgency to go check on Mac, who, much to my surprise, is only a few feet away and already staring at me while my father whisper-yells at him.

Whatever Rick is saying, it looks like it’s destroying Mac.

I can see it in the childlike way he returns his attention to my father—eyes soft, posture defeated. It’s like he’s desperate for approval and disappointed in himself, but there’s something else there. Something he’s holding back that almost looks familiar.

I march over, ignoring Rick to examine the cast on Mac’s arm and the stitches on his cheek. He’s still shirtless, dark bruises dotting his face and flanks. One of his eyes is so swollen that just imagining the pain he’s in makes me suck in a breath. He’s a mess, and I don’t know why he’s up and walking around, but I have a feeling Rick has something to do with it.

And here I am, thighs slick with the proof of my betrayal and weakness. I should have stayed close by to protect Mac. “Whatever you guys are talking about, it can wait. Mac needs to get off his feet and ice his injuries.”

“Where have you been?” Rick asks, completely ignoring my statement.

Go ahead, Rylee. Tell your father and your situationship how you were getting finger-fucked by your ex not fifteen feet away.

I spare him a single backward glance. “It doesn’t matter. We need to get Mac out of here.”

“No.” Rick lets out an angry breath. “What we need is for the two of you to get your shit together and move your asses over to the after-party at Imperial. The next fight will be over soon, so you don’t have much time. Rylee, you’re a mess and there’s blood on your cheek. Mac, walk it off, go hit the showers and put your suit back on. Now more than ever we need to save face.”

He claps Mac’s back with unnecessary roughness and proceeds to leave us in the hallway.

“He’s fucking kidding, right? You need to rest and recover.” I rub the spot my father smacked like I might ease the pain or erase my actions from down the hall.

“No, he’s not kidding and I’m fine.” Mac waits a few seconds and then says, “So that’s your ex?”

A loud crash echoes down the hallway and someone, likely Colton, screams out a string of profanities.

I bob my head, my cheeks heating as Mac takes in my rumpled dress and whatever state my hair is in. Then he stares down the hallway toward the noise. “Is that where you just came from?”

I fidget without answering, smoothing down my hair and suddenly feeling queasy.

Mac stills my movements with a soft hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to do that.” His jaw ticks at another crashing sound from down the hallway. “I meant what I said about being in your life for the long haul.”

A few of the tears welling in my lower lids slip free.

Holly was right, Mac really is too pure for this world of ours.

He straightens my dress and wipes Colton’s blood from the side of my face with a pained expression. “I need to shower, then we’ll head to the party. There is a women’s locker room you can use here, or you can wait with Leon.”

I put my hand over his. “We’re not going to that party. I need to make sure you’re okay and then I want to go to bed and forget this night ever happened.”

“I’m fine. It’s not the first time I’ve had the shit beat out of me during a fight.”

He doesn’t address my other statement, like it’s already a given that we’re going to the Pit party.

“I *really* don’t want to go.” I grab Mac’s wrist when he starts to back away. “You’re hurt and I don’t feel like being around people. Please, can we just head back to the Den?”

“I’m sorry, but like the Boss said, we have to go.” As if sensing my disappointment, he reaches out to cup my cheek. “As soon as he gives us the okay, we’ll leave. I promise.”

It’s such a simple refusal, but the implication of that *no* highlights a much deeper truth: When push comes to shove, Mac will always follow Rick’s orders.

I let out a slow exhale.

No matter what I do, I always seem to be the second choice. The unwanted daughter, the tool used to gain access to my sister, the fill-in for Jeremy, the abandoned girlfriend...

Even with Mac I come second to my father’s wishes.

It’s selfish, and possibly unrealistic, but for once in my life, I just want to be placed *first*.

My hands fall to my sides. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

COLTON



PICKING UP THE CLOSEST CHAIR, I hurl it against the wall.

“Fuck!”

Why is she here? And why did I touch her like that?

My hands dig into my scalp, and I have to put my head between my knees to keep from screaming again. I was seconds away from bending her over the exam table and fucking her within an inch of her life. How could I let myself lose control? And what was I going to do after? Toss her over my shoulder and carry her away from here? Let the world burn for just one night with her when she belongs to someone else now?

She didn't seem to belong to someone else with my fingers buried inside her pussy and my cock pressed against her ass...

My head whips to the door as every single fiber of my being tells me to run after her.

Apparently, she could fuck the entire planet and I'd still want her.

What a fucking cuck I turned out to be.

I've envisioned seeing her again so many times that I thought I was dreaming when she said my name out in that Pit. Then I saw the tears rolling down her cheeks and the other subtle differences, like the new sharp angles of her once familiar body and that ridiculous pink hair that suits her better

than it should, and I knew it wasn't a dream—this time it was really her.

Fuck.

Being close to Rylee was so much worse than I imagined. Catching a glimpse of her in the arms of someone else in that alleyway was one of the worst moments of my life, but to touch her tonight? Feel her clamp around my fingers and hear her soft moans as she came knowing that she's no longer mine... *That* was an entirely new form of torture.

I can still smell her everywhere, like a fragrant garden on a spring morning, sweet and full of life, which makes the fact that she's gone that much more soul destroying.

The door opens and the scent of stale cigarettes floods into the room, replacing any lingering trace of Rylee.

"You were fantastic," Frank says. "Governor Conrad had a chub the entire fight. I told him you're not technically part of the Dead Kings and he's interested in poaching you for next year's Pit season. He's asked the Vipers to invite us to the after-party on his behalf so we can continue talking business."

"I'm not going." Heading for the sink and supply cabinet in the corner, I turn on the faucet and stick my whole head under the spray, washing away sweat, blood, and the smell of alcohol. I didn't give a single shit when Ashlynn accused me of being drunk, but to hear those same words from Rylee's lips made me feel dirty and pathetic.

When I'm done, I rummage through the cabinets and find a towel to wash the rest of myself with while Frank continues to fume.

"Like hell you aren't. Conrad knows about every black-market business deal on the East Coast, which means he has dirt on everyone here. After our short conversation, he now thinks the Dead Kings have our own connections to procure underaged girls from across the border. We're going to this damn party. Don't forget, boy, Eastmann and your girl will be there. If you're not in attendance, what's to stop me from informing him of her—"

Frank struggles against my hold as I slam him into the door.

“Don’t you fucking say it.” I push into his throat until his red face takes on a bluish tint. “I’m following your rules. Threaten her again and I’ll kill you.”

Releasing my hold, Frank crumples to the ground in a pile of coughs and gasping breaths. I spit on the floor. “I’ll go to your stupid party, but only because I have business of my own to attend to.”

AN HOUR LATER, I pull into the alley behind Imperial, the nightclub hosting the after-party, and cut the engine of my bike. This area is supposedly neutral territory, but judging by the number of Italian flags I saw on my way in, I’d bet my left nut Rick Adder is trying to get back on the good side of the Family by letting them host the post-Pit party.

My hair is still wet and half frozen to my head and I’m so cold it hurts to bend my hands, but hopefully the chill that seeped into my bones will keep me on my toes.

I’m not in the habit of making life easy for Frank, but as soon as he said Rylee would be at the party, I knew I had to see her again. Apparently, I’m a masochist and one torture session wasn’t enough.

What the actual fuck is wrong with me?

As I make my way around to the front entrance, passing fancy cars and half-clothed women who must be freezing their asses off, I remember why I’ve never been to one of these fucking things before. It’s mostly because the Dead Kings haven’t actually been invited, but even when I had the opportunity with the Jackals I never bothered coming.

Decadence. Greed. Debauchery. The Pit parties are everything I stand against.

Everything I stood against...

The Pit started off as a way for rival organizations to air their grievances in a controlled setting. Over time, the fights became a networking event, where organizations could make new contacts and form business alliances. The Jackals, Jack and I included, hit up more than a few Pit fights back in the day when we were first getting our start. Back then there were no parties, just dirty fights and the occasional handshake deal.

Now the Pit is just another way for Rick to make money and flex his power. The fact that he has men like Charles Eastmann, Governor Conrad, and Senator Marwood in attendance should be a red fucking flag for everyone involved but, like always, greed proves to be a universal blinder.

That's the problem with the power hungry, one tiny taste of control and their appetites become insatiable. If I ever make it back to Eden, the boys and I should light every one of these motherfuckers up.

Through the window, a flash of pink catches my eye, and I stop midstride.

There she is, looking sexy as fuck and pissed off as ever as she escorts the Viper fighter over to a tufted-leather couch.

Holy fuck.

I didn't fully appreciate the dress she's wearing until this very moment. Knowing under that thin layer of fabric her panties are still wet from what *I* did to her sends blood rushing straight to my cock.

The dress isn't her usual style, and judging by the way her father keeps side-eyeing the garment with disgust, I'd bet she wore it with the exclusive purpose of pissing him off.

Give him hell, Tiger.

I catch my smile in the reflection of the glass and quickly wipe it away as someone approaches my side.

"This is the cleanest I've seen you in weeks," Ashlynn muses, rubbing her hands up and down her arms. "It's freezing out here. Can we go inside?"

"There is no *we*, Ash. Never has been, never will be."

She rolls her eyes. “Give it a rest, Colt. While you were smashing up the medical wing, I did some recon. The Viper’s name is Mac. He’s Rick’s right-hand man. Word on the street is he and Rylee have been dating ever since she came to Boston...in *May*.”

That gets my attention, exactly like she knew it would. “May? She was in Eden with us. How is that possible?”

Ashlynn shrugs. “Could be a rumor, or maybe Rick is the one who sent her to Eden in the first place? I have no idea, I’m just relaying the information.”

For one god-awful moment the idea that Rylee was a plant from the very start—like I originally thought when I tried to run her out of town—pops back into my head, nearly slicing me in two.

Then I remember her reaction every time she learned something about the Jackals, and her devastation when she learned about Holly and the Vipers. How she almost died trying to save Danny and Jack and the way she looked at me on the night she fled Eden...

I shake my head. You can’t fake that shit, and you definitely can’t fake what we had.

Besides, she’s a horrible liar.

I turn back to face the window, watching as Rylee pours what I thought was vodka, but is actually just ice, into a napkin. She wraps it up tightly and delicately brings it to the Viper’s cheek. He winces and then places his hand on her upper thigh.

Yeah, I should have killed this guy when I had the chance.

Enough is enough. It’s about fucking time I got to the bottom of this shit.

Sidestepping Ashlynn, I storm inside, my appearance earning me more than a few curious glances. They stop to congratulate me, offering me drinks and women, but I push past all of them and make my way over to the only person in this nightclub who matters.

The second I'm in front of Rylee, her mouth stretches into a tight line. She's trying to hide how ticked off she is and pretend like nothing happened between us earlier, but it's not working. How could it when, despite her scowl, she's already leaning closer to me, like her body can't help but react to me the same way mine does to her?

Like I said, horrible fucking liar.

"I need to talk to you," I say dryly, trying to hide how, even with her mad, being this close to her is the happiest I've been in months. Not to mention how seeing that dove on her thigh makes my dick twitch all over again.

If she wasn't already mine to protect, that mark would solidify it.

She ignores me, but Mac, or whatever his name is, sits up straighter at the sound of my voice. His eyes are so fucking swollen I don't know if the poor bastard can actually see me or not.

I widen my stance. "Your boyfriend will be fine on his own. I just need to talk to you for a minute. Alone."

"No." She crosses her arms and lowers her head, but instead of defiant she sounds tired and possibly a little hurt. Unable to handle knowing it was me who caused that pain, I reach for her chin, but as I do, her eyes narrow and her mouth twists into a snarl. "Don't you dare fucking touch me."

I draw my hand away from the open flame of her ire.

Much to my surprise, it's the Viper idiot who speaks next. "Go talk to him. I promise I'll be here waiting for you when you're done."

She stares at him with cold disbelief. If his face wasn't already so mucked up, I think she'd slap him. Instead, she rises to her feet. "Don't follow me. Either of you."

She blazes through the crowd, snatching drinks out of whoever's hand is closest and tossing them back like a recovering alcoholic on a relapse binge. I stay glued to her retreating form, watching the subtle swish of her hips and

basking in the lingering floral scent she left in her wake, until a voice calls up to me from the couch.

“Are you going to hit me again?”

“Depends. Are you still fucking my girl?”

He shakes his head, smiling like my statement was a joke. “We both know she needs to cool off. Why don’t you have a seat? I know that leg I kicked has to be hurting you.”

It is hurting, but I’ll be damned if I let him know.

I drop onto the couch anyway, far enough that we’re not touching, but close enough that the cushions jostle him as I sit, and he grunts in pain.

“I broke your ribs?”

“Sure did.”

“Good.” I lean back, linking my fingers together at the base of my skull and spreading my legs. Feeling something rough and a little wet on my neck, I bring my hands forward, the corner of my mouth pulling up when I see traces of dried blood from where Rylee dug her nails into me.

“What are you smirking about?” Mac asks, sounding annoyed.

“So, tell me,” I say, ignoring him to put my hands back behind my head. “When did you and Rylee start fucking?” If I can’t get answers from her, maybe I can get them out of this schmuck.

He sighs. “Fine, I guess we can do this your way. It was sometime after her night terrors abated. Around the same time she started eating again and feeling half human after you abandoned her and broke her heart.”

Ouch. I might have deserved that one. “Night terrors?”

“*Mm-hmm,*” he confirms. “She screams your name sometimes, but mostly it’s a guy named Jack. She punches and kicks in her sleep, too, but I’m sure you already knew that.”

I lean forward to stop the pain in my chest from spreading.

“It’s funny,” he says next, “every time I think she’s getting better, you fuck it all up. First by not showing up, then by breaking up with her, and now here you are to do it all over again. Don’t worry, though, I’ll be there *once again* to clean up the mess you leave behind.”

I might have won the Pit fight, but the Viper is decimating me in this one.

I spot Rylee across the club where one of the Irish girls is inviting her up onto the bar top. Rylee takes the woman’s hand, wobbling in a way that tells me she’s not used to wearing heels that high...or she’s well on her way to being intoxicated.

The music changes, and after some encouragement from her new friends, she starts dancing. I am captivated, utterly and completely under her spell as she moves. She is a sorceress worshipping a foreign god with the swing of her hips. I think the turning of the Earth slows to watch along with me.

Unfortunately, I’m not the only one enthralled.

Between that dress and the way she’s rotating her hips, half the men in this establishment have their sights zeroed in on her. Either she doesn’t notice or doesn’t care, which is interesting. Rylee was always a firecracker, but the girl I knew hated attention. Could she have changed that much in six months?

“This is your influence, I assume?” I say to the Viper prick, jutting my chin out in Rylee’s general direction.

He squints, prying open his least swollen eye to see her, then laughs. “I’ve never so much as seen her snap her fingers to the beat of a song. I’ve also seen her have exactly one drink. So no, *Jackeen*, I’m afraid this show is all for you.”

Rylee takes a teetering step too close to the edge of the counter, and the Viper and I are instantly on our feet—like we could actually make it across the room and catch her if she fell. Thankfully, she rights herself at the last moment.

She takes another long draw of champagne, draining the glass in her hand before throwing it against the wall where it

shatters into a thousand pieces. The girls around her clap and cheer.

“You fucked her up something fierce,” the Viper says. “How anyone could dump someone like—”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You keep saying that, but I never broke up with her.”

The Viper raises his stitched eyebrow. “*She* thinks you did.”

I step in front of him. “Explain. Now. Before I finish breaking your face”

“Your buddies came to visit our Boss.” His head tilts, as if confused. “The next day, Rylee told me she no longer had a boyfriend.”

He must be referring to Danny. Which means he’s talking about the night I tried to come to Boston but ended up kidnapping Jeffrey Segretto instead. Right before Ashlynn accidentally killed the poor fuck. As if that memory wasn’t already bad enough, now I have to deal with knowing that’s the same night Rylee gave up on me? It makes sense, I did get her fucking text messages the next day.

You’re a coward.

Jack would be ashamed.

I rake my hand through my hair. If what this prick says is right, then Rylee thought we were broken up when I saw her kissing him... Which means once again I’m the one at fault for this entire shitshow.

God-fucking-dammit. I really did dig my own grave on this one.

Rylee won’t want to hear it, but I have to at least try to explain myself. I take a single step forward when a sudden commotion at the door stops me in my tracks.

Outside, people are yelling, and if I’m not mistaken that loud popping noise almost sounds like—

The windows shatter, tiny glass shards exploding through the air as a hailstorm of gunfire rips through the club.

Rylee.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

COLTON



FIGHTING against the stampede of partygoers, I head for the bar where I last saw Rylee.

The club is a mosh-pit of mayhem, people running into each other and falling to the ground, their panic making the situation ten times more difficult to navigate.

More shots explode from the front, and the man next to me collapses to the floor, a gaping hole in his chest right next to his American flag pin.

I duck when the next shots ring out, but I never stop moving. Even when sparks fly from the overhead lights and molten heat rips into my side, I keep going, tossing aside anyone who gets in my way.

No one has any idea where to go or who to fight. Everyone has a gun in their hand, myself included, but no one knows who the hell to shoot at—we're all enemies, after all.

Someone slams into my shoulder. "You're going the wrong direction, the fight's that way," one of the Russians screams in a thick accent. He tries to stop me, but I punch him square in the mouth. Next, one of the Bolivians and I slam into one another. He attempts to get me to join the fight by shoving me in the opposite direction, but I put that motherfucker on the ground and keep moving.

When I finally make it to the bar, Rylee is nowhere in sight.

"Rylee!" Her name is a screamed prayer sending adrenaline raging through my veins.

No reply.

My pulse pumps feverishly as I climb over the counter, and my boots land in a pool of blood next to a pair of high heels. *Where the fuck is she?*

Tapping the grip of my gun against my temple to clear the spots in my vision, I spin in a circle. Fear combined with the pounding pressure in my skull is making it hard to think straight, but she couldn't have gone far.

More gunshots ring out, closer now than before, but I can't tell which direction they're shooting in. "Rylee, I know you fucking hate me, but answer me, goddammit," I plead.

Behind me, the freezer door cracks open, and I swivel around, finding myself staring down the barrel of a pistol.

Tucking my own sidearm into the back of my jeans, I cautiously raise my hands. The door opens a bit further, and the Irish woman Rylee was dancing with earlier pushes her gun into my forehead. "Don't you move a *feckin'* muscle," she warns.

Staying as still as possible, I speak with deliberate slowness. "I'm here for the girl. Pink hair, black dress. Is she in there?"

After what has to be the longest three seconds of my life, the woman waves me into the freezer and shuts the door behind us. The indigo lighting of the interior gives the entire room an otherworldly glow. I look around for Rylee, but the only thing I can focus on is the smeared streaks of something dark and viscous all over the floor.

Oh fuck. Is that Rylee's? I'm going to be sick.

I place my hands on top of my head and double over, trying to breathe.

"The blood is mine," the woman says in a heavy Hiberno-English accent. "Your woman was having a meltdown. I didn't know what to do, so I dragged her in here with me."

Hot bile rises in my throat, and it's all I can do to croak out "Where?"

She gestures vaguely to the makeshift tourniquet on her calf. “Can’t carry her with my leg shot, and I didn’t think she’d be able to cooperate if we needed to run. So I hid her behind the fruit crates.” She points to a large pile of boxes in the corner, but I’m already sliding across the floor to tear down the stack.

I choke down a cry of relief as halfway under the shelf, hands over her ears and her eyes shut tight, I finally see Rylee. She’s in the fetal position, her breathing uncontrolled, but she looks otherwise unharmed.

“No. No. No. It’s not real. You’re in Boston,” she whispers to herself.

My chest cleaves open.

Pushing aside the rest of the boxes, I cup her cheek. “Tiger, open your eyes. We need to get out of here.”

Muffled screams penetrate through the freezer door, and her eyes peel open. She takes one look at me and scrambles into my lap, wrapping her arms and legs as tight as she can around my waist, like a frightened animal searching for comfort.

I run my hands over her back and hold her, reveling in the knowledge that she’s safe and basking in the feel of her heart beating rapidly against mine.

For one brief second, I am home.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

She shakes her head and leans away, removing her hands from around my torso. Then her body goes rigid against mine. I look up to figure out why, and find Rylee staring at her own blood-covered hand. “You’re bleeding,” she says, her eyes wild, cheeks pale. “T-they sh-shot you?”

My brows pinch. “What? No, I’m fine.”

Ignoring me, she runs her hands frantically over every inch of my body. The contact feels so good I groan—thankful that the freezer generator and ruckus outside covers most of the

sound. She presses her palm over my left flank, and I suck in a loud breath, grimacing.

Fuck me.

Bringing my hand to the spot she touched, I find a hole in my Henley and a nick in my skin from where a bullet must have grazed me. *Fuck that hurts.* “It’s just a scratch, I’m okay.”

“He sh-sh-shot you.” Her lips are quivering, tears brimming in her lower lids.

I take her trembling hand and wipe it clean on my shirt, but it doesn’t help. Her face sags and glistens in a thin layer of sweat.

“Rylee?”

She goes ghostly white as her breathing becomes shallow and erratic once more. “I can’t breathe,” she gasps before her eyes glaze over.

“Rylee, what’s happening?” I give her a shake, but she doesn’t respond.

Someone brushes against my side, and I have my gun out and pressed into his groin before I realize it’s the Viper.

“It’s just me,” he says, like that means anything. This motherfucker is lucky I have a steady trigger finger.

I don’t know when he came in, but the fact that I didn’t hear him is more than a little fucking alarming. I take in the rest of the freezer to see what else I missed. Besides the Irish woman being gone, the only thing that’s changed is Mac barricaded the door.

I lower my gun, slapping Rylee’s cheek with a light but forceful touch. “Open your eyes. Look at me.” Her lids remain tightly shut as she gasps for air, wheezing while she rocks her body in tiny movements.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Mac says flatly, as if he’s not surprised.

A shot goes off in the club, and despite the thickness of the door, both Mac and I flinch.

Rylee's hands, one still covered in my blood, fly to her ears. "No, no, no."

I rock her back and forth, doing my best to stay calm and not make this worse for her, but seeing her like this is breaking something inside me. "You're okay. I've got you. I'm here now," I soothe, cradling her against my chest.

I turn to the Viper. "How often does this happen?"

Mac crouches down beside us, running a hand over her hair. There is so much affection and concern in his actions that I don't push him away.

"We need to get her out of here and, thanks to you, I'm too messed up to carry her." He hands me a phone. "Get her somewhere safe and text Leon from my contacts. We'll meet up with you later."

"Jack," Rylee murmurs. "Please, no."

My gut tightens. *She's reliving that night.*

"How often does this fucking happen?" I repeat.

"Less than it used to." Another shot goes off, and the Viper flinches as a bullet *pings* off the metal door. "Get her up. We really don't have time to talk about this now."

Fuck. He's right. There will be time for questions later. I have to get her out of here.

Cupping the back of Rylee's neck, I bring her face to mine and plant a soft kiss on her forehead. "Hang on, Tiger."

I scoop her up, keeping my pistol ready in one hand and throwing Rylee over my shoulder with the other. She's crying now, but thankfully doesn't fight me.

I had no fucking idea it was this bad. I really am the scum of the earth.

Mac starts to unbarricade the door and pauses, eyeing me up and down. "The Boss is going to shoot me for sending her with you."

We stare at each other, my grip tightening on my gun.

If he makes a single move to stop me, I won't hesitate to put him down.

His eyes drop to my hand. "You going to shoot me?"

Jaw clenched, I hover my finger over the trigger.

"This fuckin' guy," he mumbles under his breath, shaking his head as he moves the last crate away from the exit. "Just keep her safe. Once I open this door, head for the hatch beneath the bar. It'll take you into the basement. Take a left and there will be a service door at the end of the corridor that leads to the alley. I'll cover you. Remember, text Leon."

I dip my chin, adjusting Rylee one last time before he opens the door and fires off two rounds.

Once Rylee and I are through the hatch, I hear Mac drag something heavy over the opening. Screams and more gunfire sound from overhead as I move through the dark basement. It's a fucking maze down here, but after a few dozen cobwebs and three solid kicks to the door leading outside, we make it to the alley safely.

The problem is, Rylee is still half catatonic and I only have my bike.

Hopeful that the brisk air will snap her out of this, I tuck my gun away and set her down on the trunk of a nearby car.

Taking her face between my hands, I crouch down to her eye level. "Rylee, baby, I need you to breathe."

She shakes her head, as if to say she can't.

"Yes, you can." I inhale deeply. In through my nose, out through my mouth, hoping to coax her into doing the same.

"Do it with me this time." I repeat the process, and eyes wide, she latches onto my wrists and drags in a wheezing breath.

I bring my forehead to hers. "That's it, Tiger. Another one."

She nods through clenched teeth, and slowly inhales again.

I wait a few more breaths before I shrug out of my long sleeve Henley and place it over her head. It's way too big, but it will at least keep her warmer than that ridiculous dress.

"You're hurt," she whispers as I drag her arms through the oversized sleeves.

"I've had worse. We need to get on my bike. Do you think you can hang on to me for a few miles?" The hotel Frank has us in isn't far from here, but Rylee is shoeless and coatless. In this freezing weather, this ride is going to be miserable for her.

"I can do it." Her hand shifts to her thigh, and she pinches the skin near her tattoo until her nose scrunches up. I want to ask her what that's about, but I know we don't have time.

After checking that the coast is clear, I carry her over to the bike and pop my helmet onto her head. For once in her life, she doesn't argue or put up a fight. And when I climb on, she even wraps her arms around me without me needing to force her to.

"I'm still mad at you," she says into my back, her teeth chattering against the thin fabric of my undershirt.

There she is.

I put the bike into gear. "I know."

Her arms tighten around my middle as we skid out of the alleyway, catching a glimpse of flashing blue and red lights and the wail of approaching sirens from the east.

We speed away, and I soak in the feeling of her body pressed against mine. She's safe, we both are, and no matter how pissed she is at me—and whatever the deal with this Mac fucking guy is—the way she climbed into my lap in that freezer gives me hope that a small part of her might still love me.

The panic attack highlighted just how much she's been suffering by herself and how badly I let her down. I was so busy trying to protect her from Frank and Eastmann that I forgot sometimes it's the wounds you can't see that do the most damage.

I'll never be able to make up for my cowardice, but at least I got her out of that club in one piece.

I place my hand over hers on my chest.

If she had better clothes on, I'd drive us away from all of this. We'd hole up in a safe house somewhere, escape all the madness, and maybe I could explain everything to her. But that will never happen, not when she's half naked and already shaking from the cold.

I'm also painfully aware that when her adrenaline wears off, so will her tolerance for me.

The engine roars beneath us, echoing the anguished keen of my soul as every turn of my tires takes us another step closer to losing each other forever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

RYLEE



SUNSHINE, cloves, mint, and the faintest hint of motor oil cradle me in a protective cocoon. I'm cold. So cold that I've moved past tingling numbness into blinding pain.

Everything around me bounces in time with the chatter of my teeth as Colton carries me through an elegant hotel lobby with barrel-vault ceilings. Wherever we are, I can't find it in myself to care, so I take another deep breath and burrow into his chest.

"Almost there," he murmurs, and despite the pain my eyes drift closed.

I'm vaguely aware of a shower running and my dress being cautiously unzipped before something soft is shoved over my head. Next thing I know, scalding water is boiling me alive. I wither in agony, slipping and sliding as I struggle against the large arms holding me under the lava.

"It's just a shower, Tiger. The water is barely warm. Try to relax, the feeling will pass." Colton presses me into his chest to keep me from bolting, and after what feels like an eternity, the scorching discomfort subsides.

Sopping wet and still fully clothed, he removes his undershirt and jeans, making sure to leave on his boxers, then scrubs my arms and feet with soap. Keeping me under the spray, he quickly cleans himself before shutting off the water and carrying me over to the running bathtub.

We don't speak and I don't fight him as he lowers me into the steaming water and excuses himself.

I have to twist and bend my body to fully submerge my torso in the half-full basin, but when I do, the warmth eases some of the stiff tingling in my muscles and my limbs finally begin to unfurl.

Much more alert now, I realize Colton kept both of us dressed as much as possible during that shower. He never removed his boxers and I'm still wearing my underwear as well as one of his clean undershirts—which billows around me in the crystal-clear water of the massively oversized tub that's still filling from an ornate spigot on the opposite wall.

When Colton returns, I sink my chin below the water, covertly letting my gaze roam up his flanks until he leans over to hand me a glass of amber liquid. I sit up to take it, noticing the waterproof bandage taped over the wound on his side and a glimpse of a tiger tattoo on his neck.

That's new.

“Are you warm enough?”

His eyes are trained on the tile floor, and I wrap my arms around my knees before answering. “Better, but I still can't feel my feet.”

A sound of displeasure gurgles in his throat. “Hand me one.” He kneels on the rug, extending his palm expectantly.

“One of my feet?”

I catch the tiniest hint of a smirk as he rolls his eyes and says, “No, one of your fingers. Yes, your foot.”

When I try to raise my leg, the slick porcelain makes me slip and I nearly dip under the water with my drink.

With only an exasperated sigh for warning, Colton maneuvers himself gracefully into the opposite end of the tub to face me. The water level rises so quickly that in order to keep it from overflowing, I lunge forward, scrambling across him and trying not to spill my whiskey while I shut off the spigot on the wall behind his back.

Crisis averted, I now find myself in an entirely new predicament. Not only is my waterlogged T-shirt see-through,

but the way I'm draped over Colton means my breasts are right in his face. He swallows audibly, taking in the sight before zeroing in on the close proximity of one of my nipples to his mouth.

My breath hitches when he raises his hand to my waist, the contrast of his hot palm over the soaked fabric covering my chilled skin making my heart pound violently against my rib cage. When his fingers dig into the soft flesh above my hip, his grip is so desperate I nearly moan. Closing my eyes, I brace myself for whatever comes next, only to be lowered gently back into the water.

I try not to overanalyze the sinking disappointment flooding my belly. After all, I should be used to these almost-moments by now with the way Mac and I always seem to—

My eyes snap open.

Oh God.

“Where's Mac?” I ask, the octave of my voice shrill and panicked.

Colton pushes my shoulder's down into the water and grabs one of my feet, cautiously working the blood back into my toes. “The Viper prick is fine. He gave me his phone, and I already texted some guy named Leon that you're safe. They'll be back in touch in an hour or two.”

He switches to my other foot, massaging life into my lower extremities with each pass of his skilled hands. I sigh contentedly, reclining against the tub until the tips of my hair dip below the surface, fanning out like soft-pink flower petals around me.

Considering how an hour ago all I wanted to do was punch Colton in the dick, this should be awkward, but it's not. No matter how badly he hurt me, there's still this pull between us—a comfort from being near one another; an easiness that comes more naturally than breathing.

We may not be together anymore, but he still feels like home.

“He cares for you,” Colton says, interrupting my thoughts.

My head tilts in confusion. “Mac? Yeah, I guess so.”

Colton’s eyes drop to the arch of my foot. “You’ve been dating since May?”

I snort into the whiskey glass. “Yeah. Mac was in Eden with us, you never noticed?”

He grips my heel. “When did you guys start fucking?”

And there’s the awkwardness.

I bring the amber liquid to my lips, taking a tiny sip and letting it burn the back of my throat as I decide how honest to be.

Fuck it. The man ran through an onslaught of bullets to get to me, the least I can do is give him a straight answer. “Mac and I have never had sex.”

Colton kneads the arch of my foot with his knuckles. “So he’s not your boyfriend?”

“Rick created the rumors of Mac and I dating as part of a cover story that I was in Boston all summer.” I shrug, taking another sip of the whiskey. “We kissed one time, after I realized you weren’t coming for me, but no, we’re not dating. I don’t know what Mac and I are.”

Colton’s grip on my foot becomes momentarily painful and a frown tugs at his lips. “And back at the club, when you couldn’t breathe, how often does that happen?”

“Not very often...anymore.” Heat creeps up my spine, my neck shrinking into my shoulders as I contemplate six different ways to escape this bathroom.

Continuing to rub his hand up my calf, he closes his eyes. “Danny had panic attacks any time he heard loud noises for years after the mine collapsed. I had night terrors. It doesn’t make you weak, it makes you human.”

I rest my chin on my knee, staring at him through veiled lashes. He’s never talked about this with me before. Last summer, Danny drunkenly let it slip that Colton still woke up screaming, but in all the nights we spent together I never experienced it for myself.

“How did you make it stop?”

He looks at me for a long, drawn-out breath. “Jack sent us all to therapy for a while when we were teenagers. The therapist was big on finding ways to ground yourself in the moment. Five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, one thing you taste. That sort of thing.”

I take another sip to wash away the sudden bitterness coating my tongue. “I’m glad that worked for you, but I can’t exactly see a therapist about this. Not when that would mean disclosing that I killed Logan and Sheriff Knott.”

“I didn’t say the therapist worked for me.”

“Then what was it?”

He turns his neck and runs two fingers down the length of the tiger tattoo. “You. The only time I’ve ever slept peacefully was when I was lying next to you.”

Fighting through the blinding ache in my chest, I lift my chin. “I don’t exactly have that option either, do I?”

One of my hands floats to the surface. It hovers above the water, half in and half out, half dry and half wet, but not quite either. It’s exactly what this thing with Colton is like—it makes me feel alive, even though it’s slowly killing me.

I dive my hand under, submerging it completely. “Why didn’t you come for me like you said you would? You just left me here without a single word of explanation.”

The hand on my foot stills. “I did come. It took me longer than it should have, but I came. Like I said earlier, you were just too busy making out with the Viper to notice.”

The memory of the motorcycle pulling into the alleyway the night Mac and I kissed surfaces in my mind, along with the indescribable desire I had to turn around.

That was him.

Would anything have turned out differently if I’d stopped kissing Mac and followed the tug in my chest?

Colton would have beaten the shit out of Mac that night instead of today, and we'd likely have had this conversation sooner, but it wouldn't have changed any of the damage he'd caused before that moment.

“Don't put this on me. Danny and Minho told me you left the Jackals and that you weren't coming to Boston. I hadn't heard from you in almost *three months*. I was trying to move on with my life. Besides, what was I supposed to think? That you abandoned your brothers but were still coming for me? How could I have known when you didn't even have the courtesy or respect enough to respond to my texts?” My voice echoes sharply off the subway-tiled walls and I realize I'm shouting.

Taking a calming breath, I lower my voice. “I thought maybe you blamed me for what happened to Jack. I couldn't fault you for that, not when I was blaming myself, but the bottom line is that I needed you and you left me here entirely alone. I had to attempt to move on with my life or I was going to fall apart.”

Colton's expression goes blank, his facial muscles sagging and the color draining from his cheeks. I keep talking because I have to get this off my chest if I ever stand a chance at feeling whole again. “I would have waited an *eternity* for you if I'd known you were coming for me. But I didn't know, and I will never allow myself to be abandoned again. Not by my sister, or my father, and definitely not by my partner. I have to know I'm someone's priority.”

My confession is excruciating. I loved this man, and part of me always will. Love just wasn't enough.

I'm half tempted to flee from the room, but once I go, this thing between Colton and I will irrevocably be over—and that's far more terrifying than staying put and hearing his response.

He releases my foot to rake his waterlogged fingers roughly through his hair, highlighting a newly inked marigold on the formerly blank patch of skin on the back of his hand.

Looks like we'll both carry painful reminders of one another but at least no one can see my scars.

“I get that I’m the one who fucked up here,” Colton says, eyes locked on the ceiling. “But just so we’re clear, I said that I would come for you when it was safe. Look at what happened tonight. My world is never going to be safe for you. *I’m* the reason Logan was able to get to you and your sister. *I’m* the reason Knott was able to take Danny and Jack. *I’m* the reason Jack is dead. You almost died that night right along with him—all because I refused to stay in Eden when Jack asked me to. What does being someone’s priority matter if it puts you in danger or gets you killed?”

He brings his elbows to his knees, resting his head in his hands. “I can’t be the reason you get hurt. I won’t be.”

“But you did hurt me. Nothing has ever, or will ever, hurt me the way you have.” My voice is quiet and fragile, but it’s the truth. Everyone who’s ever let me down or been taken from me, like my mom and Jack, didn’t have a say in the matter. Colton did.

I see the exact moment my words shatter him.

His eyes close and he clutches his chest, fingernails biting into the tattooed eagle over his heart until he finally draws in an audibly anguished breath.

“You have to believe me when I say I *never* meant to hurt or leave you.” He scoots closer, water sloshing against the edge of the tub when he wraps his arms around me to rest his head atop mine. “It’s not an excuse and I know I fucked up, but I didn’t know how to tell you what was happening. I thought I could fix everything, but then one week turned into two, and three turned into four. It all kept spiraling out of control... I’m so fucking sorry.”

He crushes me against his chest, my whiskey splashing into the water. “The only thing I wanted was to see your face and hear your voice, but I knew if I did I wouldn’t be strong enough to finish what I started.”

My body goes rigid against his, the tiny hairs on my neck rising. I can see from his reaction that he never intended to be cruel and that he's been hurting right along with me, but I also don't think he meant to let that last part slip. "What did you start, Colton?"

His cheek rolls back and forth across my head as he lets loose a quaking breath. "That night at Jack's, when I told you I was afraid what you'd think of me once you knew all the things I've done to keep my family safe, do you remember what you said to me?"

I think back to that night, the smell of lilies from the walkway, the Cuban food, the boys cooking in the kitchen, and Jack smiling at all of us. The conversation Colton and I had in his old bedroom. "I told you it didn't matter what you'd done, as long as you were doing it for the right reasons."

He nods against my hair. "I can't tell you what I'm doing, but I swear to you on Jack's memory that no matter how fucked up it looks, I'm doing all this shit for the right reasons." He pulls away, searching my eyes like my opinion of him is the only thing that matters.

Setting my drink on the side of the tub, I stare up at him, trying to find the truth of what he's saying in those blue-green eyes of his. "Okay. I believe you."

The words are barely off my lips before his mouth is on mine. He drags me into his lap, kissing me like a drowned man devouring his first breath of air. I thread my fingers into his hair and a moan slips from my throat as he deepens the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth with languid strokes while his grip on my waist pulls our bodies flush against one another.

I'm tempted to melt into his touch, to let his fire consume me and forget everything that ever happened before this moment, but the wounds his absence left on my heart are still pink and raw, the scars just now beginning to form.

Bringing a hand between us, I force his reluctant lips away from mine. "I said I believe you, *not* that I forgive you."

It's an important distinction, and I need Colton to understand that without the whole truth, I can never give him the absolution he desires.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness. I just want to keep you safe and apologize for the pain I've caused." He runs his nose against my jawline and nips at my earlobe. "Let me show you how sorry I am."

Goose bumps erupt across the surface of my skin in response to the low, sensual timber of Colton's voice. My eyes flutter open and closed at the decadent sensation of his palm sliding down my flank, his touch trailing sparks of electricity across my skin. He grips the hem of my T-shirt, waiting until I nod before pulling it up over my head and throwing it across the bathroom where it lands on the tile with a loud *smack*.

"Beautiful," he murmurs reverently. Then his lips are on mine and he's running his rough hands up my back and across my stomach, exploring my flesh the same way his tongue explores my mouth. I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss and whimpering as fire spreads through my chest.

His tongue flicks against my own, and it feels so damn good that when his mouth drops to my neck to nibble and suck, all I can do is gasp and lean into him.

My body is aflame, my clit throbbing so fiercely I keep forgetting to breathe. It's like the synapses in my brain are firing off in a thousand different directions at once. I want this. I want *him*. But with my mouth no longer occupied, there's just enough room for my thoughts to stray...and uncertainty to creep in.

Somewhere deep down I know sex is a temporary fix, a Band-Aid over a gaping hole of a sinking ship. It might make me feel better for a second or two, but in the long run, it won't change the inevitable truth that Colton is going to leave again.

My body stills, and he pulls back an inch, searching my expression.

I shake my head, not knowing what to say.

“The choice is yours, Tiger. I can help silence the noise,” he taps my forehead, “or we can stop. Whatever you want, that’s what I’ll do.”

Fingers still interlocked behind his neck, I shrug. “What I want is for none of this to have happened. I want us to be back in Eden with Jack, sitting at his kitchen table laughing and smiling and playing dominoes. I want to kiss you without wondering if it’s the last time. Beyond that, I don’t know.”

Colton cups my cheek, his eyes closing as he draws in a staggered breath—he can’t give me any of those things...and we both know it.

He leans us back against the tub and we stay there like that, me listening to the strong cadence of his heart and him stroking my hair, until the water turns tepid. Then he wraps me in a towel and carries me to the bed where he forms his body tightly around mine so that my back is flush with his chest.

“If it were up to me,” he says softly against my ear, “I wouldn’t have chosen this life for you.” His inked fingers trace the dove tattoo on my thigh, pausing over the crescent-shaped scars scattered throughout.

Because I can already hear the clock counting down on our time together, and because I’m feeling sentimental and fragile, I play along. “What life would you have chosen for me?”

His breath dances across the sensitive skin right below where my ear meets my neck. “A quiet one,” he says. “I’d build you a nice house and plant you as many marigolds as you wanted. I’d keep you safe.”

That doesn’t sound so bad.

“How would I spend my days?” I turn toward him, trailing my fingers over the tattoos on his shoulder and bicep as he tucks a loose strand of damp hair behind my ear.

“However the hell you wanted. With me. Under me. Running. Doing computer shit. Whatever made you happy, I’d find a way to give it to you.”

“Colton.”

“Yeah?”

“The Jackals make me happy. *Helping* people makes me happy.” I lay my hand flat over the eagle on his chest. “*You* used to make me happy. That was all I needed. Why can’t you just give that back to me?”

Colton sighs. “I never want to lie to you. Please don’t make me start now.”

My chest pinches.

“There are other ways to help people. It’s not too late for you,” Colton says. “Minho and I could make new identification papers, and you could have a safe life somewhere away from the Vipers and the Jackals. Away from all this death and violence.”

“Away from you?”

“It would be safer.”

“Is that what you really want?”

“Of course not.” He sighs, closing his eyes tightly as if in pain. “I want to stay next to you in this bed. I want to hold you until the world crumbles around us and everything turns to dust.”

I shake my head. “*This* is the life I want. As soon as things are sorted with Holly and Eastmann, I’m going back to Eden and the Jackals.”

Colton is part of the life I want, but I can’t bring myself to say it aloud. When he tucks my head under his chin and curls his arms around me, it feels like he understood my unspoken words anyway.

Some time later, a phone buzzes, the sound tearing me from the false safe haven we created cocooned in each other’s arms, plunging me back into reality.

Colton reaches over me and frowns. “The Vipers are here.”

Coldness rushes in to fill the vacated space he leaves in the bed as he retrieves Cherry’s dress from the bathroom. When he

returns, he also has a shirt and sweats, which he helps me slide into while I sit lifelessly on the edge of the bed.

When I'm dressed, Colton lays his head in my lap. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. You are the best thing that ever happened to me," he confesses. "I'm still so in love with you that sometimes I think my bones will break beneath the weight of it."

My heart gives a painful thud, and I slide my fingers into his soft blonde hair. "Then stay. Come back to me and your brothers."

He closes his eyes, and I can actually hear the strain in his teeth from how tightly he's clenching his jaw. "I can't. Not yet anyway."

"Then this is it for us." I swallow hard, my lower lids prickling with tears that I refuse to let fall as the scars on my heart tear back open. "I can't do this half-in, half-out thing anymore. Either you're going to be there for me or you need to let me go so I can move on with my life."

A soft knock sounds on the door.

Colton stands to lead me to the entryway, pausing before placing Mac's phone and Cherry's dress into my hand. He grazes his knuckle along my jaw and grabs my chin, smashing his lips into mine.

My eyes sting and my lips burn from the force of it, but I kiss him back just the same, searing the feeling of his touch into my memory. When his arm snakes around my waist and lifts me from the floor, for one beautiful second I think he's changed his mind...

Then he sets me back down and pulls away.

"I'll love you until the day I die, Rylee Adder. But I'll let you go, if that's what you need."

He leans down to steal one final kiss before closing the door between us once and for all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

RYLEE



WHEN I WAKE, Mac's side of the bed is empty, meaning one of two things: either he hasn't slept or he chose to sleep somewhere else.

It twists my stomach in knots to admit it, but I'm relieved I was able to sleep alone.

After he and Leon picked me up from the hotel, Mac and I barely spoke two words to each other. He sat next to me on the ride back to the Den, but just stared out the window without comment as Leon explained the aftermath of what happened at the Pit party.

In total, twenty people are dead: two Vipers, six Russians, three Irish, five small-time locals, three unaffiliated civilians, and—most notoriously—one U.S. senator.

By the time Mac and Leon came to retrieve me, Senator Marwood's death had the media in a frenzy. It's still unclear who shot first, but according to Leon, it looks like a fight between Mafia and Cartel members spiraled out of control, triggering a domino effect throughout the rest of the club. As a result, the Pit's been shut down indefinitely and everybody involved agreed to lie low for the foreseeable future.

It's a complete mess, but thankfully the two people I care about most made it out. I'll likely never see one of them again, and the other one will hate me after we find the time to talk, but they are unharmed and that's all that matters.

Pulling the collar of Colton's shirt up over my nose, I allow myself to breathe in his spiced-sunshine scent one last

time. The pain is still there, but it's shifted to something more akin to mourning. Colton's role in my life is officially over. I don't think the scars he left on my heart will ever heal, but last night did give me an odd sense of closure.

I force myself to sit up, noticing for the first time how bright the light seeping through the curtains is. Something shifts on the couch, and my eyes snap to the shadow perched on the farthest cushion near the door.

Mac's chin rests on his knuckles as he stares at me thoughtfully. He's still dressed in the suit he wore to the party, his cast barely visible under his coat sleeve.

I hope he didn't sit there all night...

"What time is it?"

"Late. But you needed the rest." Leaning back, he flips the switch on the wall, the light illuminating the bruises on his face, which are much darker than they were yesterday, but at least some of the swelling has gone down.

"I'm surprised the stupid birds didn't wake me up." I laugh, trying to bring some levity to the tension-filled room.

It doesn't work.

"The sparrows have been gone for months." His voice is drawn with exhaustion, but I'm not sure if that's the reason my chest deflates.

"Oh, sorry. I guess I didn't notice. Are you feeling okay? How's your arm?"

"I'm fine." He stands abruptly, grimacing as he does. "We need to get going soon. You have an appointment on your calendar for 4:00 p.m. we can still make."

Shit. I completely forgot about my "date" with Korey.

Not quite ready to wash Colton from my skin, I quickly slip into a long-sleeved dress and thigh-highs that I pair with tall boots.

Avoiding the inevitable confrontation of my memories from last night, I concentrate on the task at hand and attempt

to psych myself up. Fortunately, after walking through the process with Minho hundreds of times, the only thing I need to prepare for is the fake flirting with Korey. Other than that, I'm not the tiniest bit nervous about using the Ghost Rider program we designed to copy the supercomputer's code.

After applying mascara and concealer to hide the deep-purple shadows under my eyes, I retrieve the thumb drive and shove everything else I need into my purse.

In the hallway, Mac eyes my outfit, no doubt noticing that I'm more dressed up than usual, but he doesn't comment. I hate that my actions yesterday hurt him. But what I hate even more is how the look on his face is an exact replica of the devastation on mine last night when I left that hotel room.

I deserve every ounce of his coldness, but it stings just the same.

In the garage, the Viper guards who accompany me to school are nowhere to be found. "Just us today? Did you finally convince Rick that so many of you guarding me was unnecessary?" I try to make myself sound casual and light, but halfway through the question I remember two Vipers didn't make it out of the club last night.

The men who died might have been my guards, or maybe even one of Mac's friends. This time I can't fault him when he says nothing.

We're almost to the car when my steps falter. Mac normally rides with me while the other guards follow behind in another car. That won't work today. If I'm going to let Korey drive the Chevelle, Mac can't be in the back seat. "Hey, do you mind following in the SUV instead of riding with me today?"

I wait for him to question the reason for my request, part of me hoping the oddness of it will knock him out of this stupor, but he just nods and heads for one of the black Cadillacs.

During the drive to campus, I eye him in my rearview mirror, mulling over what I'm going to say to him later instead of concentrating on the task at hand. Worrying about what the

hell is going on with Mac is already way too distracting, so after parking, I march right up to the experimental labs without waiting for him to follow.

The security normally stationed outside is noticeably absent, and before I can think better of it, I see myself in. The building, one of the newest on campus, is all concrete and wood paneling, reminding me more of a trendy art museum than a college facility. I've never seen this place empty, not even on school holidays or weekends, but today, with the exception of an elderly man posted up behind the reception desk, it's completely uninhabited.

Which is why the *clop* of booted footsteps and a noise that sounds suspiciously like glass breaking nearly makes me jump out of my skin.

An exasperated groan rings out down the hallway. "I told you they weren't packed right. It's bad enough you're confiscating everything, but do you have to break it, too?" Korey emerges from around the corner behind two men in khaki jumpsuits carrying boxes marked CONFIDENTIAL in bold red letters.

He looks beyond pissed as he stomps after them. For a second, I think he's going to tramp right past me, but he skitters to a halt. "Rylee," he says, a genuine smile changing his entire demeanor. "I was worried you wouldn't remember, but here you are—and early at that. I love it."

With my attention locked on those boxes and the additional men filing in to carry more away, the tightening unease weaving its way around my throat won't allow me to respond.

"Rylee? Is everything alright?" He sounds concerned but also a little put out.

Remembering myself, I force a smile. "I've never been here before. It's a lot to take in."

"It's wild, right? They built it a few years ago. Everything is state of the art."

“Impressive.” I glance around the hallway, adjusting the shoulder strap of my bag. “I’m a little early, but I’d love that tour you promised before we head out.”

Try as I might to look elsewhere, my gaze keeps returning to the men. *What are they carting away in those boxes?*

Korey smiles proudly. “Yeah, of course. I finished the project I’ve been working on, so the lab is mostly empty, but I’d love to show you where all the magic happened.”

Mostly empty? Alarm bells go off inside my head as my eyes land on the last set of boxes being carried through the door.

“If we’d done this earlier, I could have shown you all the concept designs and simulation models on my laptop, but the *government* decided I hadn’t done enough for them and came back today to steal the rest of *my* equipment. Like *I* would ever sell the code *I* developed to a foreign entity.” He emphasizes a new key word each time one of the beige jumpsuited workers passes us with a box.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Any second now I’m going to choke on the bile burning a hole in my esophagus. “The supercomputer is gone?”

“Yeah.” Korey gives me a single glance of concern. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to finish ahead of schedule. Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You look a little green.”

I am so fucked. So absolutely fucked.

A million panicked thoughts scream inside my skull and I start to hyperventilate.

The supercomputer is gone.

I’ll never be able to decode the thumb drive now.

I try to come up with a solution or a way to turn this around, but my mind is so frantic and my breaths so shallow, I’m seconds from passing out.

Korey shuffles his feet, clearly uncomfortable. “I can still show you around the lab if you want?”

“When did they take the computer?” My voice is so shrill it comes out as more of a squeaky whisper.

“They started three days ago,” Korey replies, his chin tucking into his neck as he leans away from me. “Hauled the last piece out yesterday. I guess they figured it would be easier without students everywhere, secrecy and all that jazz.”

I'm going to be sick.

I take a step backward, and then another. “I’m suddenly not feeling well. Can I take a rain check on this date?”

Without waiting for a response, I stumble outside and spew my guts all across the walkway.

Once I’m far enough away from the labs, I dial Minho, who picks up on the first ring.

“I was going to call and explain,” he says by way of greeting. “I just haven’t had time yet.”

Ignoring his confusing statement, I divulge the reason for my call in a single breath. “It’s gone. The supercomputer is gone and I never copied the code.”

“Don’t worry about it. Are you near your computer?” The furious click of his keyboard echoes through the line.

Holding the phone away from my ear, I glance at the screen like that will somehow explain his odd reaction. “No, I’m on campus. Did you hear what I said? We lost access. We can’t decode the thumb drive.”

More furious typing and aggressive clicking.

“Minho?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Don’t worry about the drive, we have bigger fish to fry right now.”

The skin on my arms pebbles, gooseflesh branching up my neck and out across my shoulders. “What happened?”

The typing stops, followed by the sound of a screeching chair. “The incident at the Pit party last night opened up everyone in attendance to law enforcement scrutiny. The Feds are always looking for an excuse to bring these guys down,

and a shooting is the perfect way in. Unfortunately for us, we had siphons on almost every single organization there. In order to protect the Jackals, I had to shut them all down.”

My lungs squeeze. “Oh shit.”

“Exactly. Now our return to Eden is delayed again and as of 6 a.m., our income took a near-catastrophic hit.”

I spin around and speed walk in the direction of the parking lot. “Tell me what to do. I can be at my desk in fifteen minutes. How can I help?”

There’s a rustling noise, like he’s shifting in his seat, before he says, “You understand we can’t risk anything being traced back to the Jackals, right?”

“Obviously.”

“Okay, well, to do that, I had to shut down large portions of the Ghost Rider program.”

“Oh.” I stop walking. I’m a foot away from the Chevy, but I can’t seem to move my feet.

“I’ll get you back online as soon as feasibly possible. Your phone works and so does your laptop, but for the time being, I had to cut off your access to the network and the accounts. Sorry.”

Silence.

“Ry? Even if you’d copied the code, we wouldn’t be able to use it for months. We can’t risk opening up another point of access into the Ghost Rider network right now.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Okay.”

“This is a setback, not the end of the road. In the meantime, try to keep yourself busy and I’ll call you soon, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Rylee?”

“I’m fine.” I end the call, my grip crushing the phone as I grapple between the urge to scream and the need to break

something the same way the universe seems intent on breaking me.

I pop open the trunk of the Chevelle and, after placing my bag inside, wrap my fist around the tire iron glinting in the late afternoon sun.

The first thing I smash is the driver's side window—the same one Colton cracked all those months ago in Eden. Glass flies everywhere: in my hair, down my dress, all over the asphalt. Then I go for the next window, and the next one, and another one after that. The front windshield takes the most work, but after climbing on top of the hood, I'm able to shatter that one, too.

It's not enough.

Chest heaving, I go for the doors next and then the hood. Slam after metal-crunching slam, I swing the tire iron into the Chevelle—screaming as I unleash all my pent-up rage and heartache from the past six months. When my throat is raw and there's nothing left to hit that I haven't already swung at, I back away, panting. It's still not enough. I want to keep screaming. I want to cry. I want to tear the clothes from my body and the hair from my scalp.

Why can't anything ever go my way?

I fall to my knees, the rough pavement ripping through my thigh-highs and tearing my skin.

Movement catches my eye as Mac steps up to the Chevy. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't even look at me before ramming his knife into one of the tires. The rubber hisses behind him as he tugs me to my feet and wraps my fingers around the hilt of the blade, wordlessly inviting me to finish off the rest of them.

I do, and when the last tire is shredded and my rage is a little more under control, he takes the knife from my hand and walks me over to the Cadillac.

Instead of climbing in, I turn to face Mac. "I'm still in love with him. I never meant to lead you on, I didn't even know myself until yesterday." My head drops forward. "Everything

is falling apart around me. I figured I might as well rip off the Band-Aid with you, too. I'm so sorry."

Mac laughs, the sound so at odds with my dismal, self-deprecating emotions that I pick up my head, staring in disbelief at the way his continued laughter tugs on his swollen cheeks and pulls at the stitches bisecting his eyebrow.

"It's not funny."

"Oh, I'm aware, but you're not the only one who fucked up here."

"You can't seriously be trying to make me feel better about this," I say with a watery scoff. "Don't you see how you being perfect right now is making this so much worse? Unless you've also been in love with someone else this entire time, there's nothing you can say that will make what I did to you okay."

The guilt shadowing his face is unmistakable.

My jaw hangs open. "You're kidding me... Who?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose—*exactly like Rick always does*—and then winces. "Can you just get into the Caddy? I need to call a tow truck for the car you massacred and then I'll tell you everything. I promise."

"Get in the *karr*, I got a secret I'll tell ya in *tree* seconds," I mumble, mocking his sometimes-Irish accent as I scramble into the back seat.

After a quick phone conversation, Mac climbs into the front. We make eye contact in the rearview mirror and when he doesn't immediately start talking, I lift a single brow. "Spill."

"This is harder than I thought," he says, taking a deep breath. "Before I start, I want you to know I'm as much at fault here as you are, if not more. If I hadn't been lying to myself, maybe I would have seen it sooner, but after seeing you with your ex last night..." He shakes his head. "The way you looked at him, it was like looking in a mirror."

His eyes fall to his lap. “I think, somewhere along the line, I got confused because I do love you... I’m just not *in* love with you.”

In the mirror, the bruised skin around his eyes crinkles. And while my initial inclination was to assume this was all a lie to make me feel better, I’ve never seen that look from him before. Whoever he’s thinking about, it’s definitely not me.

“Mac...”

“Okay, fine, here it is,” he says, shaking off his smile. “Several years ago—damn near a decade ago, really—I met a girl who flipped my world upside down. She was an absolute firestorm of passion, anger, and beauty. She hated me and I was instantly smitten.

“The first time we met, I was bailing her out of jail.” He laughs, as if lost in the memory. “She asked who sent me and then spit in my face when I told her.”

My eyebrows pinch together. *None of this sounds very romantic...*

“Anyway. A lot of arguments and a lot of forced proximity later, I fell head over heels in love with her. I think she loved me, too, or she could’ve, but she’s a few years older than me, and I think that made her second-guess herself. Before we could figure it all out, she landed herself in some hot water and went into hiding. That’s when she reconnected with an old flame.”

Mac’s eyes meet mine in the mirror as cold recognition creeps up my spine.

“They got married,” he pauses to make sure I’m paying attention, “and then a few years later he was killed. Shot twice in the back of the head.”

I’m too stunned to speak, so I just stare at him from the back seat.

“No matter how poorly you think of yourself, Rylee, you’ll never be the guy who thought that someone’s death meant you’d finally have a chance with their widow.” His head shakes, hot shame pouring from him in waves until the cabin

is so thick with it, I can almost taste it on my tongue. “I saw how devastated she was at the funeral and I couldn’t even find the words to give my condolences. I knew then that I had to move on.”

I lean forward and punch him as hard as I can in the shoulder. “You’re in love with my *sister*? Are you fucking kidding me?” I shake out my hand, the pain keeping my thoughts from spiraling. “Ew, it’s not because I look like her, right?”

Mac’s pupils narrow as he turns around to look me directly in the eye. “*Yer* nothing like your sister. I’ve never confused that fact for a single second. You and I spend every day together, we have fun, you’re hot as hell, and *tings* between us are always so easy. Isn’t that exactly what a relationship should be? That first night you stayed in my bed, I remember *tinkin’* to myself that if *we* can’t make it work, nothing ever will.”

His heavily accented explanation helps me believe his sincerity. Placated by his answer, I lean into the seat. “Why didn’t you tell me? Or say anything to Holly when she came back?”

“She’s still in love with Jeremy. I can’t compete with a ghost. Nothing was goin’ to happen, so it didn’t seem relevant. Plus, I convinced myself I’d moved on...until last night.” He laughs, and I think it might be the saddest sound I’ve ever heard.

“I think you should tell her.”

“I can’t.”

I make a dissatisfied humming noise.

“Okay, Judgmental Judy, what are you going to do about your face-smashing ex?”

“Nothing.”

“Exactly.”

We both let out a frustrated huff.

“We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?” I offer. “Still can’t believe you’re in love with my sister. You know, if you guys ever figure it out, you’re going to have to tell her we made out and I humped your leg.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ll cross that bridge if the time ever comes,” he says as the tow truck pulls in next to us.

“Mac?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for telling me. That really did make me feel less shitty about myself.”

He leans back in his seat, his face turned up toward the tinted sunroof. “If we were allowed to pick who we fell in love with,” he says, “I’d pick you in a heartbeat. I hope that asshole of yours knows what he gave up.”

I look away, leaning my head against the cool glass window.

“He knows.”

Outside, the tow truck driver takes off his hat and puts his hands on his hips as he surveys the damage I caused. I roll down my window and call him over. “How much is it going to cost to fix?”

Using his thumb and index finger, he smooths his bushy gray mustache. “Hard to say. I suppose it might help if I knew what caused the damage.”

“I had a run-in with a sparrow,” I supply with a shrug.

He looks at me with a skeptical brow. “Birds did this?”

I shrug again.

“Alrighty.” His eyes flare wide. “What do you want done to her?” When I don’t jump in to make requests, he starts listing options. “I could try to pop out the dents, but she needs a lot more than that. Extensive body work, a new coat of paint, new tires, and I’m sure what’s under that hood isn’t much better—”

Mac rolls down his window and hands the man a business card. “We have an account. It’ll be under the name Rick Adder or Mac Donovan. Give the girl anything she wants and put it on our tab.”

It’s a nice gesture, but no matter how tempted I am to take him up on this offer, I know better now—if it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. “I can’t, I’m already indebted to Rick enough as it is for letting me stay in the Den.”

Mac turns in his seat again, the stiff movement obviously causing him pain. “Rylee, for once can you just let loose and have a little fun? The Boss hasn’t lowered himself to looking at our finances in years. I’ll make sure he never finds out. Think of this as my apology for the past few months and as the start of our new friendship.”

Let loose and have a little fun.

I guess if I’m stuck in Boston, I might as well do exactly that.

A smile tugs at my lips as I turn back toward the tow truck driver. “Do you have a pen and paper? Because I have some ideas.”

PART TWO



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

RYLEE



Seven Months Later

Late August

EVERY TIME I drive this beautiful car, I damn near have an orgasm.

Matte black paint, glossed noir racing stripes, a rebuilt engine that sounds like a throaty growl every time I gas it... Whoever said diamonds were a girl's best friend clearly never saw the effect of three thousand pounds of steel on a girl's panties.

Shutting off the engine, I hop out and take a few steps back so I can get a good look at her. *Damn.*

"It's been months, are you really going to do this every single time you drive?" Mac gruffs, slamming the door way too hard, even though I've asked him countless times not to.

"Do what? Admire her beauty? Of course I am. Maybe if you stopped to admire Hol—"

His hand claps over my mouth as we pass a group of Vipers heading out of the Den and into the parking structure.

Once they're out of earshot, he shoves me away. "Seriously, can you quit that? One day someone will hear you and that's it for our cover story. We both know when that happens, the Boss no longer has use for me." Mac slides an index finger across his throat, and as we step into the great room, our heads snap to the glass elevator leading to his would-be executioner's office.

After the news of the shooting broke and the subsequent investigation into the party's attendees commenced, the patronage of Sidewinders dwindled to a trickle. It's not isolated to the casino either. All of Rick's business dealings took a major hit after the crime bosses chose to collectively blame him for the heavy surveillance from the ATF and FBI.

There's also been rumors regarding the disappearance of some of Rick's high-society associates, and accompanying whispers he turned informant to save his own skin. None of those claims have been substantiated, but it's still been bad for business.

Desperate to maintain a steady flow of income, my father's been branching out into the illegal importation of drugs, tech, and guns—digging his unredeemable grave an inch deeper with each new business venture.

These days, he barely comes out of his office. If it wasn't for the rent money I drop off every month, I wouldn't see him at all—which has been glorious. Mac keeps offering to take it for me, but Rick hates the fact that I'm financially independent, and I can't seem to give up doing it myself. There really is something satisfying about handing him the paper bag of money and saying, *“I know times are hard, I just want to pay my way and do what I can to help.”*

His vexed reaction is usually worth the trade-off of being in the same room. Plus, it's the only time I get to check up on Cherry, who he keeps tucked away in his office.

Mac's neck juts forward expectantly, like he's still waiting for me to agree to stop mentioning my sister in public.

“Fine.” I shrug. “I'll keep my comments to myself. Be honest, though, is the real reason you're mad because I wouldn't let you drive earlier?” I unlock the door to my room with a swipe of my keycard. “I need to stop by the registrar's office later today, would it help if I let you drive me to campus?”

“Actually, that would help a lot.” He plops onto my unmade bed, the poor mattress squeaking under the strain of his massive form.

Mac lost quite a bit of weight while his ribs and arm healed. It was a painstakingly slow recovery that took just as much of a mental toll as it did a physical one, but now that he's working out again, he's packing the muscle back on. The guy is absolutely stacked and, judging by how many times I've caught Holly staring at his biceps when he carries little JJ, I'm not the only one who's noticed.

A knock sounds at my open door, and I wave in my Viper visitor, pointing to the brand-new computer build sitting by my closet.

Hakim whistles. "Damn, that's beautiful."

Leaning over, I tap the power button and watch his face light up as the rainbow-colored cooling fans spin to life. "I know, right? Not only is she pretty, but she's fast too. Wait until you see how good your games look with the new graphics processing unit I installed."

Hakim shuts off the computer and bends to pick it up, but Mac snaps his fingers. "You know the drill, pay the woman first."

This is the part I always struggle with. In the beginning, fixing computers was a way to keep my mind occupied while my access to the Jackals' accounts was offline, but the workload became so heavy and time intensive that Mac suggested I start charging for my services.

The Vipers didn't have a problem with paying, and now I do everything from easy fixes to brand-new builds. This one was fairly simple, since Hakim only uses it for gaming, but some of the more technically complicated projects I've worked on have been really fun. I make decent money, too. Way more than I ever did as a waitress and more than enough to pay rent to my father.

Once I was reconnected to the Ghost Rider network, tackling the Jackals' IT issues was added to my daily to-do list. Which, of course, Danny insists on paying me for. I haven't touched a dime in the account he set up, but eventually I'd like to put the money toward the new projects I plan on proposing to the club.

The past seven months of my life have been an odd balancing act. One second, I'm helping ensure a Jackal isn't being tracked or assisting one of the charter heads with surveillance. The next, I'm removing porn malware from a Viper's computer. And that's not even accounting for school work or the hours I spend helping out with JJ. But it keeps me busy and *just* tired enough for a dreamless slumber.

I never thought I'd say this, but the Vipers aren't all bad people, they're just misguided and kind of feral—like teenagers away from home for the first time. They live their lives as if they'll never face the consequences of the choices they make.

For the most part, they treat me well. Sometimes, usually when I'm running with Mac, I worry about the day their violent decadence will catch up with them, but then I remember that we all have to be accountable for our actions, and I am not responsible for theirs.

Hakim, for example, is supposed to be at the docks right now guarding a shipment of cocaine from Bolivia. Who am I to stop him if he chooses to be here with me instead?

Mac shoves him toward the door. "Get back to the docks before I report you to Leon."

"I'm sure the drugs will still be there when he gets back," I respond, giving Hakim a quick wave before the door shuts in his face.

Mac throws his hands skyward with an exasperated sigh. "How do you *always* know about this shit?"

I know about it because, out of sheer boredom one night, I hacked into the Vipers' security footage feeds and some of their databases, but Mac doesn't need to know that. "The more important question is, after everything that's happened with you and Rick, why do you still care? Leon is second-in-command now. You *hate* the Den. What's keeping you here?"

His face sobers. "You know why."

He's right, I do.

Mac and I might not share the same bed anymore, but we still stay up late watching movies and talking, especially during those first few months when he was healing and I was...*struggling*.

I don't know how I ever missed it before, but the man is head over heels in love with my sister. He loves her so much it hurts him to be close to her. Still, no matter how often I encourage him, he refuses to make a move. It's been difficult to witness, even more so lately because I know I won't be here to see if they ever work it out.

Sighing, I push Mac across the room and through our shared bathroom door. "Once again, you've managed to depress me. I need to take care of a few things before we head to campus. Meet me in the garage in thirty minutes."

The door closes with a soft click as I rush to the closet to pack up the last of my things. Mac still hasn't noticed that nearly everything I own is now neatly stowed in the trunk of my car. I left the large computer monitors on my desk as a decoy, which probably helps, but the missing piles of clothes and shoes on the floor are a little harder to ignore.

Not that I'm complaining.

Right as I'm zipping up the last load of my belongings into my gym bag, my phone chimes from my desk drawer. I run over to grab it.

Alex: They're officially back in Eden.

Me: Everyone?

Alex: No, not quite. Still missing you and a few others.

Alex: Any hiccups?

Me: Nope. I'm headed to campus and still plan to leave at first light. Remind me what time Jack's Celebration of Life is at?

I know the cookout is taking place exactly a year and a month from the anniversary of Jack's death, but Danny's

changed the time so often that even with a whole day as a buffer, I'm half afraid I'll miss it.

Alex: Noon.

Me: Thanks, boo.

Alex: I'm so excited to see you. I can't wait to squeeze the shit out of you in person.

Me: Same. Go have fun with your man. See you tomorrow.

Alex: Love you.

I clutch the phone to my chest. Alex finally has Minh back, yet he still took the time to update me. I don't know what I did to deserve such an amazing person in my life, but his friendship single-handedly carried me through the last seven months. He's the only other person who understood what it was like to be separated from everyone and who could relate to what I was going through. I absolutely love that man and will forever be grateful for the texts and long hours spent on the phone together.

Okay, enough of that. You're literally going to see him in less than twenty-four hours.

I slip my cell into the back pocket of my black jean shorts and scan the room. It's as bare as possible without arousing suspicion. *Perfect.* I'll get a few hours of sleep tonight and leave when the Vipers' Den is quietest, which is normally just before sunrise.

My stomach flutters as I adjust the bag on my shoulder and step out into the great room. As long as I stay inside the Den, no one cares what I do anymore, which has made the trips back and forth to my car easy and uneventful.

As if to prove my point, a group of Vipers raise their hands in greeting from over by the fireplace. I wave back, cringing as one of them snorts a bump of coke off the dirty ass table and another one gets a lap dance from one of Cherry's girls. Three tables down from them, another group lays out brass knuckles,

baseball bats, and other melee weapons that they no doubt intend on using later.

Nope.

Definitely can't say I'm going to miss this place. I will miss some things: like Mac and my sister and my adorably squishy-cheeked nephew. But living here, especially knowing the evil men my father associates with financed this place, makes me feel dirty—like I'm making a public declaration condoning my father's greed instead of staying here as a last resort to keep the people I love safe.

Unlocking my car, I toss my bag into the trunk beside the others. That's it. That's the last one. Now only one more task stands between me and Eden. It feels strangely cathartic, or at least it did until heavy footsteps *click* across the concrete behind me.

"That wasn't thirty minutes," I say, hurling my keys at Mac's face.

Without breaking his stride, he snatches them from the air, waiting a beat too long before responding. "I heard you leave."

He knows.

The guilty thought leaves tiny beads of sweat on the back of my neck as Mac and I load into the car. I buckle myself into the custom leather bench seat I had installed, the rumble of the Chevy matching the one inside my stomach.

Hands at ten and two, Mac revs the engine. I wait for him to confront me about leaving, but he never does.

We don't talk during the short drive to MIT, which is already strange enough, but when he parks, he doesn't make a single move to follow me. Mac's silence and refusal to accompany me are eerily similar to his actions the morning after the shooting, which only adds to my anxiety. There's nothing I can do about it right now, though, not with a tight schedule to stick to.

Keeping my head down, I speed walk to the administrative buildings where icy air conditioning blasts me in the face. This

close to 5:00 p.m. and with summer courses over as of last week, campus is desolate and, thankfully, there's no line.

A stone-faced elderly woman sporting a pair of hot-pink, horn-rimmed glasses peers at me over the countertop. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Rylee Adder, I'm the student who's been emailing regarding taking a leave of absence. I believe you have a refund check for me to pick up?" I sound ridiculously formal—probably because I rehearsed what I was going to say sixty-seven hundred times last night—but at least I sound confident.

The woman blinks, the noise resonating in the air like a rusty door hinge in the quiet room. After a quick glance at the clock, she types something into her computer and pushes her glasses up her nose. "Rylee, yes. I have your tuition refund right here."

She takes an envelope out of a wire desk organizer and places it firmly on the counter but doesn't remove her hand. "I dug into your records—as protocol dictates, of course. And I must say, I'm surprised to see a student of your caliber taking a sabbatical. You're in the top 5 percent of your class and on schedule to finish early. Only one semester left and you're not finishing? I have to ask why?"

Shit. I did not rehearse an answer for this one. "To be perfectly honest, I'm just not cut out for big-city life. I'm not from Boston and I sort of hate it here."

Hoping I didn't offend her, I fidget with Jack's ring while fighting the urge to shove my hand into my pocket. "Out of the five classes I have left, all but one are offered online. That changes next academic year. I still plan to finish my degree but waiting a semester to re-enroll means I can do it online. It means I can go home *now* and be with people who share my values and support me."

A tiny smile cracks over her pink-painted lips, and she slides the envelope an inch closer to me. "That's as good a reason as any I've heard before."

Plucking the envelope off the counter, I shuffle from one foot to the other. “Did you have time to look into that second issue?”

Her glasses slip back down her nose as she glances at the screen. “Your tuition was paid anonymously all three semesters. I don’t have a name for you.”

“Okay then.” It was a long shot thinking she might find the answer when I’d already tried, but it was worth asking. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. Thank you for your help.”

Backstepping out of the office, my eyes stay trained on the door long after it closes. For some reason, I have this crazy notion that the registrar is about to storm out and demand the check back. She’d have every right to, since the money isn’t mine. It’s not Danny’s or the Jackals’ either, like I initially assumed, and it most definitely isn’t my father’s. Rick actually laughed at me when I’d asked if he’d been secretly paying my tuition.

At one point, I had the infuriating suspicion that it was *him*, but since Minho has access to all his bank accounts, we quickly disproved that theory. The truth is, I have no idea who’s been paying for my schooling. If I did, this envelope would already have a stamp and mailing address on it so I could wash my hands clean of this debt. For now, I’ll just have to hold on to it.

Eyes and body still facing the registrar’s office, I’m halfway to the parking lot when I slam straight into another student. Pain radiates from my rib cage as I whip around, ready to apologize *and* inform whoever this is that they need to keep blade covers on those damn elbows, but the words dry up on my tongue.

“Korey?”

“Rylee?” he says, eyes bulging with surprise.

Korey and I never did go on that “date,” and although I’ve thought about his supercomputer weekly, I haven’t thought of Korey himself once. “Didn’t you graduate?”

“I’m here for an alumni event.” He adjusts the messenger bag on his shoulder and straightens his collared shirt, each movement dripping with self-importance.

Running into him is not only unexpected, it’s a rather unpleasant reminder of how I failed to copy the code he wrote. I take a step away. “Sounds fun. It was good seeing you, but I —”

“Do you have some time to catch up?”

A flash of pink catches my eye. Initially, I brush it off as my own hair, but then I remember I went back to my natural strawberry blonde months ago. I look again to where the registrar’s pink horn-rimmed glasses glint in the sun from the walkway.

Dammit. I need to move out of her line of sight—and quickly. “Uh, sure,” I chirp, taking the initiative to lead Korey to a picnic bench on the other side of the walkway.

After a brief glance over my shoulder confirming we’re blocked from the registrar’s view, I take a seat, scrunching my nose as the sticky-sweet tang of lemon-lime bites through the air.

“Aw, shit,” Korey grumbles, abruptly rising to his feet to escape the copious amounts of neon-green liquid leaking from his bag. “Fuck!” He pulls out a wet sticker-covered laptop, shoving it into my hands before frantically rifling through the rest of his messenger bag.

“Everything is soaked. Do you mind watching my stuff while I go get some paper towels?” he asks, continuing to remove the important items from his bag and setting them on the table.

I glance at the parking lot and then the laptop. “Can’t you just take it with you? I really do need to get going.”

“Come on, please? It will dry out quicker in the sun, and this way I can make sure you don’t run off like last time.” As if sensing the impending *no* on my tongue, he adds, “If you watch my stuff and stick around long enough to let me

convince you to go on a date with me, I'll make it worth your while."

His face doesn't move, but I can almost feel the eyebrow wiggle laced in his offer.

Gross.

I place the computer on the table, hoping he'll pick up on my polite refusal.

"Damn," he grunts. "One semester away and I've already forgotten how different the women here are. Wait, I've got it." He snaps his fingers, pointing aggressively at my face. "If you stay *and* agree to let me take you to dinner, I'll show you the source code for that supercomputer I designed."

A spark of curiosity has me inching forward. "I thought you said the government took everything associated with the project, including your personal items?"

He leans in conspiratorially. "I had to make a big fuss so they wouldn't realize the laptop they were taking was actually my backup. By that point, they'd already deleted my cloud storage and confiscated my notebooks. The last copy of everything I've ever worked on is here. I couldn't risk losing it."

I attempt to rein in my excitement, but my pulse speeds up anyway. "Are you saying all of the code is on there?"

Korey slaps the table. "*Ha*. See, I knew that would get you. You geek girls are something else. But no, not all the code, just enough to recreate the basic design."

I stare down at the beat-up laptop with newfound appreciation. After months of nothing, the code Minho and I need lands right into my lap the night before I return to Eden? It can't be that easy...

"Why would you risk carrying this around?" I ask with an arched brow. "What happens if it's stolen or falls into the wrong hands?"

Korey rolls his eyes and places his hands on his hips, highlighting an unfortunate wet spot that makes it look like he

peed his pants. “I needed it for the alumni presentation, and obviously I have trackers on it, but it’s not like I can report the damn thing missing if it’s stolen. Hence why I usually keep it on my person.”

“What kind of trackers?”

His responding huff lets me know I’m pushing my luck, but I need him to answer the question.

“One digital and one physical with a GPS. Listen, can you watch my stuff or not?”

“Yeah, of course I can,” I say, biting my lower lip. If this is going to work, I’m going to need as much of a head start as humanly possible. “You know, if you stop by the cafeteria and ask for some dry rice and a bag, we could put the laptop in there? Just to be safe.”

The cafeteria is clear on the other side of campus.

Korey lights up. “That’s a great idea. I’ll be right back. In the meantime, think about where we should eat tonight.” He winks and scurries off with an awkward, bow-legged stride I assume is to prevent chafing from his wet jeans.

I count to ten before grabbing the computer and sprinting to my car like my life depends on it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

RYLEE



THROWING myself into the passenger seat of the Chevy, I dial Minho.

“Rylee?” His voice is content and husky, like he’s been in bed all afternoon. Considering how this is his first day home with Alex in almost a year, he probably has been.

“Sorry to interrupt the reunion, but I need to know where a pretentious genius would hide a GPS tracker in a laptop.” I hold my palm over the speaker. “Mac, get us out of here and let me borrow your knife.”

Without questioning me for the reason, Mac peels out of the parking lot.

Minho yawns. “What’s this all about?”

“I need help,” I say, trapping the phone between my ear and shoulder so I can take the knife from Mac’s outstretched hand and use it to unscrew the back panel of the computer. “You’re not going to believe this, but I have the laptop Korey used to write the source code for the supercomputer.”

I don’t know if it’s the awkward position of the phone, or how excited I am, but my voice comes out breathy and a little crazed.

“How many trackers?”

“Two. One digital. One physical.”

The line goes silent, then I hear cloth rustling. “I’d imagine you’re looking for something between the size of a fingernail and a quarter. It could be anywhere. You’ll need to take it

apart. Do you have a Faraday bag large enough to shove the whole thing into to give us more time?”

“No, I don’t.” The panel pops open just as Mac takes an overly aggressive turn, nearly causing the whole laptop to spill onto the floor. I give him the foulest expression I can muster.

“If you’re being tracked, I can’t take us back to the Vipers’ Den.”

Fuck. He’s right.

I cover the microphone again. “Pull over somewhere so I can work on this for a second. We can move the car every five minutes to make sure Korey doesn’t catch up.”

He nods once and parks a few blocks over. During all our late-night conversations, Mac and I have never broached the topic of my involvement with the Jackals. I have to give the man credit, he’s handling this little hiccup extremely well.

Giving him a grateful smile, I glance down at the laptop, getting my first solid view of the innards. It’s a jumbled mess...and that’s being generous.

“Minho, this thing is heavily modded. Dual central processing units, a massive hard drive, and a monstrous motherboard. None of it is standard. Some parts look like he might have soldered them together himself.”

“Can you video chat?”

I hit the button and flip the view so he can take a look at what I’m talking about. When he accepts, I catch a quick glimpse of him and Alex, both shirtless and curled up against a modern wood-panel headboard, looking satiated and happy before Minho brings the screen up to his face and squints. “It could literally be anything.”

“Could it, though?” Alex grabs the phone, his curly hair falling into his eyes as he takes his own peek at the screen. “I might not know about computers, but I know you two are likely overcomplicating things. If he already had trackers installed, then he knew this might happen. Don’t overthink it. Figure out what you actually need off that laptop and assume Korey understood that too.”

A lightbulb goes off in my head. “If I were a thief—”

“Which you are, on literally every level imaginable,”
Minho quips.

I want to roll my eyes but my grin prevents it. “Super helpful input, thanks for that. *Like I was saying*, if I were a thief and didn’t want to be tracked, I would toss every piece of this laptop except for one.”

Minho takes the phone back and lets out a low whistle. “Holy fuckballs. The student becomes the master.”

“Explain,” Alex says, sounding annoyed and far away.

“The tracker is *in* the hard drive,” Minho and I reply in tandem.

Not willing to waste another second, I jam the blade into the protective casing on the hard drive and pop it open. There’s no reason to do this when accessing the information stored inside, so I can only pray that—

“*Aha!*”

I hold up a nickel-sized metallic disc to the camera.

“Wipe it for prints and toss it,” Mac says firmly.

Minho nods. “That’s exactly right. Good freaking work, Ry. Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.”

Shit. I guess the cat’s out of the bag now.

I wince, angling my body toward the window to save myself from having to see Mac’s reaction. “Same. See you guys tomorrow.”

Once the tracker is wiped clean, I use the hilt of the knife to smash it into a thousand unusable pieces, scattering what’s left of the device into the wind as we drive—which is why I don’t immediately realize Mac drove us to a park overlooking the harbor instead of taking us back to the Den.

With the windows down and the engine off, a humid, sea-tinged breeze drifts through the cabin, bringing with it the sound of lapping water and the cry of distant gulls.

“I already knew you were leaving,” he says. “Does Holly know?”

I can’t meet his eye. “She knows, but she’s not coming. I need you to promise me you’ll look after her and JJ.”

His throat bobs, and the inside of my Chevelle suddenly seems too small.

Despite the guilt, I won’t apologize. I love Mac, he’s one of my best friends, but his loyalties are torn. I couldn’t risk telling him.

My phone chimes. *Ugh*. It’s horrible timing, but only four people have my number and one of them is sitting next to me. This has to be Minho calling back about the laptop.

I give Mac a half smile and try not to let the firm set of his jaw make me feel even worse while bringing the phone to my ear. “What did we miss?”

“Rylee?”

My heart skips a beat, and then another one as Colton Archer’s voice rings through the line.

For one moment, my world grinds to a halt—my brain battering against my skull like I hit an invisible wall at high speed.

Sound ceases to exist.

I don’t blink or breathe.

Colton answers my silence with a frustrated growl. “Come on, say *anything* so I know some Viper asshat didn’t just take your phone,” he pleads, his gravelly tone pulling at something deep in my chest—something I spent the last seven months burying.

My lips part, but my mouth is too dry to form words.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

It might be the adrenaline coursing through my veins from stealing the laptop, or maybe the surprise of Mac dropping the bomb that he knew I was leaving, but something about this feels like a fever dream—*or like I’ve lost my mind*.

My fingers fall to my thigh, but instead of pinching, I shove my hand into my pocket, rubbing my thumb over the smooth surface of the trinket I keep there.

How is Colton even calling when I have his number blocked?

Pulling the phone away from my ear, I check the screen.

Unknown Caller.

“Whose phone are you calling from?” I ask once I’m sure my voice won’t crack.

A whooshing breath fills the line, and Colton murmurs something that sounds a lot like “*thank fuck*,” and then, “Are you with the Viper prick?”

I glance at Mac, who’s clearly heard every word but is doing his best to look like he’s not eavesdropping.

Colton makes a noise like he’s sucking his teeth. “Your silence is answer enough. Put me on speakerphone, you both need to hear this.”

For some unknown reason, I actually do as he says.

“Did she put me on speaker?”

“Yeah. I can hear you,” Mac responds, rubbing the spot on his jaw where Colton hit him.

“Good. There’s not much time. In less than two hours, the FBI will be at Sidewinders with a warrant. They have permission to search *any* attached building and arrest anyone on sight.”

He lets that sink in for a second before continuing, “They’re anticipating a firefight, which means a bunch of trigger-happy agents and a bunch of dumb-fuck Vipers are about to bump heads. Rylee, you need to run. Grab Holly, grab the Viper, just get the hell out as soon as possible. You cannot, under any circumstances, be there when this goes down.” Colton sighs. “Viper, if anything happens to her, I’m holding you responsible.”

Mac shifts uncomfortably. “How do I know we can trust you?”

“You don’t have to trust me. Even if I am lying about the raid, the bottom line is that I’m telling you to get Rylee somewhere safe. If there’s one thing you and I can agree upon, it’s her.”

That must be enough evidence for Mac because he starts the car and throws it into reverse with a low curse.

“Why is the FBI raiding the casino?”

I mean to pose the question to Mac, but after an awkward pause, it’s Colton who answers. “Have you heard of Governor Conrad?”

Still not used to hearing his voice, my chest constricts in that annoying way it always used to when he was around. Then I register what he asked, my annoyance morphing into a roiling sensation as I recall the disgusting way the governor ran his knuckle up my arm, like he didn’t need permission to touch me or anyone else—the way he didn’t even pause when he ripped off my Band Aid and reopened my wound. “Skeevy rich guy, likes young girls, in business with my father? Yeah, I’ve heard of him, why?”

The line is completely silent and, for some reason, I envision Colton raking his fingers through his hair, like the sound of my voice is just as difficult for him to hear as his is for me.

“The Dead Kings have been pressuring Conrad to give up the names of anyone he received a payout from while in office. Frank lured him in with promises he had no way of keeping and then attempted to use his attendance at the shooting to blackmail the governor instead.”

He takes a breath, giving me just enough time to briefly muse over how ridiculous it is that we’re having a semi-normal conversation after the way we ripped each other’s hearts out.

“When the governor didn’t show up for his last rendezvous, I thought maybe Frank spooked him, but

apparently Conrad and a bunch of other high-end fucks got picked up by the FBI. He made a plea deal: information about the Pit and the shooting in exchange for less jail time. They've been keeping it hush-hush, but a contact reached out this morning about the raid. I would have warned you sooner if I'd known."

A thousand accusatory questions pop into my mind. Like why is he still with Frank, and why the hell hasn't he gone home, but I quash all of them. Knowing those answers will only increase the possibility of me lowering my guard—which I can never afford to do again.

Something zips on his end of the line, followed by a drawn-out pause. "Rylee, it's not fair of me to ask, but can you text me when you're safe?"

My lungs squeeze, my head rapidly shaking from side to side. It takes me a second to realize he can't see me and that I'm going to have to verbalize my refusal. "No," I croak. "Thank you for the warning, but I can't."

I hang up before he can change my mind.

Shit. What a mess. My heart is galloping like a herd of wild horses.

It wasn't enough that I was planning on secretly leaving. No, I had to go and steal a laptop right before the Vipers get raided by the FBI. *Absolutely perfect.* Why wouldn't life unfold this way? Not to mention how one phone call from Colton elicited more of a physical response from me than all the dates I've recently been on combined.

The Chevy's tires squeal as Mac takes a sharp turn into the Den's underground parking structure. He's out the door and bounding inside before I have time to stow the hard drive in the glove compartment or unbuckle my seatbelt.

Even running at top speed, I barely skitter into the elevator with him before the door closes. "We need to talk about this," I pant, one hand on the glass to steady myself.

"No, what we need is to get Holly and JJ out of here." He taps his foot like a maniac, as if that will somehow make the

elevator ascend faster.

“Mac, look at me.” I grab his shoulders. “Holly and JJ will be fine. We have time. You’re the one who needs to make a decision. Are you coming with us, or are you going down with the ship?”

He stills, jaw subtly shifting as he grinds his teeth. “They’ll come after me. I’d only put you guys in danger.”

“Don’t be dumb. Rick puts us in danger every day. Besides, Holly’s been on the run for years. She’ll help us stay hidden, and in return you can protect her and my nephew.”

The elevator door glides open on the top floor, and Mac sprints away from me without answering. Holly and JJ greet us in the entryway, looking more than a little startled by our abrupt entrance. Mac rushes past them, only pausing for a millisecond to squish JJ’s cheek.

“I’ll pack, you explain,” he calls out from the hallway.

I pull out my phone, activating the Ghost Rider signal jammer so Holly and I can speak without being recorded. “Change of plans, Holls. The FBI is raiding this place in just over an hour. Looks like you and JJ are coming with me after all.”

She nods once. “There’s a champagne cooler in the hallway closet, can you grab it for me while I pack up JJ’s formula and some food and snacks?”

I love this woman.

For once her overly prepared paranoia is working in our favor. She’s barely phased by the news, and while my heart is beating a million miles an hour, Holly is calm and collected, cooing and singing to JJ as she packs up the kitchen.

I find the cooler where she said it would be and bring it to her.

“Perfect, thanks. Do you mind going into JJ’s room and grabbing the set of the essentials I packed from under his crib? There’s a bag of my things right next to it. If you do that, I’ll be ready to go in two minutes.”

I scurry away, Holly's soft song drifting down the hallway to accompany me.

JJ's room is a disaster. Clothes and diapers are everywhere, and in the middle of it all is Mac with one of JJ's newborn onesies clutched in his fist. "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what babies need."

Guiding him to the crib, I reach down and pull out both sets of bags. "Holly has everything ready to go. Now the only thing left to do is for you to decide if you're coming with us."

He stares at me until Holly calls out, "Ready."

Mac shoulders the bags, and the four of us, JJ babbling from the baby sling on Holly's chest, enter the elevator. I don't want to force him to make a decision, but with every floor we drop, he's running out of time.

I'm about to say something when the elevator screeches to a halt.

For one panicked moment, I think the raid started, but then I spot Holly's hand on the emergency stop button.

"Are we warning Dad?"

I'm taken aback by her question because up until this point, it never crossed my mind.

The doors slide open, but none of us make a move to step out.

It's Mac who speaks first. "If we tell the Boss, he'll put the Den on lockdown and order a mass destruction of paperwork and files. We'll be stuck here."

"Does that mean what I think it means?" I lift a brow.

He nods solemnly. "I'm coming with you."

I maneuver around him, snatching my keys from his hand and slipping out right as the elevator doors begin to close. "The Chevy isn't safe enough for JJ. Take the emergency SUV with the car seat in it, and I'll meet you on the road. There's something I have to do, but I promise I'll catch up with you. Just get my sister and nephew out of here."

The chrome doors close before either of them can argue, and I turn to face the long hallway leading to Rick's office.

I square my shoulders and fill my lungs, bracing myself for what comes next.

This might be the most boneheaded stunt I've ever pulled, but I need answers, and I may never get this opportunity again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

RYLEE



MY TREMBLING fist hovers above the carved wood of Rick Adder's office door.

Before I find the courage to knock, Leon bursts through, slamming into my shoulder so hard it nearly bowls me over.

"My bad, I didn't see you there," he says, steadying me by the bicep.

His grim expression immediately raises my hackles, erasing any remaining ache from our impact. I peer around him. "Where are you off to in such a hurry? Is Cherry inside?"

"I got a text from Mac asking me to meet up. Sounded urgent." His gaze drops to his phone, then back to me. "And no, Cherry is out of town visiting her mom. Be careful in there, the Boss is in a mood," he warns before heading toward the elevator.

My shoulders relax a fraction of an inch. Mac must be getting Leon out before the raid, and if Cherry's not here, that's one less person for me to feel guilty over.

That only leaves Rick.

I force myself to step through the double doors where my father is scribbling away at his desk, crossing out line after line on some sort of spreadsheet. His hair is perfectly coiffed, but his expression is taut, knuckles white as he continues to gouge the document.

As I ease myself into one of the green velvet armchairs before him, I find myself wondering how damaged the desk is

beneath his pen. There's no way the wood is coming away unscathed from an assault like that.

Rick's eyes never leave the paper. "To what do I owe this *pleasant* surprise?"

I puff out my cheeks and grip both armrests. *Here goes nothing.* "Am I your daughter?"

Rick stops scribbling, the room going so quiet I can hear the blood rushing through my ear canals.

"Come again?"

"I said, am I your daughter?"

He sets down the pen, finally looking up. "Of course you're my daughter. What kind of question is that?"

My leg bounces. "I've been here for over a year now." I gesture around to his office, specifically the wall of security cameras, most of which show feeds nowhere near the Den. "I've seen what your Vipers are capable of, and I find it extremely difficult to imagine you didn't know Mom was pregnant with me after you left. Did she have an affair and I'm not yours? Is that why you've never bothered with me?"

I tap my pointer finger on the velvet. My relationship with Rick has always been strained, but it's not exactly like I've given him the opportunity to fix it. If I don't do this now, I may never get another chance for answers. "Something's not adding up, and I think it's about time you gave me an explanation."

He unbuttons the vest of his three-piece suit and leans back in his chair. "You are mine. If you think I didn't confirm that with DNA testing, then you're even more naïve than I thought."

I bristle at the insult, but he starts talking again before I can spit back a retort. "Let me ask you a question: Are you happy here?"

Both my legs are bouncing now. "You know I'm not."

"Your mother wasn't happy with this life either." Rick reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a chipped picture

frame. He runs his finger across the glass, and after a second or two, hands it to me.

I expect a photo of my mother, or maybe a baby picture of Holly. Instead, I find a faded image of a toddler playing in the stairwell of what looks like an old apartment building from the 1970s. A man in a nearby doorway stares at the child, something dead and sinister in his gaze.

“That’s where I grew up,” Rick says. “We shared a one-bedroom apartment with two other families. That’s your grandfather. When he died in the Blackfriars Massacre a few years after this was taken, things only got worse.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

Rick has the audacity to appear affronted by my interruption. “You asked me two questions. I’ve answered one, now I’m addressing the other.”

He puts the picture frame back in the drawer and begins again. “No one gets ahead in life the legal way anymore. Not politicians. Not successful business owners. Not even those do-gooder Jackals you worship. We do what it takes to succeed. Take a good look around you, Rylee. Nothing you see was given to me. I took it, built it with blood, sweat, and brute force. Your mother wanted me to give it all up.”

Despite our ticking clock, I can’t resist goading him. “From what I understand, Mom asked you to *give it all up* after Holly was kidnapped. That seems like a pretty fair request to me.”

His eyes darken, pupils narrowing into slits. In a flash, the look is gone. “The mishap with your sister was nothing. One of the men I contracted for on my rise to the top wanted to ensure my silence and future cooperation. Unfortunately, these things happen from time to time. It was a temporary setback and Holly was returned unharmed.”

Rick’s gaze runs over my hair and face. “That didn’t matter to your mother. She demanded I make a change. Knowing it would only be a few years until your sister was out

of the house and I could go back to running the business the way I saw fit, I agreed to take a short hiatus.”

He rolls his eyes, like admitting that was excruciating for him. “I tried taking a step back and living the way your mother wanted, but day in, day out it was always the same thing. I was bored and unfulfilled. When she told me she was pregnant with you, I realized I couldn’t keep pretending and there was no way I could stomach another eighteen years living that way. I informed your mother I was returning to Boston that same afternoon.”

My legs stop bouncing.

He not only knew about me, I’m the reason he left.

“You left your pregnant wife and teenage daughter to fend for themselves all because of some delusional need for power? Why would Mom tell me you didn’t know about me when you walked out on us, and why would Holly tell me Mom was the one who asked you to leave if it was all your idea?”

He crosses his hands over his stomach and shrugs unapologetically. “I let your mother tell people whatever she wanted. With you, I imagine she wanted to poison you against me. With Holly, I imagine she overheard what your mother told her friends, but how should I know? What difference did it make to me what a couple of housewives in North Carolina thought of me?”

Rick leans farther back in his chair. “And I never left anyone to fend for themselves. I’ve always had Vipers checking in on them, and on you. As far as your other question, can you blame me? What else is there for a man besides power and status?”

My eyebrows disappear into my hairline. I didn’t actually expect him to admit everything with such brutal, unrepentant honesty.

He stares at me long and hard. “I always knew Holly would be fine. She’s a Viper through and through. She may be confused after spending so much time with the Jackals, but

she'll come around soon. She has a son to think of now—a son who will one day run my empire.”

My nails dig into the armrest. *JJ will never be a Viper*. Holly will make sure he grows up with the same values as his namesakes, and so will I.

I clench my teeth, my next question already making me feel small and weak, but I have to know. “Was there ever a time you loved me?”

His fingers splay and close. “I barely know you. But I do feel a certain sense of protectiveness. We are blood after all.”

That’s a politician’s *no* if I ever heard one. I give myself a second to fend off the avalanche of hurt hastening toward me... But it never comes.

My father doesn’t love me and I couldn’t care less because I don’t love him either.

Rick examines my face, his expression souring as he lingers over the light smattering of freckles dotting my nose and the strawberry-blond strands of my hair. “You’re so much like your mother. Probably too much like her, but who knows what we could be to each other in time.”

Motion on a security camera feed catches my eye as a black SUV pulls out of the parking structure. Holly, Mac, and JJ are safe, which means it’s time for me to go.

I already have my answer, and I know what comes next, but I can’t keep myself from giving him one more opportunity to show me there’s something inside him worth saving. “You don’t regret any of it? There isn’t a single choice you’ve made that you look back on and wish you’d done differently?”

He rubs his chin. “In my line of business, one can’t afford to think in *what-ifs* or *maybes*. But, if I had to choose, I think I would have left your mother the moment she gave me the first ultimatum.”

My scoff is violent enough that it tears at the lining of my throat. Rick is so self-centered he doesn’t realize what he just said *also* implies I never would’ve been born.

I stifle an incredulous laugh. “You know what? I’m glad we had this talk. Thank you for your honesty. Sometimes I forget that at the end of the day, you’re just a man who happened to have a child. You didn’t choose me, and I most certainly didn’t choose you. That being said,” I rise from my chair and gesture around the room, “on the day all this comes crumbling down, I hope you remember that you could have chosen differently.”

If only he knew that day was less than an hour away...

“I’ll be sure to take that under advisement. Are we done?”

I nod, and he makes a *shooing* motion with the flick of his wrist. “Goodbye, Rylee.”

“Goodbye, Rick.”

On the walk down to my car, a few Vipers greet me in passing. A part of me feels guilty for not warning them, but another part remembers that I always knew their day of reckoning would come.

You reap what you sow, after all, and redemption is earned, not given.

The Chevy engine purrs to life, sounding throatier and more eager than usual, like she knows we’re headed home. I grip the wheel and gun it, barely giving the gates enough time to rise before flying out onto the city roads and leaving the Vipers’ Den behind for good.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

RYLEE



A STEEL BRIDGE looms in the shadows of the predawn mist. At the sight, I downshift, easing my foot off the gas to coast onto the dirt shoulder of the road and let the engine idle.

Home is on the other side of that rusted hunk of metal. I'm so damn close I can read the sage-green Welcome to Eden sign and smell the freshly baked bread from Sunrise Bakery through my open window.

The familiar, gentle buzz of cicadas sounds in the nearby brush. In a few minutes, the sun will crest the tree line to free the surrounding land from the darkness of night and illuminate a sparkling blue-green river and rolling hills. It's the other things the light might reveal that keeps me rooted in this spot.

My eyes flick to my rearview mirror. Soon, Holly and Mac's black SUV will round the curve in the road, but for the time being, I'm on my own.

I rev the engine, daring myself to cross, but my legs are locked.

It's been six months since my last panic attack and almost five without a mental invasion of memories from that horrible night, but it can take years to heal, and only a moment to break... What if the second I pass the spot where it all happened everything comes flooding back?

I have a ritual now, one I use when the fear starts to set in, but what if that doesn't work?

While I'd never give *him* credit, I looked more into the concept of grounding yourself when you feel an attack coming

on. In the heat of the moment, the whole five, four, three, two, one thing was way too complicated for me, but choosing one thing to focus on from each of my senses has proven to be extremely useful.

I check my mirror for signs of the SUV, but with Holly's ten-miles-below-the-speed-limit rule when JJ is in the car, I have at least another minute before they get here.

After taking a deep breath, I start my ritual, mentally listing the five senses I need to isolate. *Sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste.* Now comes the part where I find something visual to connect with to keep me in the moment, but for some ungodly reason my eyes refuse to focus on anything other than the pavement a hundred yards ahead.

The asphalt is a deeper shade of black than I remember, which makes me think it's recently been repaved, but I know if I close my eyes, even for a second, I'll see the bloodstains.

Yeah, this isn't gonna work. Time to move on to touch.

I lift my hips just enough to slip my hand into the tight pocket of my shorts so I can run the pad of my thumb over the trinket I keep there for instances like this. The material is warm and smooth, the familiar feeling already slowing my heart rate.

Okay, sound—

A tap on the passenger door startles me, the jump scare sending my head smashing straight into the roof. Holly's laugh filters in through the glass, amplifying as she opens the door and takes a seat beside me. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

I rub the sore spot on my skull. "It's fine, I was just—"

"Trying to figure out how you were going to cross the bridge?" she asks knowingly.

"Yeah."

Humming thoughtfully, she repositions herself to face the windshield. "I did the same thing on the opposite side of the road the first time I had to drive to work. I sat right over there by those oak trees for an hour wondering how many people

had Jeremy's blood on their tires. Or how everyone could just drive over the spot my husband died like his life didn't matter."

Gooseflesh ripples down my arms. I was here when Holly returned to work and I had no idea. She never said anything, but even after I learned what happened to Jeremy, I never stopped to consider how my sister must have felt driving past this spot day after day.

I reach for her hand. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you the way you needed me to be. I wish you didn't have to do that alone."

She interlaces our fingers. "You tried. It's not your fault I wouldn't let you in. Besides, it was good for me to learn how to navigate the world on my own again. It helped me realize that this road didn't take Jeremy from me, Sheriff Knott did. This bridge and the asphalt running over it is what brought me to Eden and back to Jeremy in the first place. It carried him home to me for years."

She grips my hand tighter. "It brought you and me back together. And it's where you found the strength to not only save me and JJ but to save Danny and yourself. One night doesn't get to change that."

After a moment, Holly slides across the seat to kiss my forehead. "Mac and I are going to stop at the grocery store before heading to Minho and Alex's place. If you're not there in two hours, I'll send one of the boys out to bring you in. Take your time, but remember this inanimate object has no power over you other than what you grant it. Neither does Sheriff Knott, or Logan, or even Charles Eastmann."

She doesn't wait for a response before kissing my cheek and climbing out—she doesn't even wave or glance at me as she and Mac pass by in the SUV.

A stronger person might feel inspired by Holly's words. Emboldened, they'd immediately put the car into gear and drive on into town. But I just sit, letting the rumble of the engine rock me into a sense of calm.

My grip on the wheel tightens.

On second thought, *fuck it*. I am a stronger person.

Slamming the car into gear, I force the gas pedal to the floor. My back tires fishtail, spraying dust and debris into the air before catapulting me forward. Five seconds later, I'm over the bridge and flying down Main Street.

The wind rips through my hair as I belt out a maniacal laugh.

I did it.

I feel free and light. I feel...like someone is following me.

A quick glance in the rearview mirror confirms my suspicions. The white Bronco flashes his lights and after pulling up to my left, forces me to the side of the road.

If this isn't who I think it is, then I will seriously blow a gasket...

“As I live and breathe. If it isn't Miss Rylee Adder speeding down *my* road at forty miles over the speed limit. *Tut-tut*. Whatever am I to do?” Despite his attempts to look serious, an oversized smile tugs at the corners of Andy's cheeks as he approaches my car.

Suppressing a grin of my own, I hold my wrists out the window. “Looks like you've got no choice but to bring me in, Deputy.”

He grabs my hands, planting a noisy kiss on the back of one before kneeling down. “It's *Sheriff* now, and you better watch yourself. People can't think I'm giving the cute girl in town special privileges or I'll never hear the end of it.”

“Oh, *fancy* new title. Well then, Sheriff Kn—” My hand jerks out of Andy's grip and his smile slips.

“Everyone just calls me Sheriff Andy.”

His sun-kissed forearm flexes as he taps the bronze star pinned to his uniform where, sure enough, his first name is printed in big, bold letters inside the Marion County Sheriff's Department emblem. A cough sounds from behind him, and he

rolls his eyes. “Rylee, this is Jimmy, who was *explicitly* told to stay in the Bronco during his ride along.”

A gangly guy wearing tight jeans and a flannel steps forward. “I think you might know my mama, Ethel?”

“Holy crap! Jimmy? I thought you were in—”

“The clink? Yeah, I got out about ten months ago. I’m moving on to bigger and better things. Sheriff Andy is even thinking about letting me join the force.” He claps Andy’s shoulder, only to immediately be shrugged off.

“I’m not thinking about shit, you just wouldn’t shut up until I let you get in the car.” Andy gives me an apologetic smile. “I don’t want to keep you, I only wanted to say hi and make sure I’d see you at Jack’s Celebration of Life cookout tomorrow?”

“Sure will.”

“Good. I’ll see you around then.” He winks and proceeds to bicker with Jimmy all the way back to the Bronco.

Shocked at how good it feels to see him, I lean back in my seat. I’ve only seen one person and already I think I’ve smiled more than I did the entire time I was in Boston.

After a quick stop at the bakery, I cruise down Sherwood Road. My heart sings in contentment as the early-morning sun warms my skin through the windshield and little pops of yellow and orange wink at me from the underbrush beside the ambling river.

When I pass the Jackal Territory sign and cross over the wooden bridge, I realize I’ve never actually been inside Minho and Alex’s place. Thankfully, I ran past it often enough that I still remember the way.

If there was any question about which house was theirs, Danny’s black pickup parked in the driveway and the cherry-red motorcycle peeking out from the partially opened garage doubling as an office would verify that I was at the right place.

I cut the engine, but before I can place my hand on the door handle, the front door swings open and a mop of curly

chestnut hair sprints in my direction. Opening my door, Alex rips me from my seat and proceeds to spin me in circles.

“I can’t breathe,” I squawk, still flying through the air.

Alex laughs. “I told you I was going to squeeze the shit out of you. What’d you expect?”

When he finally sets me down, Minho is right there to take his place. After he lets me go, he and Alex link hands and—I shit you not—dance around me in a circle. I’m laughing so hard my stomach actually hurts.

“Alright, that’s enough, let the woman breathe,” Danny says, breaking them apart. I smile as he comes into view. He has new lines under his eyes and the way his black T-shirt sleeves are rolled into cuffs makes him look even more like Jack than the last time we saw each other. My heart gives a tiny, painful squeeze in acknowledgement of what we lost, but it’s quickly soothed by his bear hug of an embrace. “It’s good to have you back, Ry.”

“It’s good to *be* back. You’re sure it’s okay I brought a Viper with me?”

“If you and Holly trust him, that’s good enough for me.” Danny lets me go, keeping his arm over my shoulder. “The drive went okay?”

“It was a cakewalk. We would’ve been here sooner if Holly hadn’t insisted on stopping for the night at a motel so that she and Mac weren’t driving tired with JJ in the car.”

Danny jostles my shoulder. “Can’t blame Holly for keeping our nephew safe, can we? Always knew she was going to be a good mom.”

“She really is.”

A black Cadillac rounds the bend while Minho and Alex examine the Chevelle, *oohing* and *aahing* each time they notice something new.

Minho makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “You did a damn good job with this car— Wait, is that... Oh my God, it is. She brought fucking donuts!” He tears open the passenger

door and holds the pastel-pink bakery box over his head like an athlete with a trophy.

All I can do is smile, my cheeks already sore from grinning ear to ear.

Mac parks the Cadillac across the street, making pointed eye contact with me as Holly waves her arms animatedly at him. I can't hear what she's saying, but whatever it is, Mac responds by rolling his eyes and backing up the car to pull into the driveway.

I stare up at Danny's sun-kissed face, watching the way he locks in on the back door of the SUV, noting the aura of nervous excitement he's vibrating with.

"You ready to meet your nephew?" I ask, bumping him with my hip.

He smiles down at me, the sun glinting off his deep-brown eyes. "I don't know if I've ever been more ready for anything in my entire life."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

RYLEE



I WAKE the next morning sandwiched between Danny's legs and the cushions of the oversized couch we crashed on. I pop my head up, ready to shove his white-socked feet out of my face, only to still when I notice the sleeping bundle in his arms.

Something bright radiates warmth into the depths of my soul at the sight of my nephew's chunky cheeks squished against Danny's chest, mouth parted as he drools all over his uncle's shirt. It's adorable, and Danny might be sleeping, but I don't think I've ever seen a bigger smile on his face.

"They look exactly like each other," Mac says, leaning over the back of the couch, keeping his accent-laced voice low. I catch a faint flash of hurt in his eyes but then it's gone. "You up for a run?"

"Yes, please," I say a bit too loudly, but I can't help it. I've been yearning for the smell of the trees and the damp earth of West Virginia for over a year now.

As cautiously as possible, I extricate myself from the couch. Danny jostles slightly, tightening his arm protectively over JJ, but otherwise doesn't move.

"Where's Holly?" I whisper.

"Spare bedroom."

"And you slept—"

"On the other couch, across from you." Mac's tone is no nonsense, a clear indication he does not want to talk about this.

Snatching my keys off the counter and heading for the door, I scrunch my face at Mac to let him know I'm dropping the Holly topic, but I'm doing so reluctantly. Having slept in my running clothes, sports bra and all, the only thing I need to do is grab my shoes from the Chevy and then I'll be ready for our run.

Once outside, I raise my arms over my head and bend at the waist, my body popping and cracking with the stretch. Even though we were all up late last night, sharing stories and eventually watching the news footage of the raid at Sidewinders and the Den, I feel pretty damn incredible—lighter, somehow.

Seeing Rick placed in handcuffs and shoved violently into the back of a police car was less satisfying than I thought it would be, but it was in no way traumatizing either. Honestly, I sort of felt bad for the guy. There I was, surrounded by my surrogate family in the comfort of a warm home, and there Rick was...alone, angry, and unloved while everything he worked for his entire life crumbled around him.

I shake away the thought. What use is there in thinking about it now anyway? I gave my father twenty-four years to show me he was worth saving. What's done is done.

We're almost to the Chevy when Mac stops, eyes locked in the direction of the garage. "Um, what's your friend doing?"

I turn right as Minho brings a sledgehammer down onto some sort of mesh metal case that explodes on impact. With a coy smirk, he looks at the mess he created and wipes away the sweat beading his brow.

Approaching cautiously, I crouch next to where Minho is digging through the shrapnel. "What are you doing?"

He doesn't look up when he answers. "After everyone fell asleep last night, I came out here to see if I could deactivate the digital tracker on the hard drive you brought. It took all of five minutes, which barely covers the exfoliation part of Alex's nighttime ritual, so I started sorting through the supercomputer code. One thing led to another and I might have been up all night. The good news is now I only need one

last thing and I'll be done— *Aha!*” He grabs a piece from the metal pile and spins around to face the workbench, connecting it to something I can't see.

“Done.” He cracks his knuckles and, after a quick glance in my direction, closes my gaping jaw with his tattooed index finger. “I should have waited for you, but once I got started, I couldn't stop. Do you remember when you suggested we use the salvageable parts of Logan's computer to build a new one?”

I nod. Minho may have fried the thing, but I knew there had to be pieces we could still use.

Minho grins. “I took your advice and did it, only instead of a password or biometrics to log in, we're using the code you stole—”

“Because it's not like we actually need access to the Eastmann Incorporated network, we just need to be able to read the thumb drive,” I finish for him, my eyes wide with excitement.

“Exactly. Rylee, thanks to you, we can decode the thumb drive now.” He's beaming and I am too.

I slip the chain with the drive over my head and hand it to him. “Should we wake the others?”

“We're awake,” Danny says from the driveway. “Mac sent us out here.”

Holly and Alex are on his flanks, the latter yawning and looking less than pleased to be ripped from bed.

“That's Jeremy's USB?” Holly asks with a slight tremble in her voice. “That's what he was bringing back to Eden?”

Dipping my chin in confirmation, I hold out the thumb drive to her. “Moment of truth. Holls, you want to plug her in for us so we can see what's on it?”

She stares for a long minute before taking the drive from my hand and connecting it where Minho points. He fires up the computer and activates the decryption program. After a

minute or two, a black window appears on the screen. It looks like the video is playing, but nothing changes.

Danny moves closer, an alarmed expression painted on his face. “Is something wrong? Why can’t we see anything?”

Minho pushes all of us aside. After some investigation, he announces, “It’s an audio file. There is no video.”

My stomach sinks. The chances we can bring down Eastmann with audio alone are slim to none, but I refuse to give up hope—not when we haven’t even heard what’s on the file.

Static and what sounds like a keyboard clicking fill the garage, followed by a deep male voice as the file plays.

“I’m not asking you to get involved.”

Holly inhales sharply, taking a step backward. “That’s Jeremy...”

Another voice, this one nasally and farther away, speaks next. *“I know you’re not. Which is part of the reason I’m agreeing to do this in the first place.”*

“What’s the move you’re comfortable with?” Jeremy asks. *“Do you want to make a copy of the video and then I’ll bring it to the press? I’d rather bring it to my brothers first, but I’m not going to do anything you’re not okay with.”*

The second voice must move closer because it’s a little bit easier to hear. Unfortunately, it’s still too indistinct to discern if it’s male or female, but I’d lean toward male, young...or possibly elderly. *“I don’t care who you give it to as long as something comes out of it. And no. You can’t copy the file or it will trigger the system alarm. We can make a separate recording of the audio from another device, but it might pick up some of our conversation. You’ll need to edit it out before giving the recording to anyone else. That’s the best I can do.”*

There’s a weird muffled sound and then Jeremy speaks again. *“That works for me. You’re sure there’s only the one video?”*

“I’m positive,” the second voice responds. *“After a data breach a few years ago, we had the entire system scrubbed. I have no idea how this made it past the auditors. It’s the only thing I’ve ever found, and I’ve been digging through this mess for years.”*

“Pause it,” Danny orders. “Who was Jeremy talking to? Does anyone recognize that voice?”

Minho shakes his head. “That guy is clearly sick as shit. I think that muffled sound we keep hearing is sneezing or coughing. I doubt we’d be able to get a match in the database.”

“Shit.” Danny taps his forehead. “Fine, start it up again.”

More typing sounds from the speakers. *“Alright, I started recording our audio. It’s picked up the previous thirty seconds of our conversation. I’m going to play the video, if you’re ready?”*

Jeremy must give a silent affirmation because new audio filters in through the speakers.

It almost sounds like wind rustling through trees and maybe distant voices. Minho messes with the controls and frowns. “The audio wasn’t recorded properly. This is as loud as I can make it.”

“When was this taken?” Jeremy asks.

“Time stamp in the bottom right corner says July 4, 2006,” the second voice replies.

Everyone in the garage stops moving and the hair on my arms stands at attention.

Whatever Jeremy was watching was recorded on the day the mine collapsed.

Garbled voices sound through the garage speakers, but it’s too distant to hear clearly. All five of us instinctually lean forward to try to hear better.

A few silent minutes go by with the tiniest pops of background noise.

“I fucking knew it,” Jeremy spits.

More silence. More pops.

“Holy fuck,” Jeremy whispers in response to whatever he’s seeing. *“I know who that is.”*

“Whoever it is,” the second voice says, *“they’re the one with the evidence you need to bring down Eastmann Incorporated.”*

“If the company’s seen this footage, why would they let someone with that kind of damning information live?” Jeremy asks, sounding flabbergasted.

“Keep watching,” the second voice replies somberly.

A few seconds go by and then Jeremy sucks in a large breath, like he’s cringing. *“Oh shit. Fuck. I guess that does add up. Jesus. Wait... Why did the video just cut out?”*

Frantic clicking.

“Something’s not right,” the second voice sounds spooked. *“Someone just deleted the video. They know we’re poking around. Shit, we shouldn’t have done this on your workstation. This is really bad. You need to go. Get the hell out of the state. Off the grid. Did anyone give you a referral for this job?”*

Shuffling sounds through the speakers, like Jeremy is collecting his things. *“Henry vouched for me when I applied.”* There’s a long beat of silence. *“Henry. He’s a senior IT analyst. White guy... Has a buzzcut—”*

“Whoever he is, you need to warn him and both of you need to go. Now. I’ll cover for you as long as I ca—” A phone rings in the distance, followed by footsteps. The second voice makes humming noises in response to whatever is being said, then hangs up with a loud clatter. *“You’re out of time. Take the laptop and the USB—”*

“I don’t need either of those things, I already told you I know who that was in the video.”

“Take the USB anyway, it has my damn voice on it. Here, I’ll grab—”

The audio cuts out, and the five of us stand there, motionless. I wait for someone to explain what any of that

meant, but the longer we stand in silence, the clearer it becomes that they're all just as much in the dark as I am.

A chill settles over my shoulders. We can't use any of this. The thumb drive is useless.

Holly is first to react, storming out of the garage, face red and fists clenched. The walls shake as she slams the front door.

"Jeremy's thumb drive is a dead end." We're all thinking it, but Danny giving voice to our internal fears drains the light from the room. As if seeing the dark rain cloud hanging over our heads, he changes directions. "Chins up. This doesn't change anything. So the drive isn't the way we bring down Eastmann, that doesn't mean we won't succeed."

Minho brings his fist down onto the keyboard. "But Jeremy said he knew—"

Danny slices the air with a hand, and Minho's lips seal without another word. "Jeremy isn't here to tell us what he saw." His voice softens. "Brother, I'm drowning. I need my VP. We can't keep putting our top resources into this. With Rick and the others out of the picture, we need new targets to replace their income. I need you and Rylee to concentrate on that. We move forward as originally planned."

Minho's jaw works like he wants to argue, but then his shoulders slump. "I know you're right, but this fucking sucks."

Danny claps him on the back. "Go get ready. The Celebration of Life starts in a few hours and I need you there early to help set up."

Minho and Alex head inside with heavy footsteps, leaving Danny and me alone.

I worry my lip, unsure if I should push the issue any further. "What about this Henry guy Jeremy mentioned? Do you think he saw what was on the video?"

Danny shakes his head. "Colt and I worked Henry over pretty good the day before Jeremy's funeral. Henry didn't even know why Jeremy told him to run."

As always, I try not to show how Colton's name affects me, but that doesn't stop me from remembering where I was the day before Jeremy's funeral.

Holy shit. Henry must be Buzz Cut Guy, the one Colton pinned to the hood of my car the first night we met at the rest stop... And that means Danny was the one sleeping in the front seat of the Chevy.

I'll be damned. That seems like a lifetime ago.

"If that shocked expression is you worrying about Henry, don't. He's fine. We set him up with a new identity, and I'm sure his broken nose has healed by now."

He throws an arm around my shoulder, guiding me back toward the house. "I get that all this feels like a setback, but we started the day without the information on that thumb drive and we were doing just fine. Better than fine, actually. I, for one, woke up with our nephew asleep on my chest and both my sisters back in Eden. We also finally get to give Jack the send-off he deserves. Today is a good day, Rylee. Don't let this eat at you. The war is not over."

AS DANNY'S truck bounces into the dirt lot between Dovetail Brewery and The Pack, déjà vu rips the air from my lungs.

Everything is so similar to how it was at Jeremy's funeral, it makes me question if it's real or not.

I'm not having a panic attack, am I? I can't be, not after all this time...

Fearing I've lost control makes my chest tighten, my struggle to breathe blurring the corners of my vision. I clutch the trinket in my pocket, the calming effects of the smooth surface beneath my thumb bringing my surroundings back into focus.

Okay. Everything is *not* exactly the same. Which means I'm *not* slipping into a panic attack. But, just to make sure, I force myself to list the differences: The windows of Maggie's

Diner are boarded up and look like they have been for months. Holly is not next to me because she, Mac, and JJ hitched a ride with Alex and Minho. There are no shiny black SUVs mixed in with the hundreds of other cars because my father is in jail, and there are significantly fewer motorcycle club cuts among the crowd. Then there is the most devastating difference...

Jack's not here.

I take a peek at Danny, who still has his hands on the steering wheel, and even though the truck is off, he's making no move to exit. Sensing my attention, he lets go and leans back in his seat. "I can't believe he's been gone for over a year... I can't believe we're here doing this shit again."

"Danny, I'm—"

"Don't you dare apologize. I already told you, it's not your fault."

While I'd like to say I no longer blame myself for Jack's death, questions about what I could have done differently still plague me in the quiet moments before I fall asleep. It's reassuring to have Danny remind me that he doesn't hold me responsible.

"I didn't know Jack long," I say after a deep breath, "but I know he'd be proud of you for how you've kept the club together. You should be too. Look around, Danny. We're all here in one piece because of you."

He stares out at the packed parking lot. "He'd feel the same way about you."

You did good, mija. I'm so proud of you.

"I know."

Danny sits up straighter, shaking out his ringed hands. "Alright. This is supposed to be a celebration, enough of this mopey bullshit."

Climbing out of the single cab, I tug at the hem of my shorts. "Are you sure I'm dressed okay?" Alex said the Celebration of Life would be a casual affair, but I'm second-guessing the black shorts and tank top I put on this morning.

Danny makes his way around the hood and glances down at the dove tattoo on my thigh. “What you’re wearing is perfect. Stay close to me.”

The crowd parts for him, and I stick to his tail, making sure to keep my head down as we maneuver through the throng of bodies. After a year away, I’m nervously anticipating a rude comment or hissing—

A palm claps my back.

“Welcome back, Rylee,” someone shouts.

“Nice to have you back,” says another.

“Good work, kid.”

Hands land on my shoulder or smack my upper back with so much force it propels me forward. When I finally look up, I’m met with smiles, nods of approval, and waves from the Jackals not close enough to reach out.

I can feel their excitement and acceptance in the center of my chest like a living, breathing thing.

Tears pool in my lower lids, but I blink them away.

Danny glances over his shoulder at me with a satisfied smirk. “If I forgot to say it earlier, welcome home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

COLTON



THE CHORUS of motorcycles biting at my heels hurtles me forward.

I'm fucking late, exactly like last time, but at least we all made it here in one piece.

Plumes of burnt hickory billow into the air from a smoker, and I can just make out the canopy-topped tents they set up for food. The parking lot is packed, even more so than it was last year, so I motion for the guys to form up and park at the boarded-up diner.

Ripping my helmet off, I keep my back to the street.

By now, the whispers will have started, but I couldn't give a single fuck. I'm not here for them, I'm here for him... And for her.

Always for her.

Using the back of my sleeve, I wipe the sweat from my beard before bending over to pull my damp matted hair off my neck and up into a knot on top of my head. This late into summer, my abysmal grooming habits are starting to take a goddamn toll on my patience. After grabbing the gas canister bungee corded to the back of my bike, I raise my free fist in the air, making a circular motion before pointing across the street. "Boys, you know what to do."

One by one, they file across the road and into the middle of the waiting crowd.

"Is that Colt?"

“Colt’s back!”

Ignoring the comments, I keep pushing until I’ve caught up with the group I came with. “Go ahead,” I say to them with an expectant wave of my hand, “we haven’t got all day.”

They tear the leather Dead Kings cuts from their backs and throw them into a pile.

“You always did know how to make an entrance, didn’t you, *brother?*” Danny jabs from the podium.

A lump forms in my throat at the malice in his tone, but after a year of no contact it’s not like I was expecting a fucking hug. He’s pissed, but that won’t matter in a few minutes.

“I have a present.” I empty the gas canister onto the pile of leather cuts and drop a match into the center. *Poomf*. The vests ignite, heat licking the right side of my face and beard as the flames climb higher. “I brought home seventeen wayward Jackals.”

“That’s funny,” Danny says, not sounding the least bit amused, “because from where I’m standing, it looks like you brought me seventeen Dead Kings.”

“*Former* Dead Kings,” I correct. “They’ve seen the error of their ways and renounced Frank’s ideologies.”

“We knew you’d bring ’em back, Colt!” one of the Green River boys shouts. His sentiments are met by hoots and hollers that start small and then grow louder as they fan out, like ripples in a pond.

My gut twists at their unwavering faith in me.

Danny must have come up with something creative as shit to explain my absence if *this* is their reaction to me being back.

Maybe there’s a chance he hasn’t given up on me either...

I glance up at him. No. Definitely not. Judging by that look on his face, he’s wishing it was me burning on that pyre instead of those vests.

He takes his time, pacing on the podium while somehow managing to look each of the men I brought with me in the eye.

“I understand you were lied to and misguided,” he says to them, “but part of being a Jackal is doing the right thing, even when the right thing is the hard thing. You were presented with a choice. You chose wrong. You broke faith, and we can no longer trust your judgment. In time, some of you might earn your spot back amongst us—as *Doves*—but none of you will ever wear the Jackal mark again.”

I draw in a breath through clenched teeth.

I warned them this would happen, but they were so eager to get away from Frank’s shitshow of a club, Danny could have said they’d be digging graves for the rest of their lives and they’d have been elated.

“Does anyone object?” Danny calls out. No one stirs. “So be it. Welcome back, boys. Now get the fuck out of my sight and go find a way to make yourselves useful.”

A ghost of a smile tugs at the corners of my cheeks, the long unused muscles straining with the effort.

Frank’s going to lose his shit when I come back alone. *I can’t fucking wait.*

“As I was saying,” Danny continues, but I’m only half listening because a flash of reddish-gold hair in my periphery has my fucking chest feeling like it’s about to explode.

The mass of people between us part at exactly the right moment, giving me a perfect view of her sexy-as-fuck tan legs and tight little ass in the shorts *I* bought for her.

Her back is to me, but she looks good. *Too* fucking good...

Fuck. I adjust myself in my jeans.

One year without sex and my body is reacting like I’m twelve again.

Danny says something else I’m too distracted to hear, and her head whips in his direction. I can’t actually see them, but judging by the sun-bronzed glow of her profile, I’d bet she has

new freckles dotting her nose and cheeks from running outside all summer.

Christ, she's even more beautiful than I remember.

“You all know who I’m talking about,” Danny’s voice breaks through my lust-induced fog. “She single-handedly kept us in business during those first few months when we were on the run. She’s the only reason I’m alive and standing before you today. Rylee, can you come up here?”

He holds out his hand, and a blush blooms across her cheeks. When she doesn’t immediately move up onto the podium, someone in the crowd whistles and another claps. Seconds later, every single person in this damn parking lot is cheering for her.

Still unwilling to let anyone see her sweat, she smacks Danny’s hand out of the way and steps up onto the podium on her own. She absolutely hates being up there, but I hate it more. Especially when the clouds part and the afternoon sun hits her hair, making each strand look like glowing embers. She is luminescent. Ethereal. She is a motherfucking goddess whose inner light cannot be contained. Perfect in every way.

Each fiber of my being aches to hold her, to draw her near... To drag her off that stage and make her writhe beneath me until she’s screaming my name and the pain I caused both of us is a distant memory.

As if he can hear my deranged thoughts, Danny’s eyes lock onto mine. The intensity of his gaze almost makes me take a step back.

Almost.

He holds up a hand, and the crowd instantly quiets. *Just like they would have for Jack.*

“I know you’re sick of my voice by now,” the Jackals grumble their disagreement and Danny smiles, “and I know I was about to release you to go eat, but as luck would have it, there’s one more item of business we can close out.”

I swallow the hitch in my throat.

He's going to vote me out.

“This club was built on rules,” Danny says to the sea of hungry Jackals staring up at him. “Rules are how we keep one another in check and stay true to the cause. Rules are why we can’t fully welcome our wayward brothers back into the fold. There are consequences for our actions. Our laws help keep us in line when our personal judgment might fail. We also hold each other accountable and, brothers, that is what I ask of you now.”

Their heads turn toward one another, trying to puzzle out Danny’s cryptic request. A few turn to me for answers, but I keep my eyes forward. I don’t know what he’s about to do any more than they do, but I have a distinct feeling that I won’t like it.

“When Jack took his last breath, I became this club’s acting president. A month later, you voted me in officially. By my count, that means I’ve been president for exactly one year.”

Fuck, he wouldn't.

My head shakes from side to side when I realize what he’s about to do—what I’ve *enabled* him to do by showing up. When his gaze passes over me, I swear I see the hint of a smug-ass smile and a gleam of mischief in his eye.

Danny always was good at thinking on his toes and even better at seizing unexpected opportunities. I should have seen this coming.

“If anyone disagrees with my assessment,” he continues, “say so now.”

Crickets.

“Good,” Danny says, placing his ringed hand on Rylee’s bare shoulder. I grit my teeth, the sight of him touching her when I can’t grating on me more than it should. “We all know that outside of the Originals and charter heads, Rylee is the first and *only* prospect Jack ever sponsored.”

A breeze picks up, sending Rylee’s wild hair dancing across her face. It’s so quiet I can hear the wind gliding

through the blades of grass in the nearby field.

“After Rylee saved my life, Jack used his last seconds to tell her how proud he was that she was going to be a Jackal. He asked her to look after this club, and I think she’s more than kept her promise, don’t you?”

“*Haroom,*” they respond as one.

Fuck me.

“I think this woman has more than earned the mark!” Danny bellows over their chant.

“*Haroom. Haroom. Haroom.*” I feel the sound in my bones and have to close my eyes against the assault of their tangible excitement.

They love her.

Danny grins. “If anyone has a question for Rylee, step forward.”

No one moves.

“If any member would like to vote *no* on her initiation, say so now.”

Wind rips through the parking lot, the rustling flap of the tent canopies the only sound filling the silence.

“Charter heads, I need your vote of confirmation.”

Lee raises his hand. “New York, aye!”

Tate follows suit. “Cloverville, aye.”

Nolan is, of course, the loudest as he yells, “Green River, *hell* yeah!”

Danny’s head dips as he inhales deeply.

Fucking hell.

We both know what comes next, and no matter how much influence or respect he has with the Jackals, he has no control over this part of the initiation. “Then I ask the Originals to give their final confirmation vote.”

He and Minho exchange a brief glance before saying “Aye” at the same time.

Rylee exhales, a tiny smile tugging across her pink lips as her shoulders relax, but her expression tenses again when she realizes there’s still one more vote.

Mine.

As one, everyone present turns their gaze on me. Everyone except for her.

CHAPTER FORTY

RYLEE



THE SMELL of sunbaked asphalt keeps me grounded while the words Danny spoke to me last summer echo within my skull like a tortuous prophecy.

If there is a single no, then the person who voted no has to explain why and we vote again. If there is a no again, you won't be initiated.

Up until a second ago, the onslaught of emotion bubbling up inside my cavernous chest was warm and welcome. Now all I have is the icy dread streaking up my spine.

I should have seen this coming, but after the devastatingly useless contents of the thumb drive, I'd stupidly thought something was finally going to go my way and I'd be voted in as a Jackal. Of course my ex would show up to rip that dream away from me too.

I've kept my eyes trained on the ground since the voting started, but *fuck this*. If Colton's going to ruin my life a second time, he's going to have to do it looking me in the eye.

Balling my fists, I force my chin up.

Colton's piercing blue-green eyes meet mine from across the parking lot, heightening the already suffocating pressure on my rib cage. Despite the unresolved outcome of this monumental event in my life—*and against my will*—I devour the sight of him, greedily taking in every detail.

A scruffy blond beard now covers the once sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw. His hair is sun-kissed, tied up into a ridiculous messy heap on top of his head that's just begging to

have someone run their nails through it. Then there's the plain white tee and the delicious way the sweat-dampened fabric hugs the firm contours of his inked biceps and chest.

Jesus.

This man is about to tear my life apart all over again and he's going to do it while looking like sex on a fucking stick.

I keep my face blank, and despite my pounding pulse, I don't break eye contact.

"Colt," I jump at the sound of Danny's voice, "if you have a concern, state it now or cast your vote."

Colton doesn't speak as he stares back at me with an unreadable expression.

A rock forms in the pit of my stomach. He's going to vote no, I know it. He practically told me so on the night of the shooting at the Pit party.

If it was up to me, I wouldn't have chosen this life for you.

I start to slip my hand into my pocket to grip my trinket but stop the second I realize what I'm doing.

Please, I plead inside my head. Please don't take this from me.

Colton's brow furrows, almost as if he heard my silent prayer. Jaw clenched, he wavers on his feet, and I can't tell if he's getting ready to walk away or charge the stage.

"Aye," he says after the longest thirty seconds of my life. "I vote to confirm."

A gust of wind rips across the podium, hiding my relieved gasp.

"Rylee," Danny says, turning my shoulders so I face him. "From this day forward, do you swear to dedicate yourself to the Jackal cause?"

I swallow, willing my voice to be strong. "I do."

"And will you bear true faith and allegiance to your new brothers, for the benefit of the vulnerable and less fortunate,

no matter the cost?”

“I will.”

“When the time comes and you’re forced to choose between the easy path and what is right, will you stay true to our cause?”

“Always.” Gooseflesh erupts over every surface of my skin, and Danny flashes me a brilliant white smile.

“No one is free—”

“While others are oppressed,” I finish for him.

“Good.” He slips something into my palm before spinning me to face the crowd once more. Each of them has a hand in the air, their open palms extended in my direction.

“The blood of this covenant is thicker than the water of the womb,” Danny’s voice echoes across the parking lot, rattling my bones.

“We swear to bleed for you. Will you bleed for us?” the Jackals cry in response.

Panic races up my spine, giving me a sudden sense of vertigo. No one prepared me for this, and I have no idea what I’m supposed to do or say. Thankfully Danny doesn’t let me freak out for long.

“Make an incision on your palm. It doesn’t have to be deep,” he whispers, inclining his head in the direction of the pocketknife he slipped me.

“You do realize this is pretty cultish, right?” I hiss through clenched teeth.

Danny rolls his eyes. “Just do it already so we can go eat.”

Before I have time to second-guess myself, I slash my palm and hold it up for everyone to see. A single trail of blood glides down the center of my marigold tattoo, but with the adrenaline coursing through my veins and the rapid rise and fall of my chest, I barely feel a thing.

“Jackals,” Danny cries out, “welcome your newest sister!”

“*Haroom,*” they thunder as one.

The little hairs on my neck and arms rise.

“*Haroom. Haroom. Haroom.*”

My heart drums along with their chant.

“*Haroom. Haroom. Haroom.*” Their feet stomp in time with the ancient cry. The sound becomes intoxicating as my face tilts skyward, absorbing the vibrant heat of the sun and savoring this moment.

Above me, a bird soars in and out of the wispy clouds, unbothered by our earthly commotion. I spin Jack’s ring on my finger. *Thank you for bringing me in, for giving me this family, and for allowing me to help carry on your legacy. Thank you for choosing me.*

With a new lightness in my chest, I glance out over the parking lot at the cheering Jackals, committing as many of their smiles and genuinely excited expressions to memory as I can until my eyes land on Colton, the only stationary object in a sea of undulating bodies. The rock the tide beats against but does not move.

He dips his chin, backing away as the Jackals surge forward to lift me onto their shoulders.

THREE HOURS.

That’s how long I make it into the tattoo before I have to tap out.

Danny set up a nice comfortable chair for me inside The Pack, but I might as well be on the surface of the sun for how badly I’m sweating.

Initially, the pain was a welcome reprieve. It kept me from thinking of Colton—from agonizing over whether or not he was already gone. Now, every time Danny brings that godforsaken tattoo gun down to score my flesh, I think I’d rather torture myself wondering why Colton hasn’t come

inside to talk to any of us than sit through another second of this tattoo.

“I can’t take it anymore. You have to stop.” My voice is so strained, you’d think I was having my leg sawed off.

Danny’s tongue darts out to the side as he wipes away the excess ink on the jackal ear he just finished shading. “That should do it. We’re done.”

My body melts with relief. “Oh, thank God.”

I unlatch my fingers, white and bloodless from my death grip on the seat, and shake out my hands. Danny’s not even touching me right now and my quad is still twitching uncontrollably. The cool solution he uses to clean the area eases some of the sting, and I get my first view of the jackal now stamped front and center on my thigh.

Unlike the flowers on my forearms, this tattoo is black and gray and nearly identical to the large Jackal flag on the wall by the pool tables. It’s freaking beautiful, and I beam with pride knowing this snarling canine means I’m officially a member of the club.

Danny continues to clean up as he says, “You should get up and walk around. Just make sure you go slowly.”

I’ve barely stood before JJ is thrust into my arms.

“Can you take him for a minute?” Holly pleads. “Mac’s too busy pretending to be asleep so he doesn’t have to talk to anyone and I’m about to pee my pants.” She darts off before I can answer, leaving JJ confused and startled. His bottom lip pouts and the corners of his mouth pull down dramatically.

“*Shhh*. Don’t cry, she’ll be right back.” I bounce him and bring my nose to his, but he’s having none of it. His face looks more and more like a tomato each time he whips his little head around and doesn’t find Holly.

A warm breeze drifts through the bar as the front door opens for the nine hundredth time, but I’m too busy trying to prevent my nephew from crying to care who it is.

“Mac,” I call out to where he’s sitting at a high-top table nearby. “We’re seconds away from a major meltdown over here. Can you grab Mr. Frog from the diaper bag?”

Mac, just as familiar with the ear-splitting volume of my nephew’s cry as I am, springs into action and is at my side with the requested toy in the blink of an eye. Putting an arm around my waist, he crouches down to JJ’s eye level and lovingly boops his nose with the frog plushy. JJ squeals with delight, and their combined laughter reverberates through the bar.

With his arm still around my waist, I lean my head against Mac’s shoulder. “Thank you, but just so you know, no one falls asleep sitting on a stool. Your acting skills need work.”

The old wood floors creak behind us. “What the fuck is this?”

I spin around, my spine stiffening and insides floundering with a strange mix of relief and fear at the devastated sound of Colton’s voice and the frighteningly wild look on his face as he cuts a path straight for me.

Mac moves to step between us, but Colton sidesteps him, ducking under Mac’s arm with an agility that should be impossible for someone of his stature.

“You said you never slept with this prick.” He drags his hand through his hair, bending over like he’s having difficulty breathing. When he stands back up, the look in his eye is so broken and furious that I glance around the bar, searching for an unseen threat.

Holly returns before I can open my mouth to ask him what the hell is happening.

“Oh good.” She gives me a quick side-eye as she takes JJ from me before forcing him into Colton’s arms. “Introductions were overdue anyway. Colt, this is Jeremy Jack, your nephew. We call him JJ for short, and he’s not a big fan of loud noises or his uncle yelling at his auntie.”

Colton’s eyes bug out, his jaw dropping as he stares at the baby in his arms and then back at Holly. He makes a choking

noise and roughly pulls both of them against his chest.

Holly pats his back placatingly, and when they break apart, Colton lets out a small disbelieving laugh—that again sounds like something is lodged in his throat—before leaning down to place a soft kiss on my nephew’s forehead.

“He’s a carbon copy of Jeremy,” he says in awe.

“He really is, isn’t he?” Holly beams.

Colton rocks back and forth, a goofy smile plastered on his lips as JJ uses his tiny hands and Mr. Frog to examine the coarse strands of his uncle’s beard.

“I’m sorry, little man, I didn’t mean to yell,” Colton whispers. “I saw the three of you and thought—”

“Wait, *that’s* what that shit was about? You thought JJ was *mine*?” I cut in.

Possessive rage coils in my gut as Colton covers *my* nephew’s ears, maneuvering JJ away from me—like *I’m* the threat here.

The audacity of this motherfucker.

I splay my hands into the air between us and take a calming breath.

Maybe I should be thanking Colton. After the way we left things in Boston, the awkward warning call about the raid, and then the confirmation vote, I was starting to feel like I owed him something. At least now I can cling to this anger and use it to fortify the wall I put up between us.

“You know what,” I say with forced civility, “I’m going to be the bigger person here and give you this time with your nephew. Lord only knows when you’ll be back around to see him again.” I spin to stomp away, but Danny stops me.

“Don’t go far. I need to head back out there to check on the guys, but as soon as this is over, we’re having a family meeting. Jack’s place okay with everyone?”

“Why not our place?” Colton asks, still bouncing JJ.

Danny tilts his head toward the ceiling and mutters something that sounds like a plea for patience, and a small wave of vindication washes over me.

At least I'm not the only one annoyed by Colton thinking he can just walk back into our lives like nothing happened.

Danny exhales. "Charlotte Grace is renting *my* place. Johnny and Anna needed more space and Charlotte needed to be closer to the Life Skills Academy. The house was sitting empty and unused." Colton looks like he's about to ask another question, and Danny fake throttles the air. "We can talk about it at the family meeting. I swear on our father's memory, Colt, if you don't show up, I'll hunt you down and drag you back by the damn dick."

Colton covers JJ's ears again but nods. "I'll be there. I've got something urgent I need to go over with all of you."

Danny wipes the anger from his expression and turns towards the bar. "Alex, is Minho still outside? Can you guys make 7:00 p.m.?"

Alex, who's deep in conversation with Mike Cook, frowns. "I'm gonna hang back to make sure Cook is ready to handle the night shift on his own. With all the charters in town, we're going to be a lot busier than he's used to."

Danny and Alex step off to the side, and Cook smiles at me. Silhouetted by the wall of pictures behind him, he looks like an old-timey barkeep. I give him a little wave and, eager to get away from Colton asking Holly a thousand questions about JJ, make my way over to the bar.

Cook and I exchange easy pleasantries, most of which he answers with a thumbs up or a quick written note. It's on the tip of my tongue to ask how Lana is doing and see if he knows what happened with Maggie's Diner, but I'm fairly certain the answer would prove difficult to flesh out with notes.

After gesturing for me to take a seat at the bar while he pours a round of beers, he swipes his hand across his temple and then holds up the back of it, pointing to the still-healing dove tattoo there.

I nod approvingly. “Guess we both crossed over to the dark side, didn’t we?”

The skin around his eyes crinkles with his answering smile. Then his face grows serious and he points to me and then Colton.

I shake my head. “No, we’re not together anymore.”

His mouth pinches to the side, his scarred cheeks making the expression look tight and uncomfortable as he hands me a beer with a familiar Dovetail logo on the bottle. He takes a minute to scrawl something out onto the notepad on the bar top.

You guys will figure it out.

I slide the note back to him. “Sometimes things just don’t work out. I know what I need now, and I won’t settle for anything less.”

He writes out another note.

Good for you. You’ve got this.

I glance back over to where Colton is now holding a giggling JJ in the air, making what I assume is meant to be airplane noises.

My stomach somersaults, and I quickly turn away to take another large gulp of my beer.

I can’t believe he thought JJ was mine and Mac’s. That timeline’s not even physically possible... *What an asshole.*

Noting my scowl, Cook slides the same note back to me, pointing.

You’ve got this.

I sure fucking hope so.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

RYLEE



AFTER SLAMMING MY CAR DOOR, I put my hand up to shield my eyes from the setting summer sun.

White stucco, oak shutters, black trim... It's not a trick of the light after all. The outside of Jack's house really is completely different. Without the lilies lining the walkway, it would be unrecognizable.

"You renovated?"

"I did," Danny calls out from his truck before heading over to help me with my bags. "With Holly and JJ taking the room we set up for you at Alex and Minho's, we'll both be crashing here for a while. Just a heads up, the inside isn't finished yet, so it's gonna be a bit tight."

"After spending the last year living in the Vipers' Den and sharing a bathroom with Mac, I can make anything work. I'm just grateful not to be stuck in a hotel."

Danny shoulders my gym bag and grabs my computer case before heading up the walkway. "I've been meaning to ask, is there something going on between you and Mac? No judgment, just trying to figure out what we're going to do with the guy."

Closing the trunk, I shrug. "He's in love with Holly."

"Yeah, I picked up on that. But you two also seem *close*."

"We're friends." I hesitate. "I have been dating a little, though." It's been going horribly and I can't for the life of me remember any of their names, but I keep that to myself.

Danny unlocks the front door and looks over his shoulder at me with a coy smirk. “I can’t wait to see how Colt reacts when he finds out.”

“*Ha-ha.*” I squint and fake smile, nearly stumbling over my own two feet as I get a good look at the inside of Jack’s house. I can’t decide what to focus on first. My gaze bounces from the brand-new oak and marble kitchen, to the open concept living room with chevron wood flooring, and then to all of Danny’s furniture from his old place.

There isn’t a single speck of Jack left in this house, and I’m too shocked to fully sort through how that makes me feel. Especially since I don’t know if it’s my place to feel *anything*. Jack was Danny’s father, not mine. Danny is the only one who gets a say in how he heals and moves forward after losing him. If this was what he needed to do, who am I to judge?

“Yeah, I know. Trust me, whatever you’re thinking, I’ve already kicked myself for it ten times over,” Danny says looking around the unfamiliar living room. “Dovetail Construction had just lost out on a massive job on the edge of town—the owner decided to sell off the land instead of building a new community—and they were desperate for work. I guess I was hoping if I redid the place, not only would it be good for the company, but maybe it would be easier for me to stay here.”

“Is it working?”

He glances around again and frowns. “Jury’s still out.”

Shifting my bags, I reach out to pat his arm with my bandaged hand. “The house looks great. Sometimes a little change makes a world of difference.”

Now that I’m looking around, the newness of everything does feel kind of refreshing. It’s bright and colorful, and the gigantic black-trimmed windows make the space appear twice as open, leaving little room for shadows...*or haunting memories.*

Danny breathes out a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Primary bedroom and bath are done, but the spare room and hallway

bath are still only studs.”

“I’ll take the couch, then.”

Setting my computer on the floor and my bag on the counter, he snorts. “Jack would literally kill me if I didn’t give you the bedroom, but let’s go get the rest of your stuff and we can finish arguing over who sleeps where later.”

Outside, more clouds have filled in the coral-painted sky and the wind is picking up again, carrying with it the scent of rain and the static charge of an approaching storm. Both of us pause on the walkway when a motorcycle revs its engine in the distance.

“Danny?” My voice is small, but he still hears it.

“Yeah?”

“How long do you think he’ll be in town for?”

He stares off in the direction of the road. “I don’t think he’ll stay long. Otherwise he would have told us he was coming ahead of time. I’m guessing this surprise visit has to do with whatever it is he needs to talk to us about.”

Something bitter coats my tongue as the first boom of thunder rolls over the hills behind us. “He seems to have a lot of information to share lately.”

Danny grabs my last bag from the trunk. “He sure does. I still can’t believe how close you were to getting caught up in the raid. We should’ve known that was coming.”

“I wasn’t going to bring it up, but now that you have... How *did* that slip through the cracks?”

He angles his body away from me. “We were watching for threats *from* the Vipers, not threats *to* them. The Lockwood charter used to handle Dovetail distribution and the acquisition of new targets. Since their separation, we’ve had to redistribute their responsibilities and everyone is overtaxed. It’s making the whole operation feel too big to keep up with.”

His head drops forward, and for the first time I can see how much weight he’s been carrying on his shoulders. “Jack would have never let any of this happen,” he laments.

I saunter up to his side. “I’m ready to work. Just let me know where you need me, coach. Wait...am I supposed to call you *pres* now?” I cringe, my face scrunching with self-loathing at how gross that sounded coming from my mouth.

Draping his arm loosely over my shoulders, Danny laughs. “You’ll get used to it.”

The SUV pulls up at the same time Colton does, the latter heading over to Danny and I at the Chevy while Minho, Holly, and Mac pile out of the car.

Another low boom of thunder crackles, and I square my shoulders, preparing myself for...well, I’m not really sure what for, but I’m fucking ready for it.

My eyes are glued to Colton as he circles the Chevy and lets out a low whistle of appreciation. “Christ, Danny. I always knew you liked my car, but I never thought you’d go out and buy one of your own. Where the hell did you find this beauty?”

He runs his hand appreciatively down the hood before popping it open. “Damn, look at all that power. Shame it’s not original, but I guess this is the next best thing,” he says, closing her back up.

A few of us exchange apprehensive glances.

“Why are you all making that face?” Colton asks, his tone sharp and confused.

Mac rounds the back of the SUV with JJ’s car seat under one arm and a shit-eating grin on his face. “They’re all waiting to see how you’ll react when she tells you.”

“Tells me what?” Colton’s narrowed eyes zip to mine.

A vindictive, self-satisfied wave of pleasure coats my skin while unexpected guilt claws at my insides. I’ve been thinking of this car as mine for so long that I almost forgot she was his first. *Was* is the key word, though, because this car isn’t his anymore, not after I broke and rebuilt her. Now she’s faster and stronger than she was before.

“The car’s mine.”

Colton examines the matte black paint of the Chevy, this time with significantly less appreciation. “No. It can’t be... What did you do to her?”

I smashed her to pieces like you did my heart and got rid of anything you ever touched.

“She needed some work after an *incident*.”

Colton continues to gawk at the Chevelle while Minhó, staring at his phone, giggles.

A second or two later, Colton’s phone buzzes. After whipping it out of his pocket, his jaw drops open and he looks from me to the car. “Holy shit, did you take a sledgehammer to her?”

“A tire iron,” Minhó supplies. I glare at him, but he just points at his phone. “What? It says right here in the mechanics report I just sent to Colt.”

Minhó begins reading aloud: *“It appears the client took a tire iron to every surface of the vehicle. When asked what happened, the client claimed the damage was caused by a bird. Client requests custom restoration. Please see photos for reference.”*

Colton lays his head and both hands on the roof, like he’s the paleontologist from *Jurassic Park* trying to figure out if he can save the sick triceratops. He looks so devastated that I almost feel bad.

Danny claps his hands. “Okay, everyone in the house. We’re going to make dinner and after we eat we’re all gonna sit down and have a nice little chat.”

“You two,” he points to Colton and I, “have three minutes to sort this out and then I want you inside.”

Holly gives me one fleeting look to make sure I’m okay and files into the house with everyone else.

When it’s just us, Colton sags farther onto the roof, seeming to lose a bit of the edge he always carries with him—the one that silences a room and parts a crowd without him having to say a word. For a second, he looks vulnerable and

exhausted, but when he pulls himself off the roof, the look is gone.

“I did it the day after the Pit fight,” I admit for some unknown reason.

Understanding and something way too close to pity flashes across his eyes, and I instantly regret my honesty. “Don’t look at me like that,” I snap.

He takes a seat on the bumper and spreads his knees.

“How exactly should I be looking at you?” His voice is low and gravelly, like he’s been waiting for me to challenge him.

“You shouldn’t be looking at me at all.” I can already see the retort forming on his full lips, but I cut him off. “Listen, I’m grateful for the heads up about the raid and even more thankful for your vote today. I know being forced to spend time with each other tonight is less than ideal, so let’s just get this argument over with. I’ll start.”

He raises his arms, palms facing skyward, highlighting the protruding veins beneath his inked flesh. “By all means, go ahead.” He’s half smirking, clearly amused by this, which is really starting to piss me off.

I put my hands on my hips. “You’ve been back in town for all of five seconds and have already managed to accuse me of having a secret baby and now you’re upset about the car. I shouldn’t have smashed it, but I won’t apologize for what I did. I don’t need you up in my face about every little thing like what I do actually matters to you. Let’s just get this dinner over with and you can go on your way and leave me in peace.”

There. I feel better already. “Is there anything you need to get off your chest before we go in so we’re not fighting in front of JJ?”

He rubs his hand—the one with the marigold tattoo on it—over the center of the hood, like he’s inspecting the smooth surface for defects. Then he looks up at me through veiled lashes. “First off, this isn’t fighting, Tiger. If anything, it’s foreplay. Trust me, you’ll know when we’re fighting. Second,

the only thing I have to get off my chest is how much I've fucking missed you."

My breath catches. "What? No, that's not what I meant."

I'm thrown so off kilter by his admission that my knees wobble, which Colton seems to take as an invitation to come closer. The muscles in his forearm flex as he lifts himself from the bumper and advances on me. "Then I probably shouldn't mention how fucking good you look either. Or how much I want to bend you over this car and punish you for what you did to her."

I take a step back, refusing to acknowledge the unwanted heat building in my lower belly.

His long arms reach across the distance to touch a lock of my hair—

I jerk my head away, but that only makes him grin.

"You have every right to be upset with me." He's so close I can smell the mint on his breath. "There are a few things I'm a little pissed about, too. But unlike your grievances, mine are easy fixes."

His proximity is making it difficult to breathe, but I don't miss the longing look he gives the Chevy out of the corner of his eye.

"The car is *mine*, Colton. I'm not giving it back."

"Keep the car. What I'm pissed about is the missing ass-shaped dent in the middle of that hood. Let me know when you're ready to put it back."

He brushes past me on his way into the house, leaving me breathless and fuming.

"That's never going to happen," I call out to his retreating form.

"We'll see."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

COLTON



FIVE SECONDS alone with her and I'm already at half-mast.

Christ. This is going to be so much harder than I thought—no pun intended.

How exactly do you keep a girl at arm's length when the only thing you can think about when she's near is winning her back and fucking her brains out?

Cracking my neck, I fight the urge to glance over my shoulder at Rylee and prepare myself to walk into my childhood home that now looks nothing like it used to.

One of the perks of being the technical owner of Dovetail Construction means the foreman included me in all the progress updates and emails of Jack's house remodel. So at least I have a vague idea of what I'm about to walk into, but I doubt that's going to make this any easier.

A sharp exhale escapes my lips at the sight before me.

This is...a kick to the nuts. Nothing about this house is familiar. None of my memories fit into this space.

Or maybe it's me who doesn't fit here.

The worst part is, Jack would have loved it. The kitchen is big enough for all of us to work together and not have to worry about bumping into one another. Without the wall separating it from the living room, he could have supervised Sunday dinner prep from the comfort of the couch with a beer in hand, a smile on his face, and his feet up on the table. If I close my eyes, I can see him on the sofa wearing that contented look he

always got any time all of us were together—a look that came so rarely after Jeremy’s death.

I rub the center of my chest and head for the kitchen where Minho and Danny are already prepping. Holly, the Viper dickwad, and JJ are in the living room, which unfortunately means I have no buffer.

This dinner is going to be awkward no matter what I do. I should just give everyone the news and be on my way. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

Danny finishes chopping the green olives before responding. “Is it going to ruin dinner?”

“Most likely.”

“Then it can wait.” He points his knife to the stove. “We’re making *picadillo*. You’re on black beans and sweet plantains.”

Reluctantly, I head over to the sink to wash my hands. “You know I hate doing the plantains.” Somehow, I always manage to burn myself with oil splatter, which is why Danny or Jack always did them, even when it was my turn.

“Oh, we remembered,” Minho calls from where he’s setting the table.

Dicks.

FOR THE BETTER PART OF an hour, Rylee stays no less than fifteen feet away from me at all times. Although annoying, it affords me the opportunity to watch her every move and, like the jealous fuck I am, scrutinize each of her interactions with the Viper.

It also means I manage to burn myself no less than twenty-five thousand times while cooking. Twice I thought I caught Rylee looking in my direction while I complained about my assigned cooking duty, but the only time we made any sort of eye contact was after she asked Danny if we could *double* the

amount of plantains he'd initially asked me to fry up—*the little shit*.

Now that dinner is ready, she has no choice but to come closer and stop ignoring me.

Out of habit, I pull out the chair next to mine for her and, to my astonishment, she actually sits in it. She reaches for the glass of water in front of her before glancing over at me with a horrified expression and abruptly stumbling to her feet and moving to the opposite side of the table.

Shrugging, I try to hide my amusement. "Suit yourself. You're just giving me a better view over there anyway."

What am I, five years old? Antagonizing her isn't going to make this any easier on either of us. It does seem to be the only way she'll talk to me, though, and it's definitely the only way I can get her to make eye contact. Each time she does, it's like she's breathing life into my withering soul.

She glances at the empty chair next to me and then down to the only other seat available—the one directly across from mine. I can see her mind working to calculate which seating arrangement will piss me off most.

"Holly, can you switch seats with me?" she finally asks.

Holly doesn't even bother to answer, simply pointing at JJ in his highchair, as if to say *you're kidding right?*

Nose scrunched and cheeks reddening, Rylee crosses her arms and shuffles over to slink into the chair across from me. Even pissed, she's cute. I've fucking missed this. Missed *everything* about her.

Regardless of the fact that I really do have a better view from here, she's too far away, and it's making my skin itch with the need to touch her.

Fuck.

No one says anything for the first ten minutes of the meal. I know it's my presence, but I also know the only way to fix it would be the truth, and I can't give them that. It's better to

have Danny mad than doubting himself. Better that I be miserable and the Jackals remain secret and untouched.

My eyes return to Rylee as she devours her rice and beans, occasionally pausing to make ridiculous faces at JJ. My lips quirk up on one side. I can shoulder being an outcast in my own home if it means her safety.

Shoving a sweet plantain in my mouth, I glance around the table. If I can just finish taking care of the Frank problem, I can spend the rest of my life winning my family back.

But that's a big fucking *if*...

The plantain turns rancid in my mouth and I force myself to swallow it.

I was hoping Minho would have cracked the thumb drive and brought Charles Eastmann down by now. Unfortunately, when I pulled him aside at the Celebration of Life, he gave me the bad news. And now that Rylee's officially a Jackal, she'll be facing danger from two fronts. I never should have voted to confirm, but I couldn't bring myself to break her heart again. Which means now more than ever, I need to take care of fucking Frank. But, as his actions grow more erratic, I'm beginning to realize there's only one way to do that.

Since the Pit closed, I've redoubled my efforts into bringing Frank down from within. I've also stopped drowning my pain in booze and concentrated my efforts on using each of his failures to sow doubt in his ranks.

After finding out about the impending raid on Sidewinders, Frank ordered the Dead Kings to go to ground and lie low until the heat dies down. When he gives the all clear and calls us back, I'll continue turning his men against him, but I'm afraid it won't be enough.

He has to suspect what I'm doing, but for some unknown reason he's still convinced he needs me around. Who am I kidding, I know exactly why he does it: Not only do I do all his dirty work, he has me doing the legit legal shit too.

Last month, using the hush money we extorted from the politicians Governor Conrad outed, Frank had me negotiate

the purchase of all the free industrial land in and around Lockwood. Still no luck with the factory itself, but it's only a matter of time before he does something drastic to make sure he owns that too.

If you ask me, he's pushing his luck. The men he's fucking with are powerful with bottomless bank accounts and unlimited resources at their disposal. They have the means and the motivation to go after him. It's only a matter of time before this all comes back to bite him in the ass. And with the way things have been going, I'll probably be right beside him when it happens.

Unless I take him out once and for all.

Beside me, JJ crams a fistful of rice into his mouth, giggling as he chews, pulling me from my dark thoughts.

"So, Mac," Danny says after the plate-scraping-filled silence reaches an unbearable level, "what are your plans now that the Vipers are finished? Are you thinking of sticking around for a while or are you headed back to Boston to pick up the pieces?"

I belt out a laugh. "Seriously, Danny? You can't actually expect us to sit here and have casual conversations with this outsider? What are we even doing here? Why are you forcing us to sit through this? Let's just have the meeting and be done with it."

"*Forcing* you to sit through this?" Danny says, hurling his fork across the room into the kitchen where it shatters a glass. "Look around you. Every year there are less and less of us. If we keep getting killed off at this rate, soon there won't be anyone left to have dinner with and JJ will be sitting at this table by himself. Fucking sue me for wanting to carry on Jack's tradition of Sunday dinners while we still can."

The unfamiliar expression on my brother's face and his uncharacteristic outburst is sobering. Danny's always been the force that grounds us. I've never seen him lose his cool like this.

I take a good hard look at him, noting the new gray hairs at his temples and the deep lines forming near the corners of his mouth. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and he's been carrying that burden without me for a year now.

Goddammit. I can't believe I'm about to do this.

Shoving another plantain in my mouth, I turn my gaze on Mac. "What *are* your plans, Viper? I'd *love* to hear them."

He clears his throat, clearly uncomfortable at being the center of attention. "No plans yet. But I'd like to stay close to Holly and JJ, in case they need me."

Holly gives him a nod.

"Right," Mac says, exhaling. "Then I guess I'm in town for as long as you guys will have me—at least until Holly decides where we're going next."

"You're not staying in Eden?" Rylee interjects, directing her question to her sister.

"We'll stay for a bit, but it's still too hard to be here without Jeremy. As of right now, South America is looking like our best option." Holly forces a smile but it doesn't reach her eyes.

Rylee's shoulders deflate, and I have to shove down the growl crawling up my throat to prevent myself from yelling at Holly. "I've got a buddy who lives on a lake up in the mountains if you want to stay stateside," I offer. "He's got a house for rent that might be exactly what you're looking for. Secluded, lots of options for living off the grid, and easy to access for visiting family. There are enough tourists that a few of us dropping by won't arouse suspicion. The three of you would fit right in and it'd be a great place to raise a kid."

Rylee perks back up at the mention of visitors, and my chest squeezes at the renewed hope in her eyes. Not only did I make my girl happy, but I also provided a solution to get rid of the Viper. That's a double win in my book.

Holly purses her lips in thought. "That sounds too good to be true. I'd love to look into it more if you don't mind sharing the details later?"

I dip my chin. “I can do that.”

With that conversation over, the silence closes back in, interrupted only by the obnoxious tick of the new clock over the fireplace. Family dinners used to be easy, full of jokes and laughter and plans for the future. I used to look forward to this. But without Jack...

“Okay, I’ve got something,” Minho says, leaning back in his chair and slipping his thumbs into his suspenders. In true Minho fashion, he waits until he has our undivided attention. “I’m going to ask Alex to marry me.”

Rylee, Holly, and Danny explode into a fury of questions and congratulations, the three of them rushing over to hug Minho while Mac and I stay seated with JJ.

“Thanks for the warning about the raid.” The Viper’s words are so low and rushed I almost don’t hear them.

“Thanks for getting them out,” I mumble under my breath. “I still don’t like you.”

“That’s fine. I wouldn’t like me either if I was you.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean? And why does he sound so easy going? I look up, trying to figure out what his game is, but his attention is fixated on Holly.

My hands ball under the table. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I growl. “Does Rylee know?”

“About what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. I know exactly what that look means. Does Rylee know you’re fucking her sister? Or do I have to beat your face in again?”

“Holly and I aren’t *fucking*. And yeah, Rylee knows,” he says, still way too calm.

It eases some of my seething fury but doesn’t eliminate my desire to smash my fist into his mouth.

Mac blinks at me slowly. “You no longer have any claim on Rylee, and you don’t get to pretend she needs to be

protected from me. Not when you nearly destroyed her—*twice*. You're the one she needs protecting from."

Okay, now I really am going to hit him. "Listen fu—"

JJ giggles, breaking the tension by smooshing his fingers into his rice and flinging it onto the table. Mac and I reach for him at the same time, but it's me JJ turns toward, opening and closing his tiny hands until I pick him up.

"Alright, little man, I've got you." Once out of the highchair, I bounce him on my knee, the rage inside me already cooling as he contentedly eats my beans one by one.

"I don't owe you an explanation, Viper, but if there was any way to prevent or take back the pain I've caused Rylee and still keep her safe, I'd have done it. I'd walk through fire for that woman. Hell, you've seen me walk through the middle of a firefight just to get to her. She may never take me back, but for me there is no one else. There never will be. My life is hers, and I will protect her from anyone, including *you*."

Mac slides over into Holly's vacated seat, holding out a finger for JJ to latch onto, and nods like he knows exactly what I'm talking about. "It sucks, doesn't it? Having them so close but not nearly close enough."

I glance over to where the Adder girls are hugging Minho, pure light radiating from their joyous expressions as they try to coerce a proposal plan out of him. I cover JJ's ears. "Yeah, it fucking blows."

"Maybe it's time we do something about it? Help each other out instead of sitting here, moping like schmucks?" He extends a hand.

"You never fucked Rylee?"

"Not once."

I glance down at the viper adorning his skin, only pausing for a split second before reaching out to clasp his hand. "What did you have in mind?"

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

RYLEE



I SHOULD BE LISTENING to the exciting details of Minho's plan for proposing, but my attention keeps drifting to the opposite end of the table where Colton and Mac are huddled together.

At first, I thought they were arguing, but now that they've continued leaning closer to one another without exchanging blows, I'd almost swear they were getting along... Maybe even conspiring?

No. That's not possible.

Shaking the errant thought away, I concentrate on Minho.

"I thought I'd pack a picnic and we could head out to the old mill," he says. "The part I'm struggling with is whether or not to have all of you there? Should it be a private thing?"

"We should be there," Holly and Danny say at the same time, but I disagree.

"It should just be the two of you. Alex has been patiently waiting for you to come home for a year, he deserves some one-on-one time, and if you really want it to be a surprise, having all of us there will be a dead giveaway. We can have a party after or something."

Minho is beaming, and I can't help but match his smile with one of my own. "You're right. Alex would want it to just be the two of us. Good lookin' out, Ry."

A little bee buzzes inside my chest. "Do you know when you want the wedding to be or how big?"

“Alex isn’t the most patient, so some time in the next year.” He looks over my shoulder. “I want *both* of my brother’s standing behind me, the same way we stood up for Jeremy.”

Colton goes very still before looking over and nodding once. “I’ll be there.”

My already too-full stomach does an uncomfortable roll.

Today’s emotional rollercoaster was only made worse by Colton’s unexpected appearance. I understand that this is *his* home and *his* family, but it’s also mine, and I deserve to feel comfortable here. If there’s a chance he’s going to hang around a little longer, I need the opportunity to prepare myself for the ups and downs of being near him—to fortify my inner defenses. I can’t afford to be caught off guard again.

“How long are you sticking around?” I blurt.

The room becomes deathly quiet, and I have to cross my arms to ward off the chilling silence.

“What?” I say to their astonished expressions. “We were all thinking it. And it’s not healthy for JJ to get attached to someone who’s just going to leave.”

Colton bounces JJ once and hands him off to Mac. “I can stay a few days.”

He’s not back for good, then. Fine. That’s all I needed to know.

A knock at the door breaks the tension.

“It’s Andy,” Danny says, making his way over to the entryway. “He got called into work and had to miss Jack’s celebration. I asked him to stop by when he was done.”

Andy strolls in, shirt wrinkled and looking a little worse for wear. I raise my hand to wave, my muscles stiffening involuntarily when I realize he’s not alone.

Colton scoffs as Ashlynn peeks out from behind Andy. “Frank sent you to drag me back already?”

Drag? His choice of words throws me.

“No,” she says, twisting the hem of her crop top around her thumb while keeping her distance. “Dad still wants us lying low until the fallout from the Viper raid dies down. I didn’t know you were here until I saw your bike outside. I swear.”

“Then why *are* you here, Ash?”

For some reason, Colton’s casual use of her nickname grates on my nerves.

Walls up, Rylee. I remind myself. Walls up.

Ashlynn releases her shirt. “I came to warn the Jackals about what we found out yesterday.”

“Get in line. Danny said we’re not allowed to talk about anything depressing until family dinner is over. Might as well wait with the rest of us.” Colton pulls out a chair and sends it sliding across the floor where it topples over at Ashlynn’s feet. She doesn’t flinch, making me think she’s used to these sorts of antics from him.

Andy moves farther into the room, his drawn expression and bouncing gaze giving me the distinct impression he’s avoiding looking me in the eye. He clears his throat. “I’ve also got some not-so-great news.”

“Fucking perfect,” Danny says, his lips forming a tight line as he retakes his seat at the head of the table.

Holly walks over to Mac, tugging him up by the sleeve of his shirt. “That’s our cue to get going. Minho, you okay if we take the car?” He gives her a less than enthusiastic thumbs up, and after quick parting hugs and a cheek squeeze for JJ, the rest of us—Ashlynn included—take our seats.

Danny sighs and a sticky feeling creeps its way up my throat. “Let’s get this over with,” he says. “Colt, you’re up first.”

Colton puts his inked hands on the table and takes a deep breath.

“Eastmann is building another mine in Eden.” The windowpanes tremble with the veracity of his rage-laced

words. “The asshole bankrupted a builder and bought the land on the edge of town for pennies on the dollar. It’s the same plot that sits on top of the coal vein our parents died mining. He thinks he can just dig past their bodies and start all over.”

Colton’s mouth snaps shut, the muscles in his jaw feathering as he grinds his teeth. I can practically hear the thoughts he’s screaming at himself—the same ones echoing in my head.

It’s happening all over again.

We failed.

We weren’t quick enough.

That last one carries extra sting for me, but I know my feelings on this matter are nothing compared to his.

The anguish so clearly written on Colton’s face is an invisible force dragging me across the table. Before I know what I’m doing, I reach out and place my unbandaged hand on his. His breathing slows with the contact, and I do my best to ignore the tingle of electricity traveling up my arm.

Andy tucks his thumbs into his belt loops. “That’s bad, but I think my news might be worse.”

Danny and Minho exchange a look that screams of skepticism, but neither of them stop or correct him. There’s no way Andy’s news is worse, but Danny motions for him to go ahead and tell us anyway.

He heads into the living room and flips on the TV. With everyone’s attention on his uniformed back, I slide my hand off Colton’s, clenching and unclenching my fist under the table, hoping it will help the tingle dissipate quicker.

When Andy finally settles on a channel, the air in my lungs catches fire.

The broadcast is split screen, the anchor on the left delivering live footage from the news station while the image on the right appears to have been taken earlier today.

It’s the right side of the screen that has panic bouncing around my skull. A news anchor in a navy raincoat stands

before a swollen marsh. Downed trees, police cars, and crime scene tape fill the background, along with a black Mercedes coupe being pulled from the murky water.

“In breaking news, recent flooding around the Atchafalaya Swamp in southern Louisiana led to the gruesome discovery of a vehicle belonging to millionaire Charles Eastmann’s missing son,” the anchor says.

“While most of the identifying features of the vehicle were destroyed, police were able to confirm the Mercedes does indeed belong to Logan Eastmann.

“DNA evidence found inside the vehicle has resulted in an arrest warrant for Rylee Adder, who was last seen in Boston, Massachusetts. The twenty-four-year-old former girlfriend of the missing, and presumed dead, Eastmann heir is considered armed and dangerous. Please call authorities immediately if spotted.”

My school ID badge picture—vacant expression and all—flashes across the broadcast. Then the screen goes black and I’m left staring at my own horror-stricken reflection.

Andy was right, this is worse.

I don’t move. Don’t blink. And while I’m not quite in shock the way I was after losing Jack, I am having trouble coming to terms with what this means. Apparently so is everyone else because a second later they’re all on their feet, shouting at one another.

“Every law enforcement agency on the East Coast, my office included, received a BOLO with Rylee’s image on it.”

“What the fucking fuck do we do now?”

“If they knew where she was, they’d already be here.”

“She can come hideout with the Dead Kings.”

“Ash, shut the hell up, we’re trying to think here.”

“If the cops arrest Rylee, they’ll turn her over to Eastmann and he’ll kill her.”

“You think we don’t know that, Andy?”

“Everyone calm down, we need to think this through.”

Only one voice among them rings clear.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” Colton says, walking over to stand before me.

He squats, so that my legs are between his knees, and encases my hand with his rough palms. “I’ll fucking die before I let anyone touch you. The cops, Eastmann, I don’t care if I have to fight my own brothers. Anyone who tries to hurt you has to go through me.”

I look away from him, dropping my eyes to my bouncing leg. “You already said you weren’t staying.”

Colton’s grip on my hand becomes crushing as he leans forward, forcing me to look him in the eye. “I’m staying. I’m going to protect you.”

He’s so close that my nose brushes against his cheek when I shake my head. “I don’t believe you.”

His mouth twists, like I plunged a dagger into his chest instead of just stating the truth.

No matter how much I want to believe him, no matter how reluctant I am to acknowledge the intoxicating pull between us, no matter how good it feels to have his skin on mine... I can’t trust him to stay.

What I realized the night I left Charlotte and again on the night of the Pit shooting is as true now as it was then: I need someone who’s going to be around. Someone who’s going to put me first.

Colton’s made it clear he can’t do that.

I tug my hand free and stand. “Holly successfully hid in Eden for years with a warrant out for her arrest. This isn’t a big deal.”

Minho throws himself into the chair across from me. “Your warrant is for murder, Rylee, not corporate espionage.” He abruptly stands back up. “I need to get back to my computer and make triple sure there’s no trace of you online. I’ll also check to see what the hell this evidence they claim to have is.

Colt and I were thorough as shit, so whatever they have has to be fake.”

“Take Jack’s truck, the keys are on the hook in the garage,” Danny shouts to Minh, who’s already barreling across the room.

Ashlynn, halfway to the door herself, clears her throat. “I should go.”

“Don’t go far, we need to talk about Frank,” Colton sneers, rising to his feet without looking away from me.

She holds open the front door. “Rylee, I’m sorry this happened, but I meant what I said about the Dead Kings hiding you.”

I open my mouth to thank her, but Colton beats me to it. “Frank doesn’t step within a hundred feet of Rylee. Ever. He doesn’t look at her. He doesn’t even *think* her name. Neither do you. Got it?”

Ashlynn disappears into the night without acknowledging him.

Needing something to do with my hands that’s not pinching the shit out of my thigh, I begin stacking dishes from the table. “Our priority should be stopping Eastmann from building another mine. I’ll have to keep a low profile, but I can help Minh— Wait,” my hands tremble as I set the plate back down, “should I leave Eden? Is my being here putting you guys in danger?”

“No,” Danny and Colton say at once.

My relief is instantaneous. “Okay, it’s settled. Stopping Eastmann’s new mine is our priority.”

“Nothing is settled.” Danny joins me in clearing the table. “We need a meeting to discuss our options.”

“I’ll put out the word.” Colton has his phone out a second later. “Lee? Yeah, it’s me... Don’t you fucking start.”

Colton pauses, listening to whatever the New York charter head is rapid firing in his ear. “You already saw it, then? Good. Unfortunately, that’s not it. Hopefully you didn’t make it too

far out of town because we need to organize a meeting with the charter heads tomorrow afternoon— Okay, good. Thanks, see you tomorrow.” Colton ends the call. “It’s taken care of.”

Danny’s shoulders relax and something that looks a lot like intense gratitude filters across his face.

“What can I do?” I ask.

“Nothing,” Danny says, then his eyes flitter to Colton. “On second thought, do you and Andy mind hitting up the dishes? I think it’s about time Colt and I stepped outside and had a word.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

COLTON



I DON'T BELIEVE YOU.

Those might be the worst four words a man could hear after telling the woman he loves he's going to protect her.

For the last ten minutes I've had to stand here, watching Danny pace back and forth across the backyard with that phrase on repeat in my head.

Even when I can't hear her voice, I hear the list of the things I *should* have done to avoid this shitty situation we've found ourselves in.

I *should* have burned and crushed Logan's car at an impound.

I *should* have killed Frank the second he threatened Rylee and my club.

I *should* have killed Eastmann at the Pit.

Fuck.

If Danny doesn't say something in the next thirty seconds, I'm going back into the house.

A boom of rolling thunder fills the air, and he finally stops moving. His hair is windblown, the muscles in his arms taut as he reels back and socks me square in the jaw.

I stumble backward, catching my footing at the last second.

It's about fucking time.

“That was a good hit.” I crack my jaw and step back into the spot I just vacated. “We both know you’re not done. Go ahead, hit me again.”

He does, and this time liquid iron coats the inside of my mouth, dripping into my beard and down the inside of my throat. “Again.”

He hits me in the stomach, and I double over with the brutal force of the impact.

“How dare you fucking leave us,” he seethes. “How dare you abandon this club. How dare you not trust me enough to help you protect Rylee, and how dare you not let me in on your fucking plan about Frank’s club. I thought we were brothers!” Danny’s shoulders heave.

Once I can stand up straight again, I wipe the blood from my mouth. “We *are* brothers.”

His knuckles connect with my jaw, and I hit the earth with a loud *thwack*.

He spits on the ground next to me. “Fight back!”

“No. You do what you need to, but I refuse to raise a hand against you in anger.”

Thunder cracks overhead, lightning momentarily casting menacing shadows across Danny’s face before we’re both thrown back into darkness.

The air between us is tight, like a rubber band stretched too thin.

“Damn you, Colt.” He plops down onto the lawn next to me, laying back to stare up at the starless sky. “I can’t keep doing this by myself. I’m drowning. I need help. I need both my brothers.”

I wipe the dirt from my face with my sleeve. “You don’t need shit. I’ve been keeping tabs on you. The club is doing fine.”

He laughs humorlessly. “I’m perfectly aware of how the club is doing. It’s *me* that’s struggling. Jack made it look so easy... What if I fail them?”

My skin is suddenly tight and uncomfortable as I glance over at my brother.

Danny's fists clench in the grass. "Why didn't you come back? I would have helped you protect Rylee from Frank. We could have found a way to make it work."

I don't respond. Really, what is there to say?

"Minho thinks you made a deal for us and for Rylee," Danny says after a long pause. "I think you didn't trust me to run the club."

Pain scores the back of my throat as I try to swallow. *Fuck*. How do I make him see that couldn't be further from the truth?

I move one arm behind my head. "Do you remember when we used to camp out here as kids—how Jack would set up four tents, but some way or another Minho and I would always end up in yours?"

Danny makes a small grunting noise and lifts his head to look around the backyard, like he can still see our campsite set up along the tree line. "You guys always managed to drag mud inside and make it smell like one giant fart cloud, how could I forget?"

"Have you ever bothered asking yourself why every time we heard something go bump in the night we immediately ran to your tent and not Jeremy's?"

Danny looks over at me briefly before returning his gaze skyward. "No, I haven't."

"It's because you're stronger than us. Minho might have been the smartest and I might have been the scariest"—Danny laughs at that—"but you were the brave one. The steady one. You were the one we came to when the night was darkest."

"We were kids, Colt. What does any of that matter now?"

"It's about to get real damn dark, Danny. And it's not just me and Minho running to you anymore—it's every single Jackal, every Dove, and every person we protect. There is a

reason for that. We believe in you to lead us through this. You don't need me."

Danny sits up. "It should have been you, Colt. You were the one with the original idea, not Jack, not me. You. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

I shake my head. "You know what you're doing, and we both know it was never going to be me. The second she blew into town I was done for. I love what we do, and I'll never give up this life, but my priorities are different now. When it comes down to it, I'll always put her first—above my brothers, above my happiness, above my own life—and that makes me unfit to lead the Jackals."

I sit up, bumping Danny's shoulder with my own. "I left because I knew you could handle this. You were always going to be the man up front, and Minho and I were always going to be the ones backing you. It looks a little different than we thought it would, but I have always and will always have your back."

My brother stares at me long and hard. His expression scrunches and then his eyes go wide. "Fucking A, Colt. What did you have to do? How bad is it and how do we fix it?"

For one second, life feels simple again. My brother has my back and I have his—nothing else matters.

I puff out my cheeks. Well shit. If I'm refusing to leave Rylee, Danny's going to need to know everything. "You remember Frank threatened to tell Eastmann who killed Logan if I didn't support the Lockwood charter separating from the club?"

He bobs his head. "We probably need to tell Rylee about that—and soon, if you ever stand a chance of her forgiving you."

In the middle of all this bullshit, he's already thinking of ways to help me get her back? I don't deserve him.

I shake my head. "Rylee has more than enough on her plate without worrying about Frank. Besides, she wasn't the only thing he threatened me with. If I didn't agree to stay with

the Dead Kings, he was going to expose the Jackals and provide receipts for every law we've ever broken. If I don't go back, he'll follow through."

My head drops between my knees. "I can't leave her again, Danny, not when the police are already searching for her. But I can't let Frank give Eastmann confirmation of what she did or let him rat out the Jackals. I don't know what the fuck to do here."

"We're going to figure this out. *Together.*" Danny goes very quiet. "You have to come clean, though. Frank wasn't going to vote me in unless you did exactly as he asked, was he?"

It's not really a question, but I answer anyway. "The club needed you. We all needed the stability only you could offer. Frank is a cancer. He'd been waiting for an opportunity to execute a stunt like this for some time. Jack's death combined with the whole Logan situation just provided him with his first opening. But yeah, that was part of the deal." I cast a small glance in his direction to see how he's taking the news, surprised to find his expression unchanged. "You still earned this presidency, brother. Frank aside, the vote was unanimous."

The back of his hand slaps my arm at the same time thunder draws both our gazes toward the tempestuous sky. "You're a fucking moron, you know that?" he says with an exasperated sigh. "You've been protecting this club and its members for as long as I can remember, but that burden isn't yours alone to bear."

He rises to his feet, pulling me with him into a crushing hug. "You've got to stop doing this shit. A hundred arrows taken by one man is certain death, but a hundred arrows spread out across an entire army? That's barely a scratch."

I hear what he's saying, but I think Danny forgets sometimes that my only redeeming quality is the action I take to protect those around me. It's how I earned my place here and how I paid Jack back for taking me in. It's my role—the one thing I'm good at.

Or at least the one thing I used to be good at...

Danny thunks me on the back and then releases me. “So what are we going to do about the Frank situation? Minho’s been keeping tabs on all the crazy shit he’s been doing. There’s no way you can go back there. It’s too risky.”

“I told Rylee I was staying, but if I don’t go back soon, he’ll come after everyone. There really is only one thing we *can* do here—one way we can move forward that keeps everyone safe.”

I look him dead in the eye, waiting for him to understand what I’m saying.

His lips sag into a deep frown. “If we cross that line, there is no coming back.”

The first drops of rain begin to fall around us, pelting me on the cheeks and getting stuck in my eyelashes. “We don’t have a choice. We have to kill him.”

I suck on my teeth, mentally running through the roster of the remaining Dead Kings who might pose a problem, but there aren’t enough of them left to do much of anything. And, while fear of reprisal prevented me from doing it sooner, if I do this the right way, I might be able to convince the last of them to come back with me, effectively ending the threat once and for all.

“I hate to admit it, but I think you’re right.” Danny shoves his hands into his pockets and ducks his head to escape the rain. “But I’ll still have to bring it to a vote.”

Lightning cracks across the sky as the rain starts to beat down on us in earnest.

“Like I said, that’s why you’re president and I’m not. You do understand that no matter what the others decide, I’m doing it either way, right? I’m the only one who can get close enough.”

Danny doesn’t argue, but when the next flash of lightning strikes, movement in the shadows has us both reaching for our guns.

Ashlynn emerges from her hiding spot near the bushes, soaked to the bone, mascara running down her cheeks. Even with two guns pointed at her, she keeps walking forward.

“What if there was another way?” she asks through tears swallowed by rain. “What if I could convince him to let you and the Jackals go without any repercussions?”

Danny lowers his firearm. “What’s stopping him from changing his mind later?”

More mascara runs down the corners of her nose, but she’s not looking at Danny, she’s looking at me. “I can give you something that will ensure my dad never moves against you, but in return I need you to promise you won’t hurt him.”

I flick my head to whip the wet hair from my eyes. “I can’t promise you that. If he lifts a single finger against—”

“But if he doesn’t—” A loud *boom* of thunder tears through the sky. “If what I give you makes him stand down, will you promise not to hurt him?”

The lights inside the house flicker in time with the next crack of lightning, catching my attention and illuminating Rylee as she stares up at the ceiling. She’s reaching her hand into her pocket when Andy spins her around and tries to dance with her. She resists for a second, but gives in, letting him twirl and dip her until she’s laughing and the troubled look on her face fades.

Her smile is so goddamn beautiful.

Trusting Ashlynn is a big risk, but if I understood her motives and if I knew it protected Rylee... “Why would you do this for us, Ash?”

She snuffles. “I know he’s lost his way, but he’s my dad. I’d do anything to protect him.”

I shake my head, water dripping from my beard with the movement. “Not good enough. I don’t believe you.”

Ashlynn turns her attention to the house, and we both watch as Andy attempts to lift Rylee up over his head *Dirty Dancing* style and fails miserably. Rylee laughs and then

motions for him to jump into her arms so she can lift him, sending them both into a fit of hysterics.

“If she never forgives you,” Ashlynn says, “if she never loves you again, would that stop you from protecting her?”

I know the answer without thinking. “Never.”

Ashlynn pushes on my shoulder, forcing me to face her. “It’s the same for me, Colt. I don’t expect anything in return, but please let me do this for you.”

My anger toward her ebbs. “Okay, Ash. Show us what you’ve got.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

RYLEE



FLOPPING ONTO THE COUCH, I try playing dead in an attempt to avoid more dancing. Andy keeps tugging at my arms anyway, but I refuse to budge. “No,” I whine. “I’m tired and my new tattoo burns.”

He puts his hands on his hips. “Fine. But if I see you flinch from the thunder one more time, we’re turning the music back up and groovin’. My nana always said the best way to get over being afraid is to dance it out of your system.”

“Deal,” I agree without correcting him. It’s easier to let Andy think I’m afraid of thunder than to explain how every few strikes or so, it sounds exactly like gunfire and I almost lose all sense of when and where I am.

One newscast and it’s like seven months of progress went straight down the drain.

Another crack of thunder shakes the windows, and I preemptively distract myself by blurting out the first question that pops into my mind. “The storm is getting pretty bad. Do you think we should check on them?”

“They’ll be done soon enough.” Andy glances toward the window. I know from experience that there are too many lights on in here for him to see anything other than his own nervous reflection, but he keeps looking anyway. “Are you that eager to have Colt back inside?” he asks hesitantly. “I was under the impression you guys were done?”

I knew this was coming. While we were dancing, his palms kept sliding lower and lower down my spine. Every

time I thought he was finally going to cop a feel of my ass, he'd glance out the window and slide his hand up to a more respectful position on my waist.

Each time, I found myself growing more and more confused about whether the tightness in my stomach was relief or disappointment.

I should be grateful I can feel anything at all, considering how during all the recent dates I've been on I've felt absolutely *nothing*. There was no stirring in my belly when they leaned in to kiss me, no flutters anywhere when they said something flirty or sexually suggestive. Zilch. I was starting to think my ability to get turned on was broken—until Colton threatened to bend me over my own car to punish me and my traitorous body came alive.

At least now I know the only thing that's broken is my good sense.

“Colton and I are done,” I assure Andy. Maybe if I say it enough, the rest of my body will hop on board with the idea too.

At my answer, Andy flashes me an impish grin and joins me on the sofa. “I'm glad to hear it. Tonight was pretty heavy—and this is horrible timing—but with you potentially headed to prison for fifteen to life, I'm afraid if I don't shoot my shot and ask you to go on a date with me now, I'll never get the chance.”

My mouth falls open... After his hesitancy earlier, I didn't think he'd actually have the nerve to ask me out.

He laughs nervously. “What? Prison changes people, and I remember how mean you were after seventy-two hours in jail last year. Who knows what kind of person you'll be once you're out this time?”

I smack his arm. “Too soon, Sheriff. Way too soon.”

Laughing, he rubs his bicep. “Okay. Bad joke, sorry. But I really would love to take you out on a date. If you're interested?”

Before I can decide on an answer, the back door slides open and a sopping wet Colton and Danny stride into the living room. Both of them appear unbothered by the blood dripping from the corner of Colton's mouth into his beard, nor do they seem to care about the amount of mud they're tracking onto the brand-new floors.

"Hopefully we don't have to use it," Danny says. "But we'll need Minho or Rylee to back up the file either way." He pauses when Colton leans over to whisper something I can't hear.

Danny's eyes glide to mine while he listens, and my skin prickles in that uneasy way it always does when you know someone is talking about you. "Okay, fine," he replies softly. "I'll head over to Minho's to take care of this and check where he's at with the evidence. Do you want to come with, or just give me your phone?"

Colton's arm flexes as he struggles to fish out his cell from his rain-logged, skin-tight jeans. "I'm going to stay here. Do you mind taking Patrick Swayze over there with you? I can't be held responsible for what I do to him if he tries dancing with my girl again."

Danny lets out a genuine barking laugh and, after clapping Colton on the back, juts his head toward the front door. "Come on, Andy, help me grab a few things from the garage and I'll walk you out."

"Hold up," I say to no one in particular. "What the hell is going on here? Did I miss something? Why are you two all chummy, and why is Colton bleeding? And another thing," I tack on, whirling on Colton, "I'm not your girl. I'll dance with whoever I want."

Colton and Danny exchange an *I told you so* look before Danny says, "Colt's going to be staying with us for a bit while we figure some stuff out."

I stare back at him, dumbfounded. "What? Why? For how long?"

Danny shakes his head, water droplets falling to the floor around him. “I’m not sure, but that’s not our priority right now. You’re a Jackal, I need you to get your computer up and running as quickly as possible so I can put you to work. After the warrant, we can’t risk people in town seeing you, so you’re going to need to keep a low profile. Go ahead and set your stuff up in the primary bedroom, it will be quietest in there.”

The mention of getting to work is a rude wake-up call.

Right. Eastmann’s new mine. Going to jail for murder. Priorities, Rylee. You can worry about your ex later.

My spine straightens. “I left my monitors back in Boston. I’ll need at least two forty-nine-inch screens and then I’ll be good to go.”

“We can grab them from the station Minho set up for you at The Pack tomorrow.” Danny pats my shoulder. After he and Andy bring in a desk from the garage, he grabs a set of dry clothes and heads for the door.

Andy hovers in the entryway. “You’ll think about it?”

Oh right, he asked me out.

“I definitely will.” I give him a small wave and then the door closes, leaving me alone with the one person on the planet I don’t trust myself to be alone with.

I swallow audibly as water drips from his clothes onto the floor behind me, the sound booming in the otherwise quiet house like a metronome counting down.

Three...

Two...

One...

“You’ll think about *what?*” Colton’s voice is a low, menacing growl, reawakening that annoying stir in my belly.

Maybe if he understands I’m dating other people this won’t be as hard for us?

Exhaling, I prepare to say it all in one breath. “Andy asked me on a date. It won’t be the first date I’ve been on since we

broke up and it won't be the last. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Darting over to the pile of my things, I grab a bag of clothes and my heavy computer case before heading down the hall, the sound of angry waterlogged boots hot on my tail.

"Like hell you are. No way I'm letting you go out with Andy fucking Knott. And exactly how many other dates have you been on?" He rips the computer case from my hands and brushes past me with it, stomping into the bedroom.

He places the case under the desk Danny moved in for me and, after setting my bags on the floor, I turn away from him and try to calm myself by counting to ten.

It doesn't work.

His footsteps stop behind me. He's so close I can feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest pushing against my back and taste the sharp tang of his frustration. My pulse rises to a nauseating tempo.

I whip around to face him. "Dammit, Colton, it's none of your business. You made it clear we were over. *This* is what happens when relationships end. I get that our current circumstances mean we have to see each other, but now that I've finally moved on enough to start dating other people, are you really going to try to ruin that for me?"

My arms flail all over the place as I yell, but he just stands there and takes it, looking down at me with that icy stare of his.

Lowering my voice, I dig my finger into his chest. "*You* did this to us, not me. Please stop making this more difficult than it needs to be. Can't you see I'm having a hard enough time with all this as it is?"

His beard shifts, like he's flexing his jaw or chewing on a nasty retort, but instead of fighting, he stomps off to the bathroom and slams the door. The water turns on a second or two later, and I slump onto the bed, finally taking a full, shaky breath.

This is not going well.

Lying back on the deep-navy comforter, I stare at the ceiling. Turns out, making good decisions for yourself is freaking hard, but I have to be strong. If I allow Colton back in and he breaks me, I won't come back from it this time. Especially not when everything else is so up in the air. Come to think of it, maybe I should swear off men altogether and tell Andy no... I can take a year or two to myself and just concentrate on me and the Jackals.

That's it. That's what I'm going to do. No more dating. No more men. No more drama.

The water shuts off, cedar-and-citrus scented steam flooding into the room when the door cracks open. Footsteps pad off to my right and then the mattress squeaks and dips as Colton takes a seat on the opposite edge of the bed. He's shirtless with a towel slung loosely over his chiseled waist. Heart racing in my throat, I quickly look away.

"Sorry," he offers quietly.

I glance at him through the corner of my eye to make sure he's talking to me and not on the phone or something, but when my gaze starts trailing down his inked flanks and lower to where the towel is slipping off his hip, I force myself to focus on the shapes in the ceiling texture.

"Rylee, I mean it. The last thing I want to do is make life harder for you," he continues. "I'm going to work on proving that to you, but I have to know one thing: if I *was* staying for good, could you give me another chance?"

My traitorous heart screams in elation at the idea, but I smother her with logic. "It was one summer, Colton. Why do we keep torturing ourselves like this?"

He sucks in a breath through his teeth, but when he speaks, his voice is even and subdued. "It was more than that, and you know it."

My chest squeezes so painfully I have to close my eyes.

If he really is staying, whether for a day or a month, I can't keep doing this. No matter how hurt or mad I am, I have to find a way to coexist with him or I'm going to be torn apart.

After a deep breath and a quick decision, I roll onto my side, using every ounce of my self-control to keep my gaze from drifting away from his eyes. “I’m too tired for this. Eastmann is trying to destroy everything the Jackals built here with a new mine. I’m wanted for murder. I can’t live for *what-ifs* anymore, and I can’t keep doing this with you. Whether you’re staying or not, we either need to go no contact or we need to agree to be civil and respectful toward one another. Our attention should be on the Jackals.”

He bobs his head. “You didn’t say no.”

I toss a hand in the air. “Do you want to try being friends or not?”

He lifts his eyes from the floor to look at me, and for a second I’m lost in their melancholy blue-green depths. “If this is the way I get to have you in my life, then sure, let’s be friends. But just so you know, I’m still going to prove myself to you.”

I swallow away the tightness in my throat. “Can you start by putting on some clothes?”

“I didn’t pack much.” He shrugs, leaning back so the breathtaking inked hills and valleys of his abdomen are on full display. I gulp.

Nope.

Lifting myself back up, I move to stand by the door. “There is a pair of your sweatpants and a sweatshirt in the bag I left in the living room. In the morning, I’ll help you go through your things in the garage and we can wash everything. After all, what are friends for, right?”

“Yeah. Alright,” he says, slowly rising to his feet and sauntering into the hallway.

I shut the door with a soft *click*, locking it behind him for good measure.

When I lean my forehead against the cool wood, I feel the soft *thunk* of another head doing the same thing opposite mine.

“I’m going to make you remember,” Colton whispers from the other side.

My chest shudders because that’s the problem...

I never forgot.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

COLTON



“FRIENDS. She wants to be fucking *friends*.” The word itself feels like an insult compared to what we had.

Danny tries to hide his rumbling laughter behind a pillow. “Dude. It’s 5:30 a.m. and I just got home. I haven’t even slept yet. What do you want me to say here?”

“You forgave me, I guess I just thought she might—”

“Might what? Fall at your feet after you bailed on her for a year and didn’t tell her why? Colt, brother, you’re smarter than that.”

I sit up from my pile of blankets on the floor. “You’re supposed to tell me what to do here, not bust my balls.”

Danny yawns from the couch. “Have you thought about—oh, I don’t know—actually trying to be her friend?”

I wait for the punchline, but it never comes. “That’s the problem, I have exactly one friend, and Alex only tolerates me because he’s in love with my brother. How do I do that?”

Danny rolls away from me and yawns. “Maybe stop telling her you’re going to stick around and show her what that looks like? I don’t know what else to say, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

His snoring reverberates through the room before I have time to blink, officially marking the end of my troubled sleep. I slip out of the blankets and head out through the front door.

This late into summer, the early morning air nips at my cheeks and I have to tug up my hood to ward off the chill.

Immediately I'm wrapped in Rylee's scent. Decadent and fresh. Floral and sweet. A delicate spring garden after a light rain.

I've fucking missed this.

Taking another deep inhale of the neckline, I wonder if it smells like her because of all the other clothes in the bag, or if this means she's been wearing it? Hopefully the latter. I like the idea of her in my clothes, especially during all those months we were apart.

I shuffle over to Jack's porch swing and settle in.

At least Danny had the good sense not to get rid of this. It was the last thing Jeremy built before leaving for the Marine Corps. I helped him install it the same morning he left for basic training, and Jack had his coffee out here every day until Jer came home. Danny had his first kiss right here on this seat. It's crazy that I know that, considering I don't even remember my own, but the way the girl screamed and fell off the swing when I'd walked in on them is something I'd have a hard time forgetting. Not to mention that dumb, love-struck expression Danny wore for a month after.

Pushing off the railing with my feet, I let the chair rock me. When it stops, I lean forward and put my head in my hands, only to perk up when the front door *clicks* softly open and closed.

Rylee jumps when she sees me, grabbing at her chest like a little old lady clutching her pearls.

"And where are you off too this early in the morning, *friend*?" I prod, unable to stop myself from saying friend like the dirty word that it is. She doesn't react, continuing to stare at me without saying anything, like she's seen a ghost.

I stand, closing the distance between us in a single stride. With a curled knuckle, I tilt her chin. "What's wrong? What happened?" I ask, searching her face as her eyes begin to water.

She jerks out of my grip, wiping at her nose. "Nothing, I'm fine. I saw the blankets on the floor and assumed you were

gone again. You just startled me.”

She might as well have stomped on my rib cage.

“I told you, I’m staying.”

Stop telling her you’re going to stick around and show her what that looks like, Danny’s voice says in my head.

“Right.” She begins stretching, and that’s when I notice the long-sleeve compression shirt, running shoes, and the shortest shorts I’ve ever seen in my damn life. If she turned to the side a tiny bit more, I could see that divot near the apex of her toned thighs.

Groaning, I close my eyes. “You’re killing me, Tiger.”

“What did I do now?”

When I open my eyes, her nose is scrunched, her freckles on prominent display.

I keep my gaze firmly locked on her face. “Let’s talk about those shorts, for starters. *Christ*. Please promise me you won’t turn around, or maybe do... I don’t fucking know how this friend shit works. Also, you’re the absolute worst at tattoo aftercare. You’re not supposed to get sweaty after new ink, remember?”

Her hip juts out to one side as she looks down at the Jackal mark on her thigh. “Damn.”

Fuck, she’s cute.

“What do I do now, then?” She throws her hands up like this is the worst news she’s had in weeks, which is laughable, considering what we told her last night.

“We could go get breakfast at the diner?” I suggest.

She frowns. “I have to maintain a low profile, remember? And the diner is closed. Do you know why? I keep forgetting to ask, and it’s not like I can tell Lana I’m in town or I’d find out from her.”

Shit, that’s right.

“Danny and Andy hemmed Maggie up for tax evasion. She’s serving five at State.”

Flames dance across Rylee’s amber eyes. “That’s it? *That’s* all that monster gets for colluding with Knott and drugging Danny and Jack?”

I cup the back of my neck. “Danny and Lana...” I pause, once again remembering the porch-swing kiss and the love-struck look. “There’s history there that makes things complicated. Maggie will never show her face in this town again. Lana understands that.”

“That’s bullshit.” Rylee’s foot taps against the deck in an erratic pattern. She tries shoving her hand into her nonexistent pockets before frantically looking around the yard with a familiar glaze creeping over her previously clear eyes.

It takes a second for me to catch onto what’s happening, but I get there. “What do you see?”

“The mailbox,” she answers impatiently. “There is a little Cuban flag painted on the side and gold house numbers.”

“What else?”

“I only do one thing from each sense,” she clips, sounding slightly annoyed, but at least her foot is no longer tapping.

“What do you feel?”

She grips the railing. “Rough, aged wood, and at least three new splinters.”

I laugh, and that earns me a brief smile. “What do you hear?”

Her shoulders lower an inch. “Danny’s snoring. Even through the door, it’s like a freight train.” She takes one long, slow breath. “Okay, I’m good now. Thanks.”

“Anytime. That’s what *friends* are for.”

That one earns me some side-eye and another smile, this one big enough to make my chest ache.

“If I can’t go for a run, should we sort through your stuff in the garage?” She shuffles her feet, like this whole friendship

thing is just as awkward and foreign for her as it is to me.

I hold one arm out toward the door. “Ladies first.”

Mistake. Huge fucking mistake.

How could I have forgotten about the shorts? Biting my knuckle, I focus on her swishing ponytail instead of the sway of her perfect ass as we quietly walk through the house toward the garage. Once we hit the brand-new epoxy floors, my steps falter, short shorts momentarily forgotten.

Where is Jack’s workbench? And the tools that used to hang on the wall? His woodworking station is gone, too, as are the car parts for my Chevy and his Dodge. I glance up at the categorized boxes stacked neatly in the rafters.

Jack: Woodworking

Jack: Clothing

Jack: Kitchen

Jack: Photos

Jack: Knickknacks

I don’t know how long I stand there reading the simplified labels of my father’s life, but eventually Rylee squeezes my palm. It’s short and quick, and I’m only able to interlock our fingers for a millisecond before she takes her hand back, but that small action says more than a thousand words ever could.

“Do you want to go through his stuff? If not, I found yours over here,” she says softly.

Following her, I run my finger over the labels with my name on them, realizing that if I’d never come home, my boxes would’ve been thrown out or joined Jack’s up above.

I pop one open and hand her a pair of sweatpants from inside. “Can you please put these on?”

TWO LAUNDRY LOADS later and a third one still in progress, Rylee and I are seated in two fold-up chairs in the driveway. We haven't said much to one another, and the comfortable silence reminds me of the first time we went out to the old mill and sat in Adirondack chairs down by the water. Just like then, her eyes are closed, her face tilted skyward, allowing me the opportunity to admire the light dancing across her cheek bones.

She's so fucking beautiful it hurts.

It'd be a perfect morning if my need for caffeine wasn't so excruciating, but after getting home so late, Danny needs his sleep and the sound of the coffee maker would wake him. I've always appreciated the quiet isolation of Jack's property, but I'm so desperate I find myself contemplating if I should drive down the road to beg the closest neighbor for some coffee. Knowing Aunt Jin, she's already at work, though.

Rylee shifts in her seat. "Just go make yourself a pot. Danny will sleep through it."

"I'm good," I say, rubbing my temples. "Besides, I don't know where anything in that kitchen is." My voice has a bitter edge to it that surprises even me and, just like everything else I try to hide from Rylee, she immediately picks up on it.

"It must be weird to be back here and have it all... *changed.*"

"More than you'll ever know." Elbows on my knees, I lean forward. "I can see why he did it, though. My parents' place has been empty for years because I can't step foot near it. Maybe I should do the same thing. Tear it down. Start fresh."

"What kind of house would you build? Walk me through it." She tucks her legs up into the chair and closes her eyes.

When I don't say anything, she cracks open one lid. "Go on, you can at least tell me what the outside looks like."

“I wouldn’t know where to start.” I shrug and lean back. “The only thing I can see is the way it was, before everything happened.”

Her lips dip at the corners. “Then I’ll tell you what my dream house looks like, but you have to close your eyes.”

She waits a beat, like she’s checking to make sure my eyes are indeed closed, and then begins. “My mom and I used to talk about this all the time when I was a teenager. She wanted one of those gaudy Mediterranean mansions. Not me. My house would be a one-story craftsman. Light-gray siding, dark-gray trim, with decorative wooden beams and matching shutters on the outside. In the front, there’d be planter boxes with greenery and flowers, and out around the side of the house, a big gated garden.”

I open my eyes to peek at the radiant smile evident in each of her words, leaning closer to bask in her warmth. “What about the inside?”

Her brow furrows a bit, like she’s actually trying to see it. “I don’t think I’ve ever thought about that part in detail, but I do know there is a big window at the back, overlooking rolling hills and miles of forest. Same thing in the primary bedroom. But no white. Like, not anywhere in the house. As far as the rest... When I try to imagine it, I only see Holly and JJ and... everyone else. I guess the other details don’t matter to me.”

She opens her eyes, and there is a new sadness there that makes me want to reach out and cup her face, to kiss her cheeks and her nose and those perfect soft lips until the warmth comes back to her expression.

But friends don’t do that.

I try something else. “Let’s think about it together. For starters, you’d need a massive office with a big desk and room for all your tech shit.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh man. What if it could only be accessed through a secret door hidden inside the walk-in closet? A shoe shelf or something that only opens when you

pick up the right boot?" Her laughter rings out into the quiet morning, and I ache with the need to hear it again.

"Can you imagine yours now?" she prompts.

I can't, but I do know it's full of the sound of her voice. Eyes dropping to the driveway, I clear my throat. "It's hard for me to look at things for what they could be."

"What about when you think of the future? Do you see anything at all?"

I look up from the ground back to her.

Only you.

I shake my head. "No, not really."

Rylee gives me a dispirited half smile. "We're going to have to work on that."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

RYLEE



DANNY LETS me tag along to the meeting with the charter heads.

I had to promise to stay out of sight during the drive and agree not to step foot outside The Pack, but after spending the morning doing Colton's laundry and after Holly's ambush at breakfast to give me lessons she called Evading Eastmann 101, I was just grateful to leave the house.

Packing up the screens in the back office takes me all of five minutes, and since the Jackals are already aware I'm in town, I head out to the bar. I might as well help Cook serve a few drinks and inconspicuously creep on the meeting. Which is easier said than done. I've been trying to read their lips without being too obvious, but I really suck at it.

Frustrated, I lean against the bar. Cook always seemed to know what Lana and I were talking about last year, even when we were whispering halfway across the diner. Maybe he'll have more luck? I scoot closer to him. "Cook, can you tell what they're talking about?"

He stops wiping down a glass to glance at the table. After only a few seconds, he goes ashen.

I push off the bar. "What is it? What did they say?"

With a trembling hand he writes two words on the spare notepad he keeps on the bar top.

New mine.

Shit. Of all people, why would I ask Cook to spy on the meeting for me? “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking when I asked you.”

Cook picks the pen back up, his scars so much more pronounced than they were only moments ago.

How long have you known?

“We found out yesterday. We’re trying to figure out how to bring down Charles Eastmann and stop the mine.”

You have a plan?

I shake my head. “We did, but the information wasn’t what we thought it would be. We still need something concrete and irrefutable. The Jackals are working on it.”

An unreadable expression crosses Cook’s face and then he pats my arm before writing something else.

They’re lucky to have you. Jack asked me to join.

I was too scared. Always resisted.

“What changed?”

I saw what Maggie did to Jack.

She locked me in the supply closet to keep me from reporting it.

I lightly touch his arm as he continues writing.

*The Jackals could have done anything to her
in retribution, but they treated her with
respect and dignity.*

*I'm too old and broken to really help at this
point, but I wanted to become a Dove for
Jack.*

Keep his legacy alive.

Make a little noise.

I grab his hand. "I want to do that, too, but I don't want to just make noise. I want to start a riot. I want to stop Eastmann once and for all."

Cook removes his hand from mine so he can write again.

Better do it quickly.

When I quirk a brow in question, he points to the television on the wall where my face and a notice of a \$500,000 reward for information leading to my arrest flashes on the screen. Across the bar, Colton meets my gaze, his icy blue-green eyes are cautious, like he's waiting to see how I'll react.

"I'm fine," I mouth, and even though he turns his head back toward the meeting, his attention stays locked on me.

As soon as the meeting ends, he rises to change the channel and storms outside with Minho hot on his tail. When I look to Danny for an explanation, he approaches the bar and shrugs. "They needed to work something out."

Cook hands him a beer as the door slams shut.

"Is Colton going to come back bleeding like he did after *working something out* with you?" I mean it as a joke but,

annoyingly, it comes out tainted with concern.

“I doubt it. Minho’s much better at communicating his feelings than I am. Lee, on the other hand, is a different story.” Danny looks back at the booth where the New York charter head is seated with a snarl tarnishing his otherwise handsome features. Even Tate and Nolan seem to be giving him a wide berth. “Lee’s definitely going to hit him, but only because he feels obligated to.”

Meaning Lee’s not really mad. I scoff and grab a rag to aggressively wipe down the counter.

“You good?” Danny asks.

“No,” I gruff, vigorously scrubbing at a sticky ring on the bar top.

Everyone, myself included, seems to have forgotten how Colton left us for a year. Now he says he’s back and *poof*, Danny starts treating him like a brother and I start treating him like a friend? To top it all off, I actually enjoyed the time I spent with him this morning, sorting through his things and talking about my dream house. Which makes me feel weak, like I’m once again letting someone walk all over me the way Logan did.

“Tell me how the meeting went.”

Danny raises a skeptical brow, like he knows that’s not what I meant when I said I wasn’t okay, but thankfully he doesn’t push the issue. “The police do have DNA evidence, a small handkerchief they’re claiming belonged to Logan with your blood on it.”

“How could he possibly have gotten my—”

A memory surfaces in the back of my mind, and a chill settles on my shoulders. “The night I met Eastmann at Rick’s casino...I reopened a cut on my forearm and bled on him. Eastmann cleaned my blood off his hand with a pocket square. He told his guard to ‘take care of it’ but he must have saved and planted it in Logan’s car. That asshole is setting me up.”

“Agreed, and we already knew it was planted.”

“How?”

“DNA in that minuscule of a sample is useless when it’s been underwater for that long. Looks like he waited until your dad was out of the picture to set you up. Finding Logan’s car was the perfect opportunity, although we’re still unclear how they found it in the first place. According to Colt, a flood doesn’t add up.”

I try to hide the fear in my voice. “Do they really have a case against me without Logan’s body?”

Danny takes another sip of beer. “Historically, it’d be a difficult case to prove, but with Eastmann’s money—”

“And the police and judges on his payroll, he’ll find a way to make it happen.” *Dammit*. I am so unbelievably screwed.

“Exactly.” Danny checks behind him and then returns his attention to me. “I wouldn’t normally tell you something like this, but Colt feels responsible for not disposing of the Mercedes better.”

My eyes fly to the door. Even though I’m angry and confused about Colton right now, that doesn’t mean I want him blaming himself for something he had no control over, not when I know all too well the toll that can take on someone. “It’s not his fault.”

“Doesn’t matter, that’s still how he sees it. Anyway, we’ve decided the current plan is to bust Eastmann for tampering with the crime scene or hang him up on—”

I hold up my hand. “Sorry, how is that going to stop him from building the new mine?”

Danny takes a long draw of his beer. “We’ve been trying to bring down Eastmann for what he did here for over twenty years and we still don’t have enough evidence to prove he’s guilty.”

Cook brushes against my side to retrieve the towel from my hand, but I’m too shocked by what Danny’s saying and too busy thinking of a rebuttal to loosen my grip. “Then we try harder, Danny. All of our efforts should be on stopping the

mine, not clearing my name. I refuse to be the reason another mine gets built here. Don't put that on me. Please."

His eyes dart to my right. "Cook, do you mind giving us a minute?"

Cook pats my arm before reluctantly wandering off.

Danny's rings click on the bar as he sits up to his full height. "Rylee, listen to me when I say this: I will *never* place one member's safety above another's, and I will *always* act in the best interest of the club and the people we protect. Don't *ever* question me on that. We will move forward as planned and take down Eastmann by proving he interfered with a murder investigation. In doing so, we'll also delay the building of the mine."

For one blink of an eye, it's not Danny speaking to me, it's Jack.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Tell me what I need to do."

SHRINKING MINHO'S VIDEO CHAT, I shove his window up into the corner of my monitor. "Well, that was a bust. What are we looking for next?"

He minimizes Eastmann Incorporated's public financial records and brings up folder after folder of video files on our shared screen. "We're looking for footage of Eastmann or one of his executives talking about a law enforcement pay off or the case. Honestly, as long as we catch him on police interference, it doesn't necessarily have to be your case."

He opens the first file. "As we saw in those financial records, his cleanup team is good, so we might have better luck catching him admitting something in the background of some random social media post where we can enhance the audio. Hell, I'd take one of his guys bragging about a deal while out for a meal or at a strip club."

“What about footage of Vic? Or even Logan talking about past payoffs?”

Minho stops typing to look at me through the camera. “There isn’t much of anything with Vic out there. They’re kind of an enigma. But there is a little bit of Logan’s footage we should go through... You’re in some of it, though, so I figured I’d tackle those quickly while you start in on Eastmann and some of his close associates.”

Nausea wriggles up my throat at the thought of Minho getting a glance of me in my old life. “On second thought, the Logan footage was a bad idea. Besides, if I’m in it, I’d remember anything worthwhile.”

“I have to double check anyway. You didn’t know what was going on back then. He could have said something that went over your head, or a security guard could have said something nearby.”

“Logan didn’t have security.”

Again, Minho stops what he’s doing to look at me. “Logan *always* had security. It’s why we were so nervous when you showed up in Eden. It’s why Jack had Danny, Colton, and Ash trailing you for weeks. We were trying to catch you meeting up with one of his security guys to report back on us. Here, you can see for yourself.”

A grainy video pops up on my screen, showing a bustling high-end restaurant that I recognize immediately as Dell’s, one of Charlotte’s fanciest steak houses. I’ve only been there once, and it appears this footage is from that night. After a quick scan for the table I sat at, I see myself in a tight white dress, spinning the stem of a wine glass.

I look exactly as uncomfortable as I felt shoved into that awful outfit Logan asked me to wear.

From the left, Logan saunters into the frame at the same time two men sit at the bar. Past-me doesn’t so much as glance their way as Logan kisses my cheek and takes a seat.

At this point, I’m already cringing when Minho activates the audio, isolating our voices and drowning out everything in

the background.

“I’ll be right back. I just need to freshen up,” past-me says to Logan.

“Take your time. Sorry I was late,” he replies politely.

As soon as past-me leaves, the two men from the bar approach Logan. *“Sir, do you want one of us to follow her?”*

Logan waves them off. *“It’s fine. She’s probably nervous being in this nice of an establishment.”*

“Sir, you’re not afraid she’s going to leave? We were pretty late, and you know how women can be when they’re upset...”

“Leave? Where else is she going to go? I made sure she can’t afford to move out of the loft. Trust me, Rylee’s trapped. I could fuck someone in front of her and she’d be forced to stay. Go have a drink or something. I’m going to make this quick.”

The two men return to the bar, and Logan reaches over to steal a sip of my wine, muttering to himself as he does. *“I can’t wait until I can leave this fucking city and go back to New York... Never been this bored in my life.”*

Our waitress arrives at the table, and Logan perks up, activating that charming smile of his that tricked me into thinking he was a decent person.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I say to Minho. “I get it, he had security the whole time and I never noticed.”

I remember what happened next clearly enough without having to relive it, and I don’t particularly want Minho to see how I came back to the table right as Logan was getting the waitress’s number. He had an excuse, something dumb about wanting to do business at the restaurant and, even though I didn’t believe him, I never said a word because he was right. I was trapped.

Minho clicks out of the video, but my nausea doesn’t abate. “Last year, I overheard Holly saying the Vipers always had eyes on me, does that mean the Jackals did, too?”

In the corner of my screen, Minho cracks his knuckles and places his interlaced fingers behind his head. “Are you asking

if this is the first video footage of you and Logan I've looked at? Because it's not. After we found out you were dating an Eastmann, Holly asked me to make sure you were safe, and that's what I did—while also making sure you weren't a threat to the Jackals. Creepily enough, I spent an inordinate amount of time watching you before we ever met. If it helps, I promise I never abused my powers and only watched when you and Logan were together or when Logan was alone.”

I might be sick. “Just you? No one else?”

It's one thing to know that Minho, who always approaches his job with a healthy dose of clinical detachment, might have seen the way I allowed Logan to treat me. But the others... I can't stand the idea of Danny, or God forbid Colton, having seen the shit I'd put up with.

“Only me. Well, Jeremy, too, but by that point it was mostly just me.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief at the same time a steaming cup of herbal tea appears before me on the desk. When I look up, Colton is already disappearing through the doorway. A tiny smile threatens to break over my lips, but I quickly smother it.

He's been bringing me snacks and things to drink since we got back from the meeting this afternoon. It's near midnight now, and even though I've heard Danny, who's been working away on his laptop in the living room, tell Colton to go to bed several times, he hasn't let up.

“Maybe I should propose to Colt instead,” Minho says bitterly. “Alex hasn't brought me shit and I've been at this just as long as you have.”

Thankful for the change of subject, I bring the black ceramic mug to my lips and blow on my tea. “Maybe you should propose to both of them. I can personally attest to Colton's skills as a lover and I hear throuples are on the rise.”

Minho recoils. “Okay, gross. That's my brother and I was *kidding*. Also, you do know he's standing beside you, right?”

My cheeks heat as I turn to find Colton hovering with a bowl of strawberries clutched in his hands and a ridiculous,

panty-melting smirk peeking out from beneath his beard. “Personally attest to my skills as a lover, *huh?*”

The burning in my cheeks spreads down my neck and arms. “You must have misheard me. I said *detest* your skills as a lover. Big difference.”

Dear sweet baby Jesus, please kill me now.

Colton hands me the strawberries. “Either way, that’s not a very *friendly* comment, Tiger.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

RYLEE



One Week Later

Early September

WE'VE BEEN COMBING over video footage and internal records for a week.

Besides aching backs and blurred vision from long hours spent staring at a screen, we have nothing to show for it. It's not that I was expecting Charles Eastmann to be in jail by now, but I thought we would have at least found something... *Anything.*

Pushing my chair away from the desk, I shoot to my feet. My head spins with the sudden movement as I gather the three mugs and empty bowl of spaghetti from tonight's dinner before making my way to the kitchen.

Danny is still at The Pack office with Minh. It's already dark out, but they'll likely stay there for the next few hours, which means I'm home alone with Colton. Again.

My stomach flutters when I walk down the hallway and hear him clicking away on his laptop at the kitchen table. He's been inundated with work, trying to catch up on all the Jackal legal matters he missed while away, but that hasn't stopped him from coming back every single day around lunch and dinner time to bring me food.

As busy as I've been, I was afraid his meal deliveries would be a distraction, but besides my pulse picking up each time the front door opens and closes, it's been fine. Colton has been very respectful of my wishes to keep our interactions

friendly and as Jackal-related as possible. Mostly he just ducks in, drops off a plate on my desk, and ducks right back out.

Tonight, it was spaghetti and meatballs with cheesy garlic bread.

His attentions would be sweet, if they weren't so annoying—or maybe if I wasn't the only person who hasn't forgiven him for leaving.

I can't wrap my head around why the others are being so easy on him. Colton abandoned *all* of us. How can they welcome him back with open arms? Yes, he's stuck around like he said he would...*so far*. But what's a single week in the grand scheme of things? What's any measure of time if even when he's a little late coming home I find myself wondering if he's delayed or gone for good?

I meant it when I told Colton we should try being friends for the good of the club, but I hadn't anticipated how having him around would open the wounds I've spent the last year healing. It was a little easier to be friendly when everyone else was mad at him, but now that it's just me, I find myself significantly less willing to make accommodations for him like I did that first morning in the garage.

Regardless, I told Jack and Danny during my loyalty test last summer that if push came to shove I would choose the Jackals over Colton, now I need to prove the truth of my words by showing everyone I can work alongside him. *Civilly*.

Huffing the hair out of my face, I pretend like I don't see him tugging at his beard or watching me walk by on my way to the sink.

After washing my dishes as fast as possible, I use the hand soap Holly dropped off yesterday, bringing my lathered palms up to my face to inhale the delicious scent. It reminds me of summer and home, of that feeling you get after a day spent under the sun when your heart is happy and light and full. I always find myself reluctant to wash it off.

Colton's eyes fall on me like a physical weight as I dry my hands.

“Are you still hungry? I can make you something to eat if you want?” he asks, rising to his feet.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to explain that I don’t want anything from him unless it’s the reason everyone else forgave him, when the front door bursts open and slams shut. I sigh and close my mouth. The interruption is probably for the best. Not knowing and not forgiving him is the only way for me to keep my walls up and protect myself.

“Colt?” Danny calls out before spotting us in the kitchen. “Oh good, you’re both here.”

“I was just heading back to my computer.” I take a step toward the hallway, but Danny holds out a hand to stop me.

“No, you need to come with me.”

My breath catches in my throat. “What happened?”

Colton must be thinking the same thing because he’s already reaching for the gun tucked into the front of his jeans.

Danny raises two hands. “Bad phrasing, everything is fine. Sorry. Colt messaged me earlier about someone needing the extra refrigerator from our garage and now I need him to help me load and unload it. Figured you could both use a little break.”

No matter how tempting getting out of this house sounds, I shake my head. “I don’t have time.”

“Make time.” Danny rolls his eyes. “There’s something I need to show you. Meet us outside in five.”

Colton and I exchange a brief glance and then next thing I know, I’m sandwiched between the two of them in Danny’s single-cab truck with Jack’s old refrigerator bouncing in the bed.

Each dip in the road ping-pongs me between Colton and Danny’s massive forms. After pushing myself into Danny’s side as far as I can without being on top of him, I manage to find a position that creates an inch of space between Colton and I.

Colton throws odd looks in Danny's direction every thirty seconds, the air inside the cabin growing more and more unbearable until he finally snaps. "Is there a reason you're letting her sit in your fucking lap?"

Danny chuckles and puts an arm around me. "Hey, I didn't make her do it, but it is kinda nice."

I smack him on the shoulder before scooting away. Unfortunately, this means my leg is now pressed firmly against Colton's. The spot where our thighs meet is an inferno, burning my flesh through the thin cotton of my leggings and making me squirm, which is exactly what I was trying to avoid in the first place.

Crossing my arms, I silently brood as we bump along the road with soft rock playing over the radio. After another awkward five minutes, Colton mumbles something under his breath.

"What was that?" I ask a bit too harshly, but I can't help it. His little outburst and our proximity has me feeling flustered and uncomfortable. He grumbles again, pulling his leg away from mine and contorting himself into a position that creates half an inch of space between our thighs.

Danny looks at the two of us, his face lit up in a silent smile. "This is going really well. Have I mentioned how much fun you guys are to be around lately?"

When the truck stops, I push Danny out of it and smack him again before taking a look around and realizing where we are. There is a newly paved parking lot as well as beautiful new landscaping, but the brick building itself is unchanged. "Holy shit, Danny. Is this—"

"The Life Skills Academy, formerly known as your after-school center? Sure is," Danny says, lowering the tailgate. "I thought you'd want to see it now that it's up and running."

My heart gives an excited jolt. "You're sure this is okay? What if someone recognizes me?"

"You're fine, it's after hours. Colt and I are gonna move this fridge into the break room around back. Why don't you

head in and check the place out?”

A few eager steps later, I’m greeted by rustic shiplap walls framed in crayon drawings, colorful concrete floors, and the scent of marinara and garlic.

“Rylee?”

My chest squeezes at the sound of a familiar soft voice before Lana slams into me, wrapping her arms around my middle. “You’re back! Danny texted to say he had a surprise, but— Holy crap, it’s you!”

She does a little excited jump, her long, curl-tipped braids nearly smacking both of us in the mouth. “Sorry!” she says, pulling away. “I needed a change, but I’m still getting used to the length.”

I lean back to get a good look at my friend, her bright smile instantly choking me up. “I love it.” Lana is as beautiful as ever, but there’s something different about her—a new sadness, or a weight on her shoulders that’s changed the way she carries herself.

She runs her palms over the sides of my upper arms. “I’m so sorry for everything,” she says. “For acting weird when you quit the diner, for my mother. I swear to you I had no idea what she was doing or what she was planning. When Cook told me…”

I put my hand over hers. “You have nothing to apologize for. We don’t get to pick our parents, and we’re not responsible for their actions. Trust me, I know that better than anyone. I should be apologizing to *you*. I’m the one who skipped town without saying anything.”

“Don’t sweat it. Danny explained you had a family emergency.” She gives me a tight smile that makes me think she doesn’t fully believe whatever excuse he told her but that she won’t pry.

A loud banging sound reaches us from a back room. Lana turns toward the noise. “I’ll take it that ruckus is the fridge?”

“It is,” I say, grateful for the change in conversation.

Her gaze lingers on the empty hallway. “Awesome. The one we were using in the staff room took a dive this morning.”

“You work here?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t bring myself to reopen the diner after... Well, you know.” Her eyes drop to the floor. “But I needed work, and Charlotte and Ethel thought I’d be a good fit. It’s incredible what you did here. I still can’t believe you thought up this place all on your own.”

My cheeks heat. “I didn’t do anything. This was Jack and Alex, and—” I try not to outwardly wince when the memory of Colton showing me this place for the first time flashes through my mind. I can almost smell the rain and feel the Chevelle pressed against my ass and back in the loading dock.

That was the day we dented the hood...

“Not according to Ms. Ethel.” Lana snorts. “I think that woman is the president of your fan club. She tells everyone who will listen about how you thought this place up. You should hear the verbal beatdowns she gives Colt about you. Every day it’s the same thing: *Where is Rylee? Why aren’t you with her? When did you get so dumb, boy?*”

Lana chuckles as she slips out of her Ethel impersonation. “Poor Colt. He’s only been volunteering for a week and I already feel bad for the guy.”

My head tilts. “Colton’s been volunteering here?”

“Yeah, he helps out during the cooking class where we teach the kiddos the basics. You should’ve seen him and Charlotte’s daughter rolling meatballs tonight. I think Little Miss Anna might be in love. She and some of the younger girls were skeptical about learning to cook, but ever since Colt showed up, they suddenly adore it. Tonight, we made spaghetti with meatball marinara and a side of—”

“Cheesy garlic bread,” I say, remembering how melty and delicious it was.

Lana smiles coyly. “Guess that answers my question on why Colt eats here and always takes a plate to go.”

More banging from the hallway draws our attention, followed by Colton and Danny's cursing. I know we should offer to go help, but the idea of Colton teaching little Anna Grace and a bunch of other kids to cook has me feeling all sorts of twisty...and a little overheated.

What is it about the image of a tattooed tough guy being soft with children that always makes the ice around my shriveled heart melt?

Lana shifts on her feet. "Do you want a quick tour?"

"Please," I say, shaking away the unwanted thoughts.

The rest of the Life Skills Academy is incredible. I can't decide what turned out better, the state-of-the-art, kid-friendly kitchen; the immaculate computer lab; or the several different rooms geared toward various age groups where kids can get help with homework or just have a safe place to go after school, but they all have my eyes brimming with tears.

The academy exceeds my wildest imagination.

All too soon the tour is over and the four of us are out in the parking lot, standing under the moth-swarmed streetlights. Lana squeezes me tight, her light jasmine perfume making me nostalgic for last summer when life was so much simpler.

"Danny said you're headed back out of town, but don't be a stranger this time, okay?" she asks, releasing me from the hug.

My chin tilts in confusion, until I catch Danny jutting his head ever so slightly forward, as if to say "go with it."

Right, because even if Danny trusted Lana enough to see me tonight, it's still safer for everyone if she thinks I'm not in Eden. "Hopefully I won't be gone as long this time around."

Lana heads over to her car, my smile instantly slipping into a frown as the grinding of her engine not turning over grates against my ears.

She slams the steering wheel with her fists and opens the door. "Looks like Wilhelmina and the refrigerator both

decided to call it quits on the same day. Can y'all give me a ride home?"

Wilhelmina? Last summer her car was named Rhonda. If I remember correctly, Danny said she moves down the alphabet each time she needs a major repair done. If she's on *W*—

I count out the letters in the alphabet...

That puts her at five major repairs since the last time I was a passenger in that car. *Ouch*.

Danny waves her over with a mischievous glint in his eye. "It's going to be a tight squeeze, but we can make it work."

"I'll just ride in the bed," I offer, but as soon as I turn around, I see a different massive refrigerator taking up the entire back of the truck.

Oh no.

Danny climbs in first, followed by Lana. Colton climbs in next, his mouth twitching like he's trying not to smile.

When I make no move to enter, Danny leans over the steering wheel. "Ry, you're the shortest, that means you're on top." Then this motherfucker has the audacity to reach across Lana and pat Colton's leg. "Come on now, we don't have all night."

"Am I missing something?" Lana asks, her gaze locked in on my clenched fists.

"No, Danny is just being an asshat," I growl, climbing over Colton to try to situate myself half on him and half on her. That goes about as well as you'd expect, considering his thigh is significantly bigger than hers.

As soon as we take the first bend in the road, I topple onto Lana. She shrieks when my elbow digs into her leg and before I can apologize or right myself, two strong hands grip my waist, sliding me over onto a solid lap.

"We're adults, Tiger. We can handle a ten-minute ride."

I'm about to argue when he removes his hands and drops them respectfully at his sides, so I close my mouth.

Clearly uncomfortable, Lana tries to scoot closer to Danny, but there is nowhere to move to. “I’m so sorry, guys, I didn’t mean to put you out like this.”

“You’re fine.” Danny gives Colton and I a nasty look. “Ignore them.”

We spend the next few minutes in silence, but then the road gets bumpy and I can’t help but yelp as I launch off my precarious human chair. It happens again, and this time my head bounces into the roof and my ass slams down into Colton’s lap. I squawk in pain and frustration while wiggling to find a more balanced seat.

Colton’s teeth grind. “Can you quit squirming? I’m trying to respect your boundaries here, but you’re making me hard as fuck— *This!*” he corrects, slapping his palm over his face. “You’re making *this* hard as fuck. Christ.”

A heated blush creeps up my spine and into my neck as I throw my hands up onto the roof, but all that does is push me more firmly against the hardening bulge in Colton’s lap.

Looks like his words weren’t just a slip of the tongue.

He half groans, half sighs, and even though it shouldn’t, the once familiar sound sends heat pulsing between my legs. When Danny hits another pothole and my head knocks into the roof, Colton throws one hand across my waist and the other over the top of my head. “Come *on*, Danny, are you trying to kill her, or is it me you’re fucking with?”

“It’s not my fault. There is a reason we’re repaving the roads next year.”

“It gets worse on my street,” Lana offers unhelpfully. “All those construction trucks for the new development outside of town pass right through there.”

Using the arm he has around my waist, Colton pins me more securely to his lap, running his fingers through my hair with the other hand. My eyes flutter closed, and this time it’s me who nearly groans.

“Is your head okay?” he says against my bare shoulder, the ghost of his breath making my skin pebble. Not trusting

myself to speak, I nod and bite my lower lip, electricity firing across my scalp as he continues searching for a bump or injury.

After an eternity of barely breathing and using every muscle in my body to keep still, Lana's house finally comes into view.

"Thanks for the ride, guys."

The muscles in my body are so fatigued from the short drive, it's all I can do to raise my hand and say goodbye.

Danny puts an arm on her midback. "I'll walk you to your door."

Despite the cool evening, the air in the truck turns thick and heated as soon as we're alone. I suck in a deep breath that feels like I'm filling my lungs with water, reminding myself that the seat next to me is empty and my legs do indeed still work. Ready to slide into Lana's vacated spot, I inch forward, only to be stopped by Colton's arm.

He clears his throat. "I'm sorry for what I said about you sitting in Danny's lap. That wasn't fair to either of you."

When I turn to look at him, he squeezes his eyes closed, like the sight of me is painful. "I'm trying so hard to give you what you asked for," he says. "But when I see someone touching you, my blood boils and I see red. It's like I can't control the things coming out of my mouth and the only thought in my head is to carry you away and scream that you're..."

He doesn't say it, but I hear the word as clearly as if he had.

Mine.

His beard shifts, like his jaw is hardening beneath it, but with so much hair covering the sharp angles of his face, I can't tell for sure.

With a mind of its own, my hand rises to verify my suspicion, and my fingers thread through his coarse facial hair until I meet the skin beneath. I flatten my palm, and he closes

his eyes, leaning into my touch. The hand he has on my hip squeezes, his grip almost desperate.

I run my thumb over his beard and jaw, which is clenched so hard it feels like stone. If he bites down any harder, there's no way his teeth won't shatter. For some reason, the words he said to me at the hotel back in Boston come to mind.

I'm still so in love with you that sometimes I think my bones will break beneath the weight of it.

Of all the things a man could say when breaking your heart, *that* had to be the worst.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

COLTON



Two weeks later

Late September

MY HEAD IS EXPLODING.

This paperwork-induced headache is so bad that after the last jarring bump in the road on my drive home, I contemplated throwing my bike into a ditch and walking the final mile back to Jack's.

It took me three full weeks, but I've finally finished sorting through the year's worth of legal shit that needed my attention. It's going to take me months to actually complete the work, but at least I have everything organized by how urgently it needs to be addressed. I also managed to knock out some of the simpler projects in the process. Danny and Lee's attorney did a surprisingly good job of keeping up with everything, but there were still some club items I'm glad they left for me.

Speaking of Danny, where the hell is he? His truck's gone and the house is dark. After shutting off my bike, I quickly remove my helmet and check my phone.

Danny: Rylee is asleep. I have two of our best guys stationed at the house. Relieve them when you get back. I'll be home in the morning.

I type out a text to the security group chat.

Me: Thanks boys. I've got Jack's old place for the rest of the night.

A shadow separates from the tree line and hops into the passenger seat of a black hatchback barely visible down the road. After flashing their lights, they speed off into the night.

Kabir: Got it. We're gonna make a coffee run and check on the other watch posts. Let us know if you need anything.

Their taillights disappear around the bend, and my chest expands with gratitude. I essentially gave them a free pass to take the night off and instead of utilizing it, they're going to go support their peers. *Damn, that's nice.* Being able to depend on the people around you is one of the things I took for granted prior to my year with Frank. Never again.

We don't normally pull security for our own, but with Eastmann on the hunt for Rylee, the consensus of the charter heads was that we needed to make an exception. Crazy enough, I wasn't even the one to bring it up. It was Nolan. He also pulled back almost his entire charter from Wyoming, despite the pipeline issue they've been dealing with, so we could keep around-the-clock vigil on Eden. His boys are crazy, but they're fierce and overly protective. I couldn't have asked for a better crew for this assignment.

After the meeting, Lee sent some of his men back to New York where they could better track Eastmann's movements. But, just like Tate and Nolan, he opted to stay in Eden *and* kept a few others here with him specifically for Rylee's detail.

My girl seems to have unknowingly made quite a name for herself. I don't know if it was Jack's sponsorship, saving Danny, or just the way she covered down when we needed her, but these fucks say her name reverently, like she's a saint.

The possessive asshole in me wants to stake my claim and make them back the fuck off, but the smart part of me knows anything equating to more protection for Rylee is a good thing.

I'm trying real fucking hard to let the smart version of me win this one.

Even with all the additional protections in place, the biggest threat to Rylee is Rylee herself. She barely leaves her

desk, and the only time she takes a break that doesn't involve a trip to the bathroom or dishwasher is to hold JJ when Holly and the Viper come over to check on her.

Every night, she and Minho stay up into the wee hours of the morning, creating new ways to comb the internet for evidence and usable footage while another team isolates the audio and disperses it for analysis. With Green River and New York covering the security load, we now have a whole team of Jackals dedicated to assisting Minho and Rylee. Judging by the forlorn look on her face every time we briefly interact during my meal deliveries, though, I'd say it's not going as well as she'd hoped.

At least the news footage covering the manhunt for her has lessened. Unfortunately, the investigation itself is ramping up. Last week alone Rylee's bank account was frozen, not that she was using it, and one of the Viper prick's contacts back in Boston informed us that Rylee's professors and classmates were questioned by local law enforcement.

Frank hasn't recalled the Dead Kings yet, but even Ashlynn said they received word Eastmann is gearing up for something big. He hasn't officially announced the new mine, but we've been monitoring East Mining Company as they snatch up mining equipment left and right. They've also been busy hiring an onslaught of geologists and Appalachian regional experts.

Each move he makes is more confusing than the last. The first mine wasn't profitable near the end. Which begs the question: Why would Eastmann risk starting another? Advances in mining and geology have definitely changed over the past twenty years, but it feels like Eastmann is playing at something much larger than just putting a new hole in the earth. Unfortunately, we've yet to figure out what the hell that is.

Despite the chaos and my current blinding migraine, there is nowhere I'd rather be. It doesn't matter that the only time I eat or drink is during the hour a day I spend at the Life Skills Academy. It also doesn't matter that I sleep on the floor or that every minute that passes by without a solution brings the

Jackals closer to all of this ending for good, because at least I'm home.

If it all goes down in flames, at least I get to be near *her*.

Walking into the dark house, I rip open the fridge and suck down a vat of fresh lemonade that tastes suspiciously like the lemonade from Maggie's Diner. *Guess I know where Danny's been disappearing off to.* When that's gone, I shove my head under the faucet and turn the water on full blast. I won't risk waking Rylee, so this is as much of a shower as I'm going to get tonight. Hopefully the cool water helps with this infernal headache.

I stay under until the need for oxygen forces me to resurface.

Ripping my shirt off, I use the soap Holly brought Rylee to wash my face, neck, and pits. The soap is some girly shit with a ridiculous name like *Chai Sunshine* or *Cloves and Sunrays*, but she loves it.

Every time she washes her hands, I catch her breathing deep and smiling to herself.

I live for those fucking smiles. So, of course I went out and bought ten more bottles I keep stashed under the sink. She hasn't noticed how, despite her constant use, the soap never runs out, but I'm sure she'll give me a verbal lashing as soon as she does.

Using a hand towel, I dry off my hair and beard before soaking up the water rivulets running down my torso, then kick off my boots.

When I turn off the water, a knocking sound from somewhere in the house crystallizes my blood.

What the fuck was that?

It happens again, this time loud enough for me to tell it came from Rylee's room. My muscles tense with awareness as I follow the sound. Security has been on the house all day, so the chances of anyone getting in without their knowledge are slim to none, but I can't shake the feeling that something is off.

Maybe she's just working with the lights off?

Or maybe Andy's in there with her and that's the headboard slamming against the wall...

I lengthen my stride.

There's no light coming out from under her door, not even the faint glow of a computer screen, but I can hear Rylee thrashing around in the sheets. Then her soft cry echoes through the door. "No. No. No. *Please,*" she pleads.

My hand flies to the handle, but the damn thing is locked.

"Rylee!" I pound on the door, but that turns her cries into screams, the shrill sound making my blood pressure skyrocket. There are no other voices inside the room, but the thought of *anything* hurting her is making me fucking feral.

"Rylee!" My pulse hammers against my temple as I repeatedly throw my shoulder into the door, but the damn thing is built so well it doesn't budge.

Rylee bleats something incoherent, and I stop moving so I can hear what she says.

"No, I can't. I need to hold pressure."

Need to hold pressure? What the hell is she—

"Someone will be here soon. Just hang on, Jack. Please," she whimpers.

My chest cleaves in two. *It's a nightmare.*

I pound harder on the door, calling her name over and over again, but the noise makes it so much worse, and her soft cries turn into full-on screams—her shredded keening only interrupted by what I assume is the headboard smashing into the wall as she flails about.

The sound of her fear is torture, made worse by knowing this isn't just a nightmare, it's a memory. *This* is what she went through that night. Alone.

My fists slam against the door, but when her shrill plea for help fills the hallway again, I have to stop and cover my ears.

Her agony is palpable. It's so awful it has me second-guessing if I was wrong about this being a dream.

"Rylee!" I bellow. "If you don't wake up and open this goddamn door, I'll break it down!"

She lets out an ear-piercing wail like she's being stabbed, and I lose it.

Unable to listen to her pain for one more second, I place my ear to the door, quickly verifying that she's still in bed, and carefully aim the barrel of my gun at the lock, far away from her position in the room.

"I'm coming in." I squeeze the trigger.

Half the door, metal shards and all, explodes, and one solid kick to the frame later, I'm inside.

Dropping the gun, I fly across the bed and scoop Rylee into my arms.

If I thought she was screaming before, I was wrong. *This* is what true terror sounds like. She kicks and screeches, struggling to break free of my hold with all her strength. She might be trying to say something, but whatever it is, it's incomprehensible under the magnitude of her panic.

After she delivers a particularly brutal elbow into my rib cage, I opt for using an old wrestling move to fold her up, immobilizing her limbs and pulling her against my body.

"Tiger, it's me. You're safe," I soothe.

By some miracle, she stops struggling, allowing me to bring my lips to her forehead as I rock her. "Baby, please open your eyes. It was a nightmare."

Her body shudders, and if Knott and Logan weren't already dead, I'd be out there killing them right now for doing this to her. I kiss her forehead again. "Tiger, come back to me. Wake up."

"Colton?" Her eyes fly open, frantically searching the room before settling on me.

I loosen my fierce grip but continue holding her. “I’m here now.” I lean against the headboard, and her arms snake around my neck like I’m the only thing in the world that can bring her comfort.

Fuck. Why does it feel like someone dropped a boulder on my chest?

Although her eyes stay open and fearful, her breathing steadies and her rigid muscles relax. In all honesty, I think she’s doing better than I am because I still can’t fucking breathe. If I went the rest of my life never hearing her scream like that again, it would be too soon.

Rylee’s fingers absently find their way into my beard where she curls the coarse strands. Eventually, the pounding in our chests evens out and falls into a slow, even chorus with one another.

I’d kill to know what she was thinking—to have her explain those odd little looks she keeps giving me, but I don’t say a word. Neither of us do, partially because we don’t have to and partially because, just like the night in the hotel all those months ago, we both know our stolen moment of peace is over the second one of us says something.

Eventually, her body tenses again anyway, and she lets out a long, shaking breath, her hand slipping from my beard as she shifts a fraction of an inch away from me.

Time’s up.

I dig my fingers roughly into her flesh for one more second before releasing her.

The hand she had on my face leaves to tentatively touch one of her ears. “I’m usually better at waking myself up,” she says. “It’s been so long, though, and this one was crazier than they used to be. I’d swear my ears are still ringing from the gunshot.”

I clench and unclench my fist to keep from pulling her closer. “You have nothing to apologize for. And...the ringing might be my fault. I shot the lock off the door to get inside.”

“You what?” Rylee pushes off my chest to look at the busted doorframe and laughs. It’s a tiny sound, light and musical—possibly a little hysterical—but it brightens the whole room. “I knew I shouldn’t have taken the bedroom. Danny’s going to kill me for ruining his house.”

“You let me worry about Danny.” Losing my internal struggle, I try guiding her back to me. She resists, scooting off my lap and tucking the comforter up under her arms to cover her chest.

Ouch.

Since I came back, things haven’t exactly been easy for us, but hiding herself from me? Like every inch of her perfect body hasn’t already been seared into my memory? That’s a whole new fissure in the growing chasm between us.

She’s so close I can feel the heat radiating off her skin, but we might as well be miles apart because without her trust, nothing will ever feel close enough again.

Rylee scans the room, like she’s trying to make absolutely sure she’s not still dreaming. “That hasn’t happened in a long time.”

“Good.” I’d hate to think she was going through that every night with Danny and I on the other side of the house completely oblivious. “Did something trigger it?”

She shrugs, fidgeting with the corner of the comforter. “Not that I can think of. Minho called it quits earlier than usual tonight to spend time with Alex, and I was using the break to go over the recording Jeremy brought back to Eden. I know Danny thinks it’s a dead end, but there’s something there. I can feel it.”

Danny filled the charter heads in on the contents of the thumb drive, but I haven’t actually had the chance to hear it for myself. “Can we listen to it together?”

Rylee only hesitates a second before grabbing her laptop from the bedside table. “It’s an audio file. I have to remote into Minho’s computer to view it. He doesn’t know I can do this.”

“You hacked Minhó?” I ask, trying hard to hide my amusement.

She stares blankly back at me, the moonlight from the open curtains illuminating her stern brow. “It’s not funny. He’ll be pissed.”

“Oh, it’s hilarious. Do you know how many times he’s done that shit to me and the rest of the guys? It’s about time he got a taste of his own medicine, but I won’t say a word.” Stealing something of Minhó’s for myself, I pantomime zipping my lips.

Seemingly satisfied with my response, she plays the recording.

When the audio finishes, I sit there, staring blankly ahead. I expected to be disappointed with the contents, but what I wasn’t prepared for was Jeremy’s voice. Or how the reminder that he’s no longer with us would ignite paralyzing self-doubt in my ability to keep Rylee and this club safe.

If I couldn’t protect my own brother or my father, what makes me think I can help the rest of them?

Rylee’s hand lands on mine before she tears it away, like the contact burned her.

“Jeremy was so close to home,” she says. “He was so close to telling us how to bring down Eastmann. It had to have been for something. Don’t we owe it to him to keep digging?”

She sounds exhausted, and while I don’t know if anything will come from the thumb drive audio, I do know she can’t keep going like this. I learned a long time ago that the more tired you are, the more likely your mind is to relive past trauma.

“I’ll get Danny on board with looking into Jeremy’s audio file again on one condition: you promise to get more sleep.”

“Deal,” she says way too quickly for me to think she means it. “I can do this, Colton. I can figure out who he was talking to.”

“Sleep. Now,” I say forcefully.

“Okay, fine.” After placing the laptop back on her bedside table, she scoots another inch away, like she’s getting ready to lay down, and then pauses to look at me.

Something constricts around my throat.

She wants me to leave.

Her mouth drops open, but I shake my head. “You don’t have to say it, I’m going. I’ll be in the living room if you need me.”

“That’s not what I was going to say. I wanted to thank you for being here and waking me from the nightmare. It’s always so much worse when I wake up alone.” In the blink of an eye, she’s hugging me, pressing her soft body against mine, surrounding me in her rich floral scent.

When I don’t immediately hug her back, she grabs my hands, accidentally dragging one of them across her breast in an attempt to put them around her. The touch isn’t purposeful, but she’s not wearing a bra and every fucking nerve ending in my body starts firing off at once.

How am I only now realizing that she’s just wearing a shirt and underwear?

Even Rylee’s breath hitches at the brief contact, her eyes raking over my bare chest greedily. She looks conflicted—aroused, but definitely conflicted—which is why I let go of her.

I’d like to think it’s a look of disappointment that flashes across her face when I lean away, but the only thing I can say for sure is that her shoulders slump, a cascade of hair falling forward to cover her beautiful features.

I tuck the loose strands behind her ear, and because I’m a masochistic fuck with no willpower, I keep going, running my fingers down the length of her jaw to cup her chin. To rub the pad of my thumb over her full bottom lip.

Fuck.

I pull it open, just a fraction, and she lets loose a breathy little sound that sends blood rushing straight to my cock.

One tiny ounce of responsiveness and I'm imagining sliding my thumb into her mouth, forcing her to take my finger the same way she'd take me.

Dammit.

I want to be the man she needs me to be, but maybe *this* is what she needs from me tonight? For me to make her forget about how shit everything is for just a few minutes and make her feel good.

I slide my thumb past her parted lips and across her wet tongue, shuddering when she licks my flesh. She opens her mouth further for me, and I fucking groan.

Maybe she wants this as bad as I do...

Have you thought about, oh I don't know, actually trying to be her friend?

Stop telling her you're going to stick around and show her what that looks like...

God-fucking-dammit.

Body heavy, I draw my thumb back and force myself out of the bed, only making it three steps before Rylee's voice cuts through the quiet room.

"Colton?"

"Yeah?" My heart is about to burst through my rib cage; my dick through my jeans.

Ask me to stay, Tiger. If you don't want me to touch you, I won't.

If you want me to fuck the nightmares away, I can do that, too.

Please, just ask me to stay...

"Never mind, it was a dumb idea."

I don't dare turn around to face her. "Say it anyway."

She lets out a frustrated sigh. "I can't share a bed with you, but I don't want to sleep alone."

I empty my lungs, the faintest grin pulling at my lips.
“Throw me a pillow.”

“*Huh?*”

“Throw me a damn pillow, Tiger.”

She does, and after tossing it on the rug near the foot of the bed, I strip off my jeans and lay down.

“Thank you,” she squeaks.

“No problem.” And I mean it, too.

Rylee must fall asleep the second her head hits the pillow because she doesn’t make a single sound. I can’t even hear the telltale breathing pattern that always used to alert me when she’d nodded off.

An hour passes and still no sign of another nightmare. I force myself to stay awake anyway. Not only do I need to make up for wanting to fuck her right after a night terror, but as deep of a sleeper as I am, I can’t risk not hearing if she needs me.

More time passes, and now my headache is back with a vengeance, but it keeps me awake and is the only reason I hear Rylee get out of bed. I can barely make out her shadow as her soft footsteps pad across the floor, coming to a stop near my feet.

“Hopefully you’re still a heavy sleeper,” she whispers.

Curious as to what she’s up to and a little pissed at the idea of her sneaking away, I don’t respond.

“Colton,” she hisses, this time a little louder.

When I don’t answer a second time, she cautiously drags the comforter off the bed and drapes it over me, the cool fabric sending chills across my naked torso.

“Still asleep?” She’s closer now, but I still can’t see her.

My lips crack into a wide smile before Rylee stuns the shit out of me by crawling under the blanket next to me.

I don’t dare move.

This has to be a dream...

Thank God my arms are still up over the pillow because it gives Rylee enough room to slide in close and rest her head on my chest. She burrows in, taking a deep inhale before bringing her hand to my beard and lightly tangling her fingers in it.

“You smell like you, but you don’t look like you.” She sighs, thankfully covering the sound of my own sharp inhale, and within a few minutes, the cadence of her breathing lengthens and I know she’s asleep, still snuggled up against me.

Chest aching but content, I wrap my arm around her and finally let myself rest.

CHAPTER FIFTY

RYLEE



I LET LOOSE a groggy gasp of pleasure as Colton kneads my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers. I'm too happy and too turned on for this to be anything other than a dream, but it's a good dream, and I think I deserve at least one of those after last night.

Knowing it's not real, I let myself indulge in the fantasy, backing my ass up into his solid body and rotating my hips until his firm cock is pressed against me. I reach back, palming his thick length through his boxers, elated by the way he swells and overfills my hand.

I will Dream-Colton to move the hand on my breast lower, and like the perfectly obedient dream-man that he is, he does, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. He continues south, easily slipping his skilled fingers beneath my panties in search of my swollen bundle of nerves.

I gasp at the contact.

With a finger on either side of my clit, he pinches lightly, using my arousal to slide up and down. Lightning fires through my body and heat pulses up my spine in waves. My soft moans spur him on, his beard tickling my neck as he wraps himself more firmly around me. The hand on my breast squeezes just hard enough to heighten my pleasure while the hand on my pussy works methodically to bring me closer to the edge.

I gasp again when Dream-Colton quickens the pace. He hums at the sound, desperately thrusting his hard cock against

my ass before his arm snakes around my waist to flip me onto my back.

My head bangs onto the wood floor with a loud *crack*, the sting forcing my eyes open with the realization that this is *not* actually a dream.

Colton really is between my thighs, and I think we bruised my skull.

His eyes are still closed, entirely unaware that he's dry humping the shit out of me, or that seconds ago I was trying to give him a handy with his boxers still on, like we're a couple of horny teenagers.

I almost laugh, but then Colton slides the palm on my hip to my flank and up into my hair, gripping it hard enough that my back arches while tilting my pelvis into the perfect position for him to grind on my clit.

I gasp. Hot pleasure courses through my body in ripples, making it difficult to stay focused, but after another second goes by, I'm able to put my hand on his bare chest and attempt to roll out from beneath him. But that just spreads my legs wider and shifts his cock into an even better position as he continues to rut against me. *Holy hell, that feels good.* I moan, crying out and panting. Of course, that only encourages Colton to keep going.

Oh shit, shit, shit.

He's going to make me come.

Panic bubbles in my chest, displacing the pleasure long enough for me to get my head on straight.

"Colton, wake up." I slap his chest, twice as hard as necessary.

His eyes fly open, and he stops moving to assess what's happening before he tilts his head to the side. His hair falls forward as he looks down at me with the most confused expression I've ever seen.

If I wasn't so worked up, I'd be giggling, but I'm currently using all of my focus to *not* hump the behemoth still between

my thighs and finish off the orgasm threatening to drag me under.

His brow unfurrows slightly, his confused expression bleeding into something almost mournful. “I was dreaming?”

Keeping my lower half as still as possible, I nod. “We both were.”

Colton lifts his massive form off me, and cool air rushes in, making me shiver, but at least I’m able to rise to a sitting position.

My core throbs and I’m just as hot and bothered as I was before—only now I feel a little empty on top of it. Crossing my ankles to quell the incessant ache, I draw my knees to my chest while Colton scoots away to lean against the footboard.

“Of course it wasn’t real. After the night you had last night, how could I have thought... I’m fucking sorry.” He hangs his head.

My hand twitches with the urge to reach out and run my fingers through his hair, but I keep it firmly planted on my knee. “It’s me that should be apologizing this time. I also thought it was a dream.” Heat blossoms in my cheeks. “I might have been the one to instigate. Nothing happened, though. My underwear is still on, and so are your boxers. We’re fine.”

Even after explaining, he looks so downtrodden that I keep going, briefly spreading my knees to prove it to him. “Colton, it’s fine. See, still dressed.”

His eyes drop to the space between my legs, his pupils flaring. “Those definitely weren’t on in my dream... And what exactly do you mean by you *started it*?”

His brows rise suggestively, and I roll my eyes.

Guilt crisis averted, I stand, dragging him with me before pushing him out through the ruined door. “Glad we cleared that up. If you would be so kind, I need to shower and get back to work. Go find something useful to do, like make breakfast.”

I bite my lip, hesitating as he hovers in the doorway.
“Colton?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for...staying last night.”

“Anytime.” His abdomen contracts when he bobs his head, making his barely contained cock jump.

I swallow, hard, and shove him the rest of the way out of the room, watching the massive Jackal on proud display while he leisurely strolls down the hallway in just his boxers and socks. As he goes, my eyes lock on the muscular cuts of his back and those two divots right above his tailbone.

Shit.

Breathlessly, I run to the bathroom and lock myself inside.

What a freaking mess that nearly was. I can still smell Colton on my shirt, feel the touch of his hand on my chest and the pressure of his pelvis between my thighs.

My entire body aches from the denied orgasm.

Ripping off my shirt to escape his lingering scent, I splash some water on my neck and chest before placing my hands on the counter to stare at my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed and I'm covered in a light sheen of sweat that makes me glow. Then there is the starving look in my eye that I haven't seen in over a year, lustful and needy.

Embarrassed, I glance lower to where the skin of one of my breasts is red, my nipple still puckered. I run my thumb over the sensitive flesh and a ripple of electricity zaps straight to my core.

Fuck.

Turning away from the mirror, I slide my hand into my underwear and circle my clit.

Oh God.

I don't need Colton. I can take care of this myself.

Shimmying out of my underwear, I spread my legs and palm my pussy, groaning at the contact as my need instantly reignites to an unbearable level. I rub faster, increasing the speed while imagining what would have happened if I'd asked Colton to keep going after waking him up.

Would he have shoved his cock in my mouth and fingered me? Or would he have teased me with the tip, running his full length over my entrance and slapping my clit until I was wet enough to take all of him at once...

What would his beard have felt like grazing against my inner thighs...

I buck my hips, rocking back and forth against my hand with a series of satisfied moans.

"Rylee," Colton's voice sounds from behind the door.

Terror rips through me but abates just as quickly.

His tone is stern and a little upset, but for some reason, the fear of being caught heightens my excitement. I should stop, but I can't. My chest caves forward with pleasure, the sound of my soaked pussy echoing off the tiled walls of the bathroom as I continue to play with myself.

Oh God. Yes.

"Rylee. Tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing," Colton growls through the door.

"I—" My knees buckle and I keep rubbing.

His fist slams against the door. "Don't you dare think of lying to me. Are you touching yourself?"

"Yes," I call out, the sound of his menacing voice and rising anger sending a wave of heat undulating through my center.

"Unlock this door. *Now.*"

Oh fuck... Colton's inked fingers and skilled mouth would have me coming in seconds, and while the offer is tempting, I can't stop long enough to open the door...and I'm vaguely aware that I shouldn't.

“No,” I say breathily. He goes quiet, and at the thought that he might be leaving, my building orgasm starts to pull away like the tide before a tsunami. “Please keep talking,” I beg, my cheeks flush with embarrassment, but I’m too far gone to really care.

Colton makes a noise of deep carnal satisfaction. “Does the sound of my voice make you want to come, Tiger?”

My stomach coils.

Yes.

I don’t know if I answer out loud or not, but Colton keeps going as if I had, hunger and amusement dripping from every syllable. “Do you want me to tell you what I’ll do to you if you let me in?”

“Yes.” This time I know I answer out loud because I almost come halfway through the single word.

“Fuck,” he growls. “First thing I’d do is spank that round ass of yours to punish you for making me wait out here when I could be watching. When I could be *helping*.”

There is a scraping sound, like metal against metal, and then Colton keeps talking. “Or maybe I’d make you watch me fuck you in the mirror—make sure you see every inch of my cock slide in and out of your wet little pussy while you scream my name. Maybe I should tell you about how I’m fisting my cock right now... About how the thought of you getting off on the other side of this door has me so fucking hard I’m afraid I’ll come before I get the chance to bend you over that sink.”

Holy shit.

Every inch of my skin is electrified as Colton jacks himself off so hard I can hear it through the door.

“I’m close, keep going,” I pant. I already know I’m going to regret this as soon as it’s over, but right now the insatiable need to douse the flame burning in my veins is all that matters.

The door handle jiggles and then Colton is inside, throwing a small metal hook to the floor and dropping to his

knees before me. I pull my hand away, but he grabs my wrist and puts it right back. “Keep going.”

He fists his massive cock, the swollen head already dripping with beaded moisture.

“Please,” he begs.

I slide my fingers back down.

“Spread your legs wider, so I can see.”

I do, and the groan that leaves his mouth almost makes me come right then and there, but I’m too present, too aware that what we’re doing is crossing a line. It was one thing to be turned on by the idea while he was safely on the other side of the door, but now that he’s here... My fingers slow and come to a stop.

Colton looks up at me with an unreadable expression, his eyes bright, pupils blown. “Do you need me to help?”

Say no. Tell him to leave.

I bite my lip and nod.

Colton pounces, lunging forward to clamp his lips around my nipple, biting and sucking, pulling and soothing, until I’m gasping for breath. He removes his mouth to kiss me, only hesitating for a moment when I turn away, before moving to my neck.

He sinks his teeth into my flesh...hard. This time there are no soothing kisses or licks to chase away the sharp sting. “Don’t *ever* turn away from me,” he says, teeth grazing against my sweat-dampened skin.

My pussy flutters in response, and I dive my hand back down between my legs.

“More,” I manage to moan after a few much-needed swirls around my clit. “Rougher.”

Colton growls, fisting his cock with one hand while the other rises to wrap around my throat. He squeezes, and I see stars.

Oh yes. Please keep going.

My pulse quickens with my strokes. “More.”

Colton’s grip tightens until the corners of my vision blur, but I’m so close to coming my legs quake with the effort to keep me upright.

Sweat drips down my chest as he pumps himself in time with my movements. “That’s it, Tiger. Make yourself come with my hand wrapped around your fucking throat.”

He brings his face right to mine, nipping at my jaw and then leaning back. “If you don’t make yourself come in the next five seconds, you leave me no choice but to do it for you.”

Turned on out of my goddamn mind, I slip my fingers inside, slamming the heel of my palm against my clit with each stroke until my orgasm rips through me. I cry out, but Colton’s pressure on my neck is so firm I don’t make a sound.

Just as the orgasm begins to fade, he loosens his grip on my throat, the rush of blood to my brain tripling the force of my peak and nearly bringing me to my knees as my world once again erupts in a blast of heat, stars, and ecstasy.

When my body stops shaking and my vision returns to normal, Colton runs his palm across my breasts, following the trail of sweat down my torso, until finally dipping between my legs.

I shudder with the contact but don’t pull away when he gathers my wetness onto his hand. Bringing his fingers to his tongue, he tastes me with the zeal of a starving man, before rubbing what’s left all over his ridged length. “That was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

He strokes himself once.

Twice.

Three times.

All the while never breaking eye contact as he leisurely uses my cum as lubrication. My slowing heart rate picks back up. We crossed a line, and I can tell he wants to push it further,

but I'd almost swear he was waiting to see what I'm going to do next. I lean forward, reaching for—

The front door slams shut, and our heads whip in the direction of the bedroom.

“Shit.” Colton tucks himself back inside his boxers and grabs my chin. “We’re not done here. Not by a long shot.”

I open my mouth to... Honestly, I have no idea, but he’s already halfway across the bedroom, mumbling to himself and sliding on his jeans before I can worry about it.

Not wanting Danny to walk in on me naked, I quickly relock the bathroom door, listening to the two of them speak in harsh whispers in the hallway until the front door slams once more.

With my back against the door, Colton’s words still echo in the room.

We’re not done here. Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

RYLEE



NORMALLY THE MORNING after a nightmare-plagued sleep, I'd be drained. Today I'm ready to take on the world. Letting myself lose control in front of Colton wasn't the smartest move, but after so much fear and pressure shadowing my every action lately, and considering how good I feel right now, it's hard to regret it.

Until this morning, I'd nearly forgotten what it was like to *not* be in a constant state of anxiety about the arrest warrant and the new mine. Hopefully Colton doesn't read into what happened, but like he said in Danny's truck, we're both adults. Just because I let myself go doesn't mean it will happen again...

The one thing this morning made clear is my need for a healthier form of stress relief, which thankfully now that my tattoo has healed is possible again.

Still towel drying my hair, I make my way into the kitchen, relieved to find Danny, and not Colton, leaning against the counter, reading the news. After aggressively straightening the paper, he briefly glances up with a slight scowl on his mouth.

"Everything all right?" I ask, wrapping my hair back up in the towel.

"Colt told me he listened to Jeremy's recording. Then he accused me of being pig-headed and letting my emotions cloud my judgment. He thinks we should identify the second voice, and I'm having a hard time convincing myself he's wrong."

My eyebrows nearly shoot off my forehead. *Colton kept his promise.*

Why is that making my chest pinch?

Danny closes his eyes and rubs his forehead. “The problem is we’re already stretched thin.”

“I can take this one,” I blurt.

“Yeah? You don’t mind?” Danny’s face scrunches in skepticism. “I don’t want to pull anyone from their other tasks. I can’t offer you additional bodies or much support on this.”

I reach for an apple from the fruit bowl. “It’s no problem.”

His posture relaxes. “Thank you. Colt also told me what happened. You okay?”

I pause the apple centimeters away from my mouth. *He better mean the nightmare and not...the other thing.* Taking a massive bite, I hum a confirmation.

He flips the page, and I briefly catch the title of the article he’s been reading: “Senate Proposes Bill to Block Foreign Purchase of US Natural R—”

Danny flips so fast I don’t have time to finish reading the full title. He flattens the paper. “I told you once that Colton has night terrors?”

“You did,” I reply through chews, curious to see where he’s going with this.

“You and Colt are the strongest people I know. Strength always comes with baggage. Otherwise everyone would be a badass,” he says it so matter-of-factly that there’s no room to question his statement.

Something bright and bubbly jumps inside my chest. “Thank you, and sorry about your door.”

Danny gives me a dazzling smile and winks. “I’d love to say that was the first time one of us shot through a door, but it’s not. Don’t sweat it.”

I take another bite. “I actually don’t even want to know that story. So, what’s on your agenda for today?”

Danny looks at me quizzically. “I take it you haven’t talked to Minho?”

I shake my head, and after an exaggerated sigh, Danny folds up the newspaper. “On top of everything else, Minho decided to add wedding planning to our to-do list. He’s proposing this afternoon, and we’re having a small bonfire at the old mill after to celebrate. That’s where I was all night, getting shit set up.”

My jaw hangs open, apple chunks nearly falling to the counter. “This is amazing! I wish I’d known, I would’ve gone with you.”

“You were already asleep when I left, and I only went over to check on him on my way to a friend’s house. I was suspicious something was wrong after you mentioned he called it quits early last night and forced you to do the same. When I got there, he was pulling his hair out in the garage with a ring box clutched in his hand, debating if he should wake Alex up that very minute and go elope.”

Wow.

I try to think back to the last thing Minho and I talked about before he abruptly said we should call it a night, but it was the same things we talk about every night when our eyes grow heavy from a day on the computer: our lack of progress and theories over why Eastmann is reopening the mine *now*. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“What made him change his mind about proposing? I thought he’d decided to wait a few months until things calmed down?”

Danny grimaces. “He’s worried this is all going to blow up in our faces and that if he doesn’t do it now, he’ll never get the chance.”

As if I wasn’t already under enough pressure, Minho’s fear now needles at me from beneath my skin.

Sometimes I really hate how honest Danny is, but at least I can always depend on him for a straight answer. “Are you

having similar doubts?” I take another bite of my apple to hide my trepidation.

He looks back down at his folded paper. “I’ll admit, since Jeremy’s murder it’s felt like we’re always one step behind. We’ve been stuck in this cycle of reacting and running for over a year now, and with less income, even our impact in the community has suffered.”

Danny glances down at the rings adorning his right hand. “But if the question is do I think it’s all coming to an end? Absolutely not. The night always feels darkest before dawn. I have to believe all this shit is a sign things are about to go our way.”

AFTER A QUICK ARGUMENT with Danny on whether or not I could afford to stop working long enough to attend the party, and then being told my attendance was mandatory, I work all day to make sure nothing falls through the cracks while we’re out.

Around noon, I get a little jittery thinking about what I’m going to say to Colton when he drops by with lunch, but after Danny places a sandwich on my desk with a brief explanation that Colton is at an appointment, I push the topic from my mind and focus my efforts on tracking down a lead from one of Lee’s Jackals in New York.

Over the past week, Eastmann’s been meeting with government officials on the Clean Energy Committee, as well as from the Department of the Interior, but we still haven’t figured out why. I get so caught up in trying to uncover what they’re meeting about over the next few hours that I almost forget about the engagement party.

Running late, I listen to Jeremy’s audio recording on repeat while getting ready for the bonfire. The second voice taunts me as I curl my hair. The more I listen, the more the voice *almost* seems familiar... But I guess that was bound to happen sometime after the two hundredth playthrough. The annoying

part is that no matter how much I turn up the volume or fiddle with the audio, I still can't hear anything from the video Jeremy reacts to.

On the desk, my phone chimes with a series of rapid succession texts. After finishing my hair and applying mascara, I slide into a rusty-brown rib-knit bodycon dress and head over to see who texted.

Mac Bodyguard/Fake-Boyfriend: We'll be there at 5:30 to pick you up. Fair warning... Holly's in a mood.

Okay good, I still have five minutes to spare. I move on to the next text.

Danny: Minho had a bunch of last-minute additions to the decorations. I need a second opinion about these stupid lights. Meet me early if you can.

Danny: Never mind, got it covered. See you at 6.

Oops. Looks like there is a three-hour time difference between those two texts. *My bad.*

I smile when I click on the next text and find a picture of Alex's hand, the commitment ring he used to wear now replaced with a shiny black band with little green stones.

Alex: I said yes!

Alex: Will you be my groomsman? Your first task, should you accept, will be to help me convince Minho we should get married tomorrow. He's crazy if he thinks I'm going to wait a year.

Alex: Please also bring some dresses to this engagement party so I can pick out something suitable for my big day. Which is tomorrow. Love you!

Chuckling to myself, I head over to the corner of the closet and shove a few dresses into a backpack before sliding on my boots. Alex seems to have strategically forgotten about

needing a marriage license, but I know if I show up without the dresses, there will be hell to pay.

A car honks from the driveway and I rush outside.

Holly is driving Minhó's SUV, but I don't think twice about it before climbing into the back next to JJ's car seat. He giggles and coos, shoving Mr. Frog in my direction and babbling joyously. My smile is so big it strains my cheeks. "Hey there, handsome. I swear you've gotten bigger in the last forty-eight hours."

Enraptured with my nephew, it takes me longer than it should to notice the awkwardness hovering in the air, but when I do, it promptly brings my mood down a notch. "What crawled up your butts? And why aren't you guys driving the Cadillac?"

I catch Holly's eye in the rearview mirror, but she doesn't respond.

"Mac?"

His arms are crossed, and instead of answering my questions, he looks pointedly at Holly. "I'm not gettin' in the middle of *tis*." His Irish accent is back with a vengeance. That can't be good.

Holly looks at me in the mirror again. "The Caddy is too recognizable. Minhó was generous enough to sign this one over to me."

My stomach hardens with the familiar inkling that Holly's not telling me the full truth. "Why would he do that when you could just borrow any of our cars?"

"I wanted to wait to tell you so we could enjoy the night, but JJ and I are leaving in the morning."

Before I can make sense of the thousands of questions brimming over in my mind, Mac's scoff slices through the tension. "Just you and JJ? Cute. Real cute, Holly. I already told ya, that's not gonna happen."

"Yes, it is." She turns on him, flames in her eyes, but Mac meets her challenge head on.

“In case you forgot,” he spits, “Colt got us papers for a family of *tree*. He put the rental house in *my* name, and I’m also on the title of this car. You’re not goin’ alone. End of story.”

“Rylee,” Holly says through heavy breaths, “we can talk about this when it’s just you and me.”

Mac throws his hands in the air and leans back in his seat to stare out the window.

The air is thick with animosity—even JJ has the good sense not to make a peep until Holly parks the car in the dirt field next to the chained-off path leading to the mill. As soon as we stop, Mac hops out and slams the door, weaving through twenty or so other cars as he storms off.

“Does he know where he’s going?” I ask, watching Mac vault the chain and keep moving farther down the path.

“He’ll figure it out,” Holly huffs. After cracking the windows, she shuts off the car and climbs over the center console to join me in the back seat. Reaching across JJ, she takes my hand in hers but doesn’t speak.

Her unwillingness to say more during the drive here, coupled with her silence now, is giving me flashbacks of how she was when I first came to Eden. If I want an explanation of what’s happening in that secretive head of hers, I’m going to have to ease her into it.

“When did Mac start calling Colton *Colt*?”

Holly rolls her eyes. “Who knows? Those two are way too chummy for people who claim to hate one another.” She smiles softly to herself. “You should have heard them bickering when they were planning the logistics of where JJ and I would go. They sounded like two little old ladies arguing over every tiny thing. The biggest debate was about what school ratings were high enough for JJ. They yelled the whole time, and the final consensus was no school was good enough.”

I want to smile at her story, but the pit opening in my stomach at the idea of my sister and nephew leaving so soon

prevents me. I knew this would happen, I just thought we'd have more time.

Holly notices my mood shift and frowns. "With everything escalating, I can't risk Eastmann finding out about JJ. You understand that, right? I'm not leaving you, I'm keeping my son safe."

I squeeze her hand. "I get it, I really do."

Her eyes glaze over, the *thank you* evident without her having to vocalize it.

She wipes at her nose. "When all this is done, you'll finish school, right? You're not going to run off with my tuition check and blow it in Vegas?"

My mouth falls open. "That was *you*?"

She smiles softly. "Of course it was. You didn't think I'd let my baby sister go into debt for school, did you? I am so very proud of you, Ry. Mom would be too." A tiny flash of pain crosses her expression as she sniffles. "I wish she was here to see what an incredible human being you've become. You're a good person, inside and out, and you belong here in Eden in a way I never did. I'm glad you get to stay."

I grab her hand with both of mine. "I wouldn't have any of this without you. You gave me a home and a family here. I'll always be grateful for that." Swallowing the emotion creeping up my throat, I cough and change direction. "When are you leaving?"

Holly dabs at her eyes with her sleeve. "Colt came by with all the papers today. I was thinking about tomorrow, but now that you know, I want to hit the road tonight."

"You can't wait a few more weeks?"

She rapidly shakes her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. It's already too dangerous for JJ, and I'm starting to lose myself again. Jer's memories are everywhere. I feel his loss so much more profoundly in Eden than I do anywhere else."

I nod in understanding. "Why don't you want Mac to go with you anymore?"

There is a long stretch of silence, and then Holly looks at her lap. “He tried to kiss me.”

It's about damn time.

“How does that make you feel?”

“Guilty,” Holly admits, subduing some of my excitement that Mac finally made a move. “But that’s probably because *technically* it was me who kissed him.” Her face contorts in revulsion. “It’s barely been a year and a half since I lost Jeremy... What kind of wife does that make me?”

“I think it just makes you human.” My sister’s pain has been harder to see since JJ’s arrival, but it’s there, lurking below the surface, just as powerful as it was the day I first arrived in Eden. “I’d never claim to understand what you’ve been through, but you were a good wife and you’re a fantastic mother. You even turned out to be a pretty decent sister.”

I reach over and wipe a tear from her cheek. “No matter what you do or who you do it with, we both know no one will ever replace Jeremy or the spot he has in your heart. It’s okay to make room for other people. Don’t you deserve to be happy?”

“I hope so.” Holly takes back her hand, this time using both sleeves to wipe her eyes before laughing. “I’m not sure when you became the big sister in this relationship, but thank you. I needed to hear that.”

With her tears now dried, she leans over to unbuckle JJ. “We should get out there before they send a search party.”

I shoulder my backpack, trying to memorize every detail of my nephew’s little face and hands as he giggles and tosses himself around, making Holly’s task of strapping him into a baby carrier as difficult as possible.

He'll be so much bigger next time I see him. Will he remember me?

“Hey, Ry?” Holly says once he’s finally strapped in.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think we should say goodbye this time.”

“Why? Afraid I’ll have a public meltdown?” Tears prick at my eyes. “You think I can’t handle life without you anymore or something?”

She lets go of a wet laugh. “Goodbye just feels too permanent. And no, I’m not worried. You’re going to be fine on your own. Wanna know how I know?”

I nod, too afraid responding verbally will set the tears free.

Holly smiles at me proudly. “I don’t think you realized it, but you made it over the bridge today without batting an eye.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

RYLEE



WITH MY NEPHEW strapped to her back, Holly scales up the path to the old mill like she's done it a hundred times before.

For one second, I allow myself to imagine the life she should have had here—Jeremy beside her, the three of them swimming together and marking JJ's height on the old stone walls of the mill beside his father and uncles'.

“You comin’?” Holly calls, briefly glancing at me before her gaze travels downriver to where Mac and Colton are skipping rocks on the bank.

I bite my lip. “You go on ahead, I'll catch up.”

Holly disappears over the ridge, and I plop onto an oversized rock, watching Mac and Colton as they search for skipping stones amid the few remaining marigolds on the muddy shore.

The days have steadily been shortening. Soon the sun will fully dip below the tree line, cloaking everything before me in inky darkness, but for now the entire river is coated in an iridescent sheen. It's serene, almost magical, but something in the back of my head keeps whispering that this is the calm before the storm. That it won't last.

As Colton and Mac casually take turns catapulting rocks across the surface of the rambling river, they don't seem to notice I'm here, allowing me to observe them in peace.

Some time between our interaction this morning and now, Colton cut his hair and shaved. The results are mind-

bogglingly beautiful, his transformation made even more intoxicating as the last light of day gives his golden hair an almost otherworldly glow.

Gone is the unfamiliar man bun and scruff, in their place, clean-shaven sides and a familiar mess of blond hair on top that's only slightly longer than it was when we first met. His jaw is once again visible, too, made sharper by time and shadow.

He looks like the man I knew, and my heart sighs with yearning at the stark reminder of what I lost.

It's difficult to tear my eyes from him, but when I do, the contrast of Mac and Colton together is just as mesmerizing. So similar, yet so different. All three of us dealt a bad hand, doing what was needed to survive and somehow ending up here, together.

The wind picks up, and a cascade of water rushes across the weir. Although I can't hear what Colton and Mac are saying over the babbling river and the spray of water from the mill, I can tell their conversation just turned serious.

Mac's shoulders slump, the rocks in his fist falling to the ground.

I stand, stopping midstep when Colton reaches out to squeeze Mac's shoulder with the same compassion I've seen him comfort Danny with, his tenderness again managing to catch me off guard.

Colton lowers his head to Mac's face, saying something that makes Mac grin before violently backhanding him in the gut.

And that's my cue to intervene...

By the time I walk over, Colton has his hand on the back of Mac's neck and they're laughing so hard you'd never suspect they'd once beaten the shit out of each other. The abrupt change in their countenance makes my head spin, but I don't have long to puzzle it out because their laughter stops the second they see me.

Mac shuffles awkwardly, as if embarrassed I might have heard what they were talking about. “Anyway, you better hurry,” he continues. “Now that she’s told Rylee, I’d be surprised if she wasn’t already on the road.”

Colton squeezes Mac’s neck and leans over. “She can’t go anywhere, I gave *you* all the papers.” He stares at me with those icy blue-green eyes of his while he speaks, but they’re not actually icy at all. His gaze is full of heat and desire, just like it was this morning.

My stomach flips.

He releases Mac to brush by me, and I do my best not to ogle his clean-shaven face or notice the way his jaw works when he says, “Find me when you’re done.”

My throat constricts to hide my sharp intake of air, but Colton must hear it anyway because his retreating footsteps pause.

I sense the exact moment he turns around, shivering as his gaze trails up my bare legs and across my backside like a soft caress. “If you’re thinking about pretending like this morning didn’t happen, or if you think you can avoid what’s coming, think again.” His voice is gravel and honey; a promise and a threat.

Heat rushes to my low belly, and for the second time today, I find that I don’t hate myself for it.

When Colton’s boot steps finally fade, Mac lets out a low whistle. “You two are something else, you know that?” He shakes his head. “I should have known when I saw him run through a shootout to get to you, but I don’t think I fully understood until we were here.”

“What do you mean?”

He raises his hands to demonstrate. “You guys are like magnets. Half of the time, you’re repelling one another so violently I feel like I should run for cover. The other half, I’m terrified I’ll be crushed between the force of your attraction.” His palms slam together with a *crack* that echoes into the surrounding forest.

I cross my arms over my chest, annoyed at his analogy. “Relationships are always volatile when they end.”

Mac’s expression morphs into the same look he used to give me when we were working out and he needed to correct one of my movements—meaning whatever he’s going to say next is going to annoy me.

I clench my fists. “Go on, spit it out.”

“Why are you doing this to yourself? To both of you? I would give anything to be in your shoes, to have Holly look at me the way he looks at you.”

My jaw drops. “Why am *I* doing this? You can’t seriously think this is my fault? Don’t you remember what this past year was like for me? And I’m just supposed to get over it because of the way he *looks* at me?”

Mac’s lips press together as he stares back at me.

My frustration pulls so tight it snaps. “Seriously?” I shout, making him jump. “This is the same guy who broke your arm *after* you forfeited a fight. Why is it so easy for everyone to overlook Colton’s transgressions? Tell me what I’m missing here.”

Mac lowers himself onto a boulder and rubs his jaw. “Trust me, I remember, but how many of us get a second chance like this? He’s clearly still in love with you. You can keep lying to yourself, but you’re obviously still in love with him, too.”

He gestures to my tapping foot and crossed arms. “You pretend to hate him, but you light up when he’s close. You react to him in ways you never did with me or any of those idiots you tried dating. Look at what just happened. He barely said two words to you and you’re ready to melt into a puddle.”

“I am not.”

Mac slow blinks.

I throw my arms into the air. “I came over here to check on you, not for the third degree about my ex. Colton had his chance and he blew it. Am I still physically attracted to him? Sure. But that doesn’t mean he deserves another opportunity to

stomp on my trust. Why are we even talking about this? I don't want to argue with you."

Mac sighs. "I'm leaving with Holly whether she wants me to or not. I'd rather not have our last conversation be a fight either, but your sister and I might never get our second chance. I can't leave knowing you're throwing yours away."

I shake my head. "While I appreciate your concern, Colton and I are nothing like you and Holly. Time and circumstance didn't separate us, choice did. He chose to stay away, Mac, just like Rick did."

Mac still looks thoroughly dejected, like he's somehow convinced himself Colton's fate is tied to his.

"You understand my sister isn't mad at you, right? She's grieving and upset with herself. She's confused."

His head droops forward. "I know, but like I said before, it's hard to compete with a ghost."

I readjust the bag on my shoulder. "Then don't compete. Ask Holly questions about Jeremy. Talk to JJ about his dad. There is a whole box of photo albums in the garage at Danny's new place, bring those with you. Jeremy is always going to be there. Show Holly that there's room for both of you in her life."

"Room for both of us, huh?" He lets out a slow breath that ends right as the sun dips below the tree canopy. "That's not bad advice. Maybe I wouldn't be so threatened by the guy if I felt like I knew him." He stands, dusting off his pants. "There's nothing I can say to convince you to give Colt another shot?"

Not this again.

Colton comforting me after my nightmare combined with what I let happen this morning was already making the situation complicated. Now Mac's badgering has me feeling defensive. If I can't convince him that I'm making the right choice by keeping Colton at arm's length, how can I keep convincing myself?

I tilt my head skyward to where a flight of tiny birds soars across the pink-and-orange-streaked sky. “Colton is like your sparrow back in Boston. He brought joy to my life and made me smile for a summer, but I woke up one day and he was gone. That was it. That’s the end of our story.”

Mac steps forward, chuckling as he takes my face between his hands. “That is literally the stupidest analogy I’ve ever heard. Do you want to know why?”

I shake my head. “Not particularly. I was just trying to explain it to you in a way you’d understand.”

Mac smooshes my cheeks together. “Too bad, I’m going to tell you anyway. First off, you can’t blame a bird for migrating any more than you can blame a wolf for doing whatever it takes to protect a member of the pack. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you knew exactly what you were getting with Colt. Now you won’t forgive him for doing what’s in his nature? You have to see how flawed that is. Second, it’s a stupid comparison because *my* summer sparrow always came back. Yours did too.”

Fuck.

A crack forms in my already flimsy internal defenses. “What if he leaves again?”

Mac looks out across the river to where the tip of the old mill is just visible above the rocky barrier. “Fly south with him.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

RYLEE



NIGHT FALLS on the old mill like a curtain.

Lucky for us, the shimmery fairy lights Danny hung in the trees make our little corner of the forest bright and festive while the roaring glow of the bonfire keeps the darkness at bay.

Alex and Minho beam as they weave their way through the partygoers, regaling us with the tale of the scavenger hunt Minho set up around town, which eventually led to the site of their first kiss under the high school bleachers, and ended with Minho dropping down on one knee.

Their happiness is infectious, seeping into every dark corner of my consciousness and making the tribulations of the past year, and the ones I'm currently treading water in, seem like a bad dream.

It's not just me either. Judging by the surrounding smiles, everyone feels the buzz of their joy in the air. The number of partygoers is limited to Minho and Alex's closest friends and family, which means it was safe for me and Holly to attend, but that hasn't prevented hordes of Jackals from stopping by to offer their congratulations before heading back to work.

As if he anticipated this, Danny set up his grill on the rocky shore down by the water and has a plate of food prepared for each of them by the time they're ready to leave.

For every burger he hands out, someone stops by my chair near the bonfire to bring me a drink. I'm handed more beers than I could ever consume on my own, and although I'm still

only halfway through my second one, the growing pile of unopened bottles on the dirt next to me has me looking like a raging boozier.

A soft smile graces my lips every time I spot the stack. I'm unsure if this is the Jackals' way of encouraging me to enjoy my night off, or if they're trying to make sure I'm hungover enough that I forget to give them more files to comb through tomorrow.

Either way, being here—surrounded by love and the delicious smell of wet earth, pine, and fire—I find myself grateful to be thought of at all. To be part of the pack.

This night is perfect—or it would be if my nephew and sister weren't currently making their rounds to say goodbye. Mac left an hour ago to grab their things and stop by Jack's place like I suggested. Saying goodbye to him was easier than I'd anticipated, my annoyance from our conversation by the river helping to ease some of the sadness, but I know his absence will hurt tomorrow.

Fucking worst analogy he's ever heard, my ass!

I laugh to myself, watching through the flames as Holly approaches Colton. He's been staring at his phone for most of the night, plastering on a smile whenever appropriate, but otherwise preoccupied with something.

It's weird to see him so glued to a device, made even weirder because he hasn't looked at me once. At first, it almost felt freeing to not have his eyes constantly on me, but his newfound indifference is raising questions I'd rather not be asking myself.

Why does he look so defeated?

Did I piss him off?

Is he regretting this morning?

After exchanging a few words with my sister, he nuzzles his face into my nephew's belly to blow a raspberry. JJ screams with delight, and although I've rarely thought about having kids of my own, I briefly imagine what Colton would be like as a father.

I've barely formed the thought when an image of him crawling on all fours, two kids on his back, two more hanging from his sides—all of them pink-cheeked with joy and laughter—slams into my subconscious.

Something is desperately wrong with me.

I blame the damn haircut and shaved beard.

Before, my brain could tell my heart he was a different person. Now, he looks so much like he did last year, the former warring parts of my body all seem to be in league with one another to sabotage my resilience.

Colton gives Holly a hug before taking JJ. His forearms flex, his Henley riding up to reveal a patch of inked skin and a pistol tucked into the front of his low-slung jeans while he holds JJ high above his head, bringing him back down to plant a barrage of kisses all across his little face.

Butterflies explode in my stomach.

I'm in so much trouble.

Fuck it. What am I doing over here by myself anyway?

I gulp down the rest of my beer and I'm about to go join them when Alex plops into the empty seat next to me. After grabbing one of my unopened beers, he slings his boots onto my armrest.

“Did you know all this was happening?” he asks breathlessly, his smile so big his cheeks look swollen.

“No, sir. That man of yours is a sneaky one.”

Alex looks dotingly at Minho, who just joined Holly and Colton across from us. “He sure is. Can't believe we're finally getting married.”

“You both deserve all the happiness in the world.”

People say dumb shit like that all the time when their friends get engaged, but with Alex and Minho I mean every single word. I clink our bottles together. “Have you always known he was the one?”

Alex shrugs. “I knew from our very first kiss, but that doesn’t mean it was easy.” He takes a rather large swig of beer. “Anyone who says relationships don’t take work is either lying or extremely unaware of their partner’s needs. After ten years, we’ve definitely had our share of ups and downs, but I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat. Why do you ask?”

I lean back in my chair, peeling away the Dovetail label on my bottle. “I guess I wanted your secret for relationship success.”

Alex slaps his thigh. “That’s the biggest load of shit I’ve ever heard, but I’m gonna answer anyway because I’m feeling generous and because I should probably clarify. *I’ve* always known Minho was the one, but I don’t think it was like that for him, and that’s okay. Relationships are about repeatedly choosing the person you love. Day in and day out, you have to choose that person, even when they make it hard.”

I can hear the smile in his voice without having to look up.

“And let me tell you, Minho sure did make it hard. Saying *not yet* to my marriage proposal. Asking me not to join when I brought up wanting to become a Jackal last year. Hell, he broke up with me when we were eighteen because he said the fact that I’m attracted to people regardless of their gender made him feel like he could never *fully meet my needs*.” Alex scoffs into the mouth of his beer. “Those things are hard, but you get through them.”

I choke on my beer. “You guys broke up?”

“Like three damn times. Once over the attraction thing, another time when the club was first kicking off, and then again this past year.”

My voice cracks as I whisper-yell, “I can’t believe you never told me!”

Alex takes another swig from his bottle. “It lasted less than forty-eight hours. I knew exactly what my idiot fiancé was doing, and I didn’t even bother taking off my commitment ring.”

Alex takes one look at my face and, anticipating my next question, says, “He thought he was protecting me.”

One of my eyebrows lifts. “And you were just okay with letting him hurt you like that? Because he *thought* he was protecting you?”

“Listen, Rylee. I’m pretty sure I know where these questions are coming from, and I’ll say this: no one said these men of ours were smart. They have good hearts, but sometimes the same alpha shit that makes them good protectors of the innocent leads to some pretty misguided choices. It can make them difficult partners to support, but you have to love the whole person—mistakes and all.”

I roll my eyes.

“Like I said earlier,” he finishes off the rest of his beer, “I know at the end of the day Minho is going to choose me the same way I’m going to choose him. Everything else, he and I can figure out together.”

Minho calls for Alex to come join him, and the way Alex blushes and smiles to himself reminds me of a teenager in love for the first time. “God, do I love that man.” He rises to his feet. “Don’t forget, we still have to convince him to bump up the wedding date.” He kisses my temple and wanders over for his turn to say bye to Holly and JJ.

I twist the bottle in my hand.

Love the whole person, mistakes and all.

Maybe I’m bitter, but that seems like some masochistic bullshit to me.

Mulling over everything Alex said, I spend another solid minute picking at the remnants of the Dovetail label.

When I look up, Holly is staring at me through the flames.

We decided earlier that we’d already said what we needed to in the car and wouldn’t be saying goodbye again. But now that it’s time for her to actually leave, I can’t stop thinking about my first day in Eden and everything else we’ve experienced together.

Closing my eyes, I see Holly's wild hair billowing in the wind as she fired a shotgun in the air to protect me from Jack. I see the way she looked at me when I entered the bungalow and found Logan standing over her. I see her face right before I crashed Logan's car. I remember all the ways she took care of me during that first week we left Eden, and then continued to support me once we were in Boston. I see the look in her eyes the first time she held JJ.

I open my eyes, tears welling in my lower lids.

Holly shakes her head, and I wipe them away before they fall.

I love you. See you soon, she mouths.

Eyes still on me, she whispers something to JJ, and his little hand lifts in a tiny wave before they both disappear down the dark path with only the pale light of the moon to guide them.

"I love you, too," I say aloud, but it's barely audible above the roaring crackle of the fire.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

RYLEE



BLINKING RAPIDLY, I move away from the fire before anyone has the opportunity to notice me crying. Much to my annoyance, trying not to cry is only making me cry harder, and soon I'm hiccuping and gasping for breath.

With my hand in my pocket, I rub my trinket and blindly move farther and farther away from the party until the bonfire is barely visible through the trees and the music is just a faint note on the wind.

I've never been upstream before and hadn't realized how much wider the river is this far from the mill. It's significantly easier to breathe away from the noise and commotion of the party, but without the fire and trees for cover, the early autumn air has a bite to it that cuts through the thin fabric of my dress. Wrapping my arms around myself, I let the breeze dry my tears and head toward a chair overlooking the water.

I don't know why I feel Holly and JJ leaving so deeply. I knew they weren't staying, and a few short weeks ago it was *me* planning to drive off in the dead of night, but the idea of leaving was way easier than being the one left behind.

While I started off today feeling in control, now it feels like I'm standing on a cliff and the slightest push might send me toppling over the edge.

Tears plow through me with renewed force, and all I want to do is—

A twig cracks behind me and I spin around, the smell of sunshine and cloves flooding my senses a second before a

calloused hand lands gently on my cheek. I lean into Colton, letting him wrap his strong arms around me as he pulls me against his chest.

Home, my body exhales.

He rubs a soothing hand over my back but doesn't say a word. Like he somehow senses that all I need is a solid place to rest and catch my breath.

I don't know how long we stand like that, but it's long enough for the beat of our hearts to fall in step with one another. Long enough for his warmth to seep into my bones and my thoughts to turn away from my sister and toward the hard muscles pressed up against my cheek and torso.

I don't want to be sad anymore. I'm tired of being scared and lonely. I'm just freaking tired. Every time I think I'm getting a handle on things, it all comes crashing down. It's been a year full of setback after setback, and I need a break. I want to feel free and weightless, unburdened like I did this morning with Colton's hand wrapped so tight around my throat there wasn't any room to think.

Bringing my palms between us, I slide my fingers down to his belt.

"What are you doing?" he asks huskily.

"Finishing what we started earlier," I say, my shaking fingers fumbling with his buckle.

His hand leaves my back to grab my wrist right as I get his belt undone. "Does this mean you forgive me?" His question is breathy and full of an emotion I can't quite name.

I look up, but with his face backlit by the bright silver moon, all I see is shadow. "It doesn't mean anything. You said it yourself, I can't avoid what's coming." I struggle against his grip, but he holds on tighter.

"If you haven't forgiven me, then why?"

Because Alex and Minho are engaged. Because my sister and JJ just left. Because Mac got into my head, and because

I'm tired and confused and I want to feel good for a few minutes. Take your pick.

That's not what I say, though. "Because you know my body and I know yours." The fact that he's not immediately taking me up on this offer is making me self-conscious. I shift on my feet and add on, "We can do this for each other, no strings attached."

"No strings?"

Fuck, why does his voice have to vibrate in my chest like that?

I nod enthusiastically.

"That's not good enough." He throws my hands back at me and walks off, slamming himself into a chair overlooking a rocky drop-off into the river below.

The moonlight reflecting off the water casts everything in a deep-blue glow, allowing me to finally see the firm set of his jaw and drawn expression.

I march over and stand before him, hands on my hips. "Not *good* enough? Are you kidding me? It sure seemed good enough this morning."

Groaning, he places both his hands in his hair before abruptly standing to tower over me. His breath is erratic as he grips my chin. "Not good enough, because I want *more*."

"I don't have more to offer," I say defiantly, staring back up at him.

"I'll settle for a kiss, then. Kiss me like you fucking mean it and I'll do whatever you want." He leans forward.

With my hands on his chest, I rise onto my toes, hovering my lips over his. I'm so close I can taste his breath, spearmint and something sinful that has the pulse between my legs begging for the touch of his tongue, but I can't do it. I can't put my lips on his, not when kissing him would feel too much like forgiveness.

I pull away at the last second and cross my arms. "Why do we have to kiss? Why can't we just...you know?"

“Let me get this straight,” Colton says. His tone is steady and calm, but there’s an undercurrent of anger and violence that almost has me taking a step away from him. “You want to fuck, but you can’t kiss me? You’ll let me use this perfect tight body of yours, but you still don’t trust me? No emotion. No commitment. Just sex.”

With one aggressive movement, he runs his hands down the back of my dress, squeezing my ass and bringing me flush against his chest. “You want to be fuck buddies. Do I have that right, Tiger?”

Despite the confusing contrast of his tone and actions, a little jolt of excitement flowers up my spine. I hadn’t thought about it like that, but that’s exactly what I need. All of the physical benefits without risking my heart. “Right. I take care of your needs, you take care of mine. We’re still attracted to each other. We’re both adults. I don’t have the energy to fight Eastmann *and* you anymore. Something has to give.”

My heart is beating so fast I can feel it in my throat.

Colton nods, positioning me between his knees and taking a step back to lower himself into the chair. “Okay. Show me.” His tone is patient and relaxed as he lazily spreads his legs, placing his tattooed hands on his thighs.

Everything about this screams *danger*. He’s too calm, too reserved, too *in control* of himself for a moment like this, but like a moth to a flame, I take a step closer. “How?”

Colton’s laugh is menacing. “You know exactly what I mean. Sit on my lap and show me how this fuck-buddies thing is gonna work.”

I glance in the direction of the bonfire, its orange glow still barely visible through the trees.

“No one can see us,” Colton reassures, but when I turn around and bend my knees to sit, a hand on my thigh halts me. “Face me.”

My blood heats at the command, my hands shaking as I hike up my dress to climb onto his lap and straddle him.

My body trembles with anticipation.

“Just like that. Now, scoot forward,” he purrs, and I do, sliding myself along his lap until my soft center is aligned with the strained bulge in his jeans. I mewl at the contact.

“Good girl,” he growls. “Now, arms on my shoulders, hands behind my neck.”

I do as he says, fucking melting at the praise. In all our time together, we never did *this*, and the thrill of being entirely at Colton’s mercy has my heart racing and my panties soaked.

He scoots forward in the chair to make more room for me to maneuver, bouncing me over his rigid length.

Unable to stop myself, I grind into him, and he lets out a sharp gasp. “Is that all you’ve got?” he says, and then he’s moving.

Gripping my waist, he pushes my hips back and forth until the friction feels so good I want to scream. But it’s not enough. After a second or two, my hands fly to his zipper, only to stop abruptly when he fists my hair, yanking down and exposing my neck. I cry out, but it’s so goddamn hot I don’t want him to stop.

Colton is pissed, and while I don’t entirely understand why, I know I fucking love it.

“What were you going to do, Tiger? Take out my cock and get yourself off with it?”

Oh fuck.

I try to nod, but I’m immobilized by his punishing grip on my hair. I grind my hips instead, rocking until Colton wraps more of my hair around his fist and yanks harder. With his free hand, he slides his thumb into my mouth. I swirl my tongue over it before he rips the digit from my lips and slips it into my thong to circle my clit.

Heat travels up my thighs, straight into my center, making me feral with need and wanton with desire. I attempt to move against him, but each time he stops me with a rough tug on my hair. “So needy,” he growls, his grip arching my back into a tight curve, rotating my pelvis in the perfect position for him to enter me.

I can't see his face from this angle, but every time my mouth falls open with a gasp of pleasure, his chest rumbles in response.

“Tell me how desperately you want my cock.” His hand leaves my clit, followed by the sound of a zipper unfurling. “Tell me in excruciating detail what you want me to fucking do to you.”

My scalp is on fire, but I love it. Each tug has my pussy yearning to be filled and my imagination running wild.

If we stay in this position, he has enough room to give me the pounding I desperately desire while maintaining full access to my clit. But what if he decides to keep giving me commands instead... Will he order me to drop to my knees so he can fuck my throat? Will he have me ride him while he chokes me out?

My pussy clamps down on emptiness, my need for Colton rising to a desperate level. Still, he makes no move to touch me...

I realize then that he gave me a command, one I still haven't followed.

“Please,” I gasp, my throat working to form the words through the extreme angle.

Colton's thumb lands back on my clit, pressing but not moving. “You still haven't given me what I asked for.” His thumb rotates in one slow, methodical circle before stopping again. Beneath my palms, his forearms are strained while his rigid cock, still inexcusably tucked away, pushes against my center, begging to be set free—the way my body begs for release.

Throat bared, flesh ready to burst into flame, I give in. “Please, Colton, I want to come again like I did this morning. Pull my hair, choke me, do whatever you want to me, I don't care as long as you're fucking me.”

His thumb starts to circle my clit in earnest, every muscle tightening at once from the exquisite feeling as my resounding moan echoes across the water.

He laughs darkly, the sound making my stomach tighten with apprehension before his lips are against my ear. “Good girl. Now look over your shoulder and tell Andy you’re never going on a fucking date with him.”

“W-what?” My pleasure-addled brain struggles to catch up, but when he releases my hair and I finally force my eyes open, I see Andy storming back toward the party.

Sitting up, I raise my hand to slap Colton on the chest, but he catches it midair.

“You’re an asshole,” I spit. “Was Andy there the whole time?”

I push away from his muscular chest, trying to scramble off his lap, but he slams me firmly back down, his jeans grating against my clit in a way that makes me whimper.

Gripping my chin, he forces me to meet the ice and fire in his eyes. “You’re right. I *am* an asshole, but do you want to know what I’m not? I’m not your goddamn fuck buddy. No strings, no emotion, no commitment? Are you fucking kidding me? You are *mine*. I get all of you, whatever that looks like. Messy. Whole. Perfect. Broken. I don’t give a fuck. I want it all, and I’ll settle for nothing less.”

I stop struggling and stare at him. I was furious enough to want to hit him ten seconds ago, but now the only thing I can think about is planting my lips on his and tasting him, trying to make him feel an ounce of what those words just elicited inside of me.

His heaving chest presses into mine. “Do you understand everything I just said?”

Speechless, I nod.

Colton releases my chin. “Good. Now do you want to get off me so I can grab us some food?”

Eager to slink away and collect myself, I climb off and straighten my dress. Then his question sinks in, and I freeze midaction, staring at him in disbelief. “Get us food? I thought you were mad?”

He zips himself back up and fastens his belt. “I’m fucking furious. I’m also pretty sure I have permanent blue balls, but that doesn’t mean you don’t need to eat. Now, do you want food or not?”

I blink once. “Yeah, I could eat.”

What the actual fuck is happening right now?

Colton takes my hand in his and leads us back to the bonfire. I must be in shock because I can’t come up with a single reason for why I’m not pulling away or why I’m following him.

“Hey,” Minho cheers as we cross under the first set of fairy lights. “I was wondering where you two ran off to. Are you guys finally back together?”

“No,” I say indignantly, while at the same time Colton replies, “Sure are.”

I rip my hand from his. “We are *not* back together.”

Colton shrugs. “Tiger, you tell yourself that for as long as you want to. Hell, I’ll have it engraved on our joint tombstone if you need me to, but there is never going to be anyone else for me. I tried being your friend and I was shit at it. We’re back together.”

My jaw hangs open.

He starts moving toward Danny at the grill. “Do you want onions on your burger?”

“Yes.” I pause. “Wait, no. I’ll get it myself.”

Colton laughs in that stupid self-satisfied way that doesn’t actually make a sound as I storm past him, knocking my shoulder into him as hard as I can, which of course means he doesn’t move and I fly two feet off course.

While I assemble my burger, I catch more than one Jackal clapping him on the back. Fuming, I take note of each of their names and faces, jotting them down on my mental shit list so I can remember to infect their computers with a virus later.

When I'm done eating, I'm still not exactly sure what just happened.

Andy is nowhere in sight, so I can't even apologize, and everywhere I look, Colton seems to be there. When I've finally had enough, I don't make it three steps from my chair before Alex catches me by the waist and spins me dangerously close to the fire—so close the heat licks at my bare legs and several of those around us reach out their hands to prevent us from falling in.

After setting me down, he drags me over to my open backpack full of dresses. "I was going to make you do a fashion show, but after going through this bag, I already have a winner."

He's clearly inebriated but so damn happy that I decide to just go with it. "Oh yeah? Which one did—"

The question dies on my tongue as Alex holds up Cherry's dress, the black, mostly see-through one I borrowed and apparently never gave back. Of course Alex would pick the sluttiest dress in there, which just so happens to be the dress I wore on the night of the Pit shooting. Jesus, it probably still has Colton's blood on it.

I shake my head. "Not that one."

Alex clutches the sheer fabric to his chest. "But it's my wedding. Please?" He jumps up and down for extra emphasis.

Ugh. I really should have looked at what I was bringing instead of just shoving it all into a bag. "We don't even know when you're getting married. I'll order any dress you want. Pick anything but that one and I'll wear it without a word of complaint, I promise."

My refusal only increases the tempo of his jumping. I start to laugh at his ridiculous antics but stop when my eyes catch on a scrap of paper falling from the dress.

Not just any piece of paper, a business card.

It floats through the air in slow motion before landing in the dirt with a thunderous *boom*.

A voice rings out clear as a bell in my mind.

I met someone who changed my way of thinking. He showed me that when you speak up about injustices, sometimes you find other like-minded individuals, and together you might be able to do something about it.

Bending down to pick up the card, time slows further and the cogs inside my head lock into place. I slipped this into my dress at the Pit. Somehow, not only did it survive the shooting, but it also stayed put when Colton undressed me at the hotel afterward.

I thought he was going to be the one to take care of my father, but it looks like it has to be me after all.

“Holy fuck.” In the wake of the shooting and after being locked out of the network, I’d forgotten.

When I stand, all eyes are on me.

Colton’s brow furrows, half his face illuminated by the dancing flames while the other half is cast in shadow. “What’s wrong?”

The music cuts out and the cicadas cease their song. I clear my throat. “I know who Jeremy was talking to on the recording.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

COLTON



I NEVER KNEW I could hate an inanimate object as much as I hate this stupid-ass phone.

It started going nuts on the ride back from the engagement party, but the Dead Kings' texts didn't make sense until we got to Jack's old place and I was finally able to scroll up to the top of the chat without worrying about someone looking over my shoulder.

The first one was Frank giving the all clear for the Dead Kings to return to Lockwood. The second was him ordering everyone to acknowledge his message by midnight.

There were a bunch of responses I didn't bother reading, but then I'd made the mistake of opening the private message thread between Frank and I—the one I can't help but bring back up again now.

Frank: In case you needed a reminder of what's at stake if you don't return

Frank: IMG

Frank: VID

My grip on my phone becomes crushing.

Thankfully, the first time I read these, I'd had the good sense to excuse myself before opening the video and image files, which meant nobody witnessed me punching a hole in the wall of Danny's brand-new mudroom.

My phone goes off again.

Frank: Recall in 72 hours.

I haven't even finished reading the text when a phone call comes through. I ignore it.

After an immaculate start to the day with Rylee, followed by my brother's engagement, everything sure turned to shit.

I shove the phone back into my pocket and glance around the bedroom.

We've been crowded around Rylee's computer for an hour. It's too damn hot in here, and I can't stop sweating. Lee is standing a little too fucking close to Rylee for my liking. Tate and Nolan are sitting on the same bed where she sleeps, Danny smells like a barbeque pit, and everyone else reeks of beer and bonfire. Plus, I just realized I never called Ethel to say I wasn't going to make it to the cooking class tonight.

Danny puts a hand on Rylee's chair. "Vic Eastmann. I can't believe it," he repeats for the one hundred seventy-fifth time since we got back to the house.

"Yes, Vic fucking Eastmann," I say, pushing off the wall. "Rylee's already played Jeremy's recording for you and compared it to other footage of Vic's voice. Minho also confirmed it was a match. Stop repeating the same thing like you don't trust the evidence she provided. The only question now is what we do next—and I'm pretty sure we already know the answer to that. So let's get that fucking over with, too."

"Colton," Rylee chides.

"What?" I toss my hands in the air, trying to ignore how that's the first time she's acknowledged my existence since we left the bonfire. "You're the only one who can reach out to Vic, and while I don't doubt it's them talking to Jeremy on the recording, Vic is still an Eastmann. The whole thing reeks of a setup, and since you're clearly the only bait we've got, fuck me if I don't like where this is headed."

Rylee's mouth scrunches to the side as the debate over whether calling Vic is a trap or not sparks in pockets around

the room. Leaning back against the wall, I rake my hand through my hair and exhale an annoyed breath.

My phone vibrates again.

Frank: Check your voicemail.

After a quick glance at the screen, I do what I should have done with the other texts and delete it.

Rylee watches me like a hawk, and she's not the only one either.

Minho, always too damn observant for his own good, removes his arm from around Alex's shoulders and shuffles over to my side right as my phone starts ringing again. "Do you need to get that?"

Neck aflame, I respond through clenched teeth. "No. Frank wants his boys back. *All* of them. Judging by the lack of check-ins in the group chat, he's lost a lot more than the seventeen who came back to Eden with me. He's not pleased."

"Shit," Minho replies somberly.

"My thoughts exactly."

I should have anticipated this after Ashlynn's cryptic text that Frank was up to something earlier, but I'd pushed it from my mind in order to say a proper goodbye to my nephew and Holly.

And to think, my main concern tonight had been getting through my brother's engagement party without thinking about Rylee curled up next to me on the floor last night, or the way her skin felt with my hand wrapped around her neck, or the way her perfect body came undone as she fingered herself to the sound of *my* voice... Talk about a reality check.

I don't know why I believed Ashlynn when she said she'd keep Frank in line, or why I thought I could make staying in Eden work.

The real kicker is, I don't even have to listen to the voicemail to know exactly what it says. Frank will expect *me*

to bring back his AWOL Dead Kings—like I wasn't the one who encouraged them to leave in the first place.

I might be able to use that to buy me a few days, but he'll still expect me in Pennsylvania before the week's up.

Fucking Frank. Those damn image and video files were an all too sobering reminder of the leash he has on me. The first one, a screenshot detailing Dovetail's distribution costs and reporting procedures, very clearly highlights how we use the brewery to launder money. It's a fairly damning piece of evidence, but I know for a fact it's not the worst thing he has on the Jackals. Still, it's not a promising sign he has it ready to go.

Then there's the video that shows Danny and the charter heads discussing Knott and Logan's deaths. I only needed to watch for a few seconds before they mentioned Rylee as the killer. I also caught the beginning of our detailed plan on what needed to be done to ensure a proper cover-up. I didn't bother watching the rest.

The fucked-up thing is I know exactly when Frank took that damn video because I saw the phone sticking out of his cut pocket. If I'd shown up in Lockwood a few hours earlier or barged into that back room meeting like I wanted to, I would have noticed him filming. I could have stopped him—*the good for nothing piece of shit*. I knew he was cunning, I just didn't realize he was capable of that type of foresight.

The reality is, despite my agreement with Ashlynn, it's looking more and more like Frank's not long for this earth.

I'll have to be smart about it before making a move, but whether I kill him tomorrow or a year from now, it still means the same thing: I'll have to leave Rylee.

Minho bumps his shoulder into my arm. "You good?"

Maybe I don't need to do it all on my own this time...

Keeping my voice low, I lean over. "Frank's texts. Can you find out if he made copies and see what we can do about it?" The gentle dip of his chin is the only confirmation I need that

he'll do everything in his power to make that happen. "Do you need my phone?"

He shakes his head. "No. I made a copy when I backed up the file Ashlynn sent you, and it updates in real time. Besides, I already have access to everyone using Ghost Rider. How bad is it?"

"Bad."

"I'll remote wipe your phone when I'm done, then."

A tiny wash of relief penetrates my tense shoulders, only to be swept away the moment I look up and find Rylee scrutinizing my every breath. Her silent stare is an accusation, a scalding brand against my flesh labeling me for what I really am.

A coward. A liar.

At the bonfire, I'd been pissed she still hadn't forgiven me, but she was right not to. I haven't been back a month and already I'm breaking my word.

My insides harden and twist.

Of course I go and say we're back together tonight, of all nights. What is wrong with me? It's like I lose all rational thought when she's around. One second I'm telling myself to take it slow, and the next I'm convinced I'll die if I'm not buried inside her.

She was right, she deserves better.

She deserves so much more than *me*.

Rylee clears her throat. "I'm going to call Vic. It's almost 10:00 p.m. If I don't do it now, we'll have to wait until tomorrow." The room falls silent at her announcement. "Minho, can you take over the computer, figure out if Vic is out and about? It would be beneficial if we could analyze how they react to my call."

Rylee stands while Minho seamlessly slides in to take her spot at the desk. The charter heads clear off the bed, and Rylee takes a seat on the corner. I don't remember ordering my feet

to move, but like an invisible force pulling me, I find myself next to her.

“We need to know what Jeremy saw on that thumb drive and we don’t have time to mess around with this,” she says. “Even if it’s a setup, calling Vic is our best option to get answers. Whatever they want from me for the information, I’m going to agree to it.”

Lee bristles. “That doesn’t sound like a fair trade.”

Rylee sits straighter. “As long as I’m the only one affected, I’m willing to make any trade. This is the right path.”

With her phone gripped in one hand and the business card in the other, she makes eye contact with Danny, and then each of us in turn. To an outsider, it might look like she’s being respectful and giving the Jackal leadership one last chance to object, but I know her too well. This wildcat is challenging *us* to remember our oath. She’s daring anyone to question her choice when she damn well knows it’s the exact move a true Jackal would make.

She’s more than earned her spot here among my brothers. My chest swells with pride and longing, remembering that this fierce woman once deemed *me* worthy enough to love.

When her eyes finally meet mine, there is nothing left for me to do but nod.

Minho pulls up a security feed. “Vic’s at a restaurant in Lower Manhattan with their mother and Eastmann.”

“That’s perfect.” Rylee hums. “If they rat me out, we’ll know once and for all we can’t trust them. But if they don’t...” She hits Call and puts the phone on speaker.

My eyes are glued to the computer as ringing fills the otherwise deathly silent room.

On the monitor, Vic startles before reaching inside their suit pocket.

My pulse pounds painfully in my temples.

Vic glances across the table at their father...and then silences the call.

Fuck.

A wide-eyed Rylee is the only one who appears elated by what just happened. “Did anyone else see two phones?” she asks excitedly.

Minho opens a second window and rewinds the footage so we can all see what she’s talking about. Sure enough, she’s right, Vic did pull out two phones, but I don’t know why the hell that’s important.

Rylee laughs. “They didn’t want to answer the call in front of Eastmann. That’s a good sign.”

Minho draws our attention back to the screen. “Eastmann is taking a call of his own. I’m isolating the audio so we can look at it later. Wait, what is Vic doing—”

Rylee’s phone chimes with an alert, and she tilts the screen so I can see. I laugh silently at the name before reading the text aloud.

Vic (Evil?) Eastmann: Who is this? Where did you get this number?

Rylee looks at the ceiling and holds up a hand to keep us quiet. “Give me a second. I’m trying to remember what Vic said to me at the Pit... Got it!”

Her face scrunches. “You guys are going to have to trust me on this one.” Her fingers fly across the keypad before any of us can stop her.

Rylee: One of us took a son and the other took a daughter.

Vic looks around the restaurant, smiling softly to themselves.

Vic (Evil?) Eastmann: Seen you on the news. I have to say, not a great look. Trying to get a cell next to Daddy Adder’s?

Rylee rolls her eyes.

Rylee: Actively trying to avoid it. How secure is this line?

Charles Eastmann ends his call, and Vic pulls out their lapel to put away their phone. Rylee sits up straighter, glancing from her cell to the video footage on the screen. “Quick. What alias did Jeremy use when he worked undercover at Eastmann Incorporated?”

Lee answers, “He used his own first name. He thought it would throw people off if he was found out.”

With lightning speed, Rylee shoots off another text.

Rylee: I need to talk to you about what you showed Jeremy.

Vic glances down at their phone and goes rigid before rapidly deleting every text in the conversation and shoving their phone back inside their pocket. Charles Eastmann stands, motioning toward the door, and disappointment pours into the room when Vic dutifully follows.

Nolan points at the computer monitor. “This is our best lead. We need to know what was on that recording. Rylee, what do you need from us to make that happen? We could take Vic and have them here in front of you in a few hours. Just say the word.”

Rylee shakes her head. “We don’t need to use force. You’ve all heard the conversation on that thumb drive. Jeremy made Vic believe in the Jackal cause. What we need is for Vic to trust us the same way they trusted him.”

Rylee’s phone chimes again, the bright light highlighting the triumphant grin spreading over her perfect pink lips as she types out a reply.

When she’s done, she holds up her phone for everyone to read.

Vic (Evil?) Eastmann: No one is free.

Rylee: While others are oppressed.

Vic (Evil?) Eastmann: I'll call you tomorrow. Noon EST.

My fierce Tiger's smile widens. "Told you."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

RYLEE



BY THE TIME I've showered the smoky bonfire smell off my skin, the Jackals have cleared out of the house and Colton is lying on the floor in his makeshift bed from last night.

Nostrils flaring, he lifts up to look at me as I exit the bathroom, then slams his head down on the pillow with an exasperated sigh. "There are four bodywashes in that shower, why did you use Danny's?"

Hiding my smug smile, I step over him and climb into bed. "Because I knew it would bother you, and I'm still pissed about what you made me do to Andy."

He snorts humorlessly. "Andy can fuck all the way off. He knows you're off-limits."

"Yeah, about that. I called him when you were in the shower, and he told me all about your threats." I roll my eyes and settle in under the blanket. "I can't believe you slashed his tires. Seriously? Are you a child?"

According to Andy, Colton made a house call during my first week back in Eden to, as Andy so eloquently put it, "mark his territory." Which is why he never followed up about our date. Not that I've had time to go out with anyone...or that I would have said yes, but it's nice to know he didn't blow me off and that he wasn't mad about what happened tonight either.

Colton laughs sardonically. "Of course good ol' Andy Knott would leave out the part of the story where I helped him put new tires on that rusted Bronco *and* how the tread on the

old ones was all but gone to begin with. I did him a fucking favor. Why are you worried about him anyway?"

I hate how readily I believe Colton's version of the story over Andy's, and how easy and comfortable it is to talk to him like this. I still can't get over what he did at the bonfire, but Andy said he'd only been standing there for a second, so it's not like Colton *planned* that little asshole move of his.

I don't know how far he would have taken it if Andy hadn't interrupted us, but I know Colton unlocked at least three new kinks I'd like to explore. And then there is everything he said afterward...

My body floods with warmth and my chest becomes uncomfortably tight.

"I can't do anything until the call tomorrow, and I don't particularly want to obsess over if I can convince Vic to trust us or not." Using my palms, I flatten the comforter around me. "If I'm not worried about Andy or pissed off at you, then I'll just be lying here the whole night freaking out about how everything is riding on my shoulders."

There is a long pause before Colton says, "You know that soap you like in the kitchen? I bought you a ton of bottles and I've been refilling it every time you use it. There's a whole stash under the sink so you'll never run out."

I sit up abruptly. "I knew it!"

He chuckles, the warm sound inflating my chest. "Do you want me to keep going?" he asks hesitantly. "I'm sure I could manage to piss you off all night if that's what you need."

I laugh, mostly because I think he'd really do it. "No, my *Things Colton Does to Piss Me Off* list is already long enough without you adding to it. Thanks, though."

Another stretch of silence.

I swallow the nervous lump in my throat. "Who kept texting and calling you earlier?"

"Frank."

He sounds defeated, but I expected that, just like how I expect I already know the answer to my next question. “If I asked you to sleep up here on the bed tonight, would you?”

I hear him turn onto his side, but it’s not until he speaks that I realize he’s turned away from me. “I shouldn’t.”

My skin flushes, the cadence of my pulse becoming uneven. “Would you have fucked me this morning if Danny hadn’t come home?”

“Within an inch of your life.” There’s no hesitation in his answer.

“But not now?”

“Not now,” he confirms.

The sound of crickets filters in through the window.

“Colton?”

“Yeah?”

My throat thickens. “Are you leaving again?”

After a moment of silence, he takes a deep breath that steals the oxygen straight from my lungs. “I don’t want to.”

The gentle whir of the ceiling fan is barely loud enough to cover my shuddering exhale. No tears, though. Not when deep down I always knew this was coming. Even in my moments of weakness today, I was still cautious enough to know it wasn’t safe to kiss him. *He* wasn’t safe. But, just like with Holly, knowing someone is leaving doesn’t prevent the hurt.

Colton’s phone lights up the dark room, his frustrated growl following not long after.

Something changed today, something he wasn’t expecting. If I could get over myself long enough to look at this situation objectively, maybe I would see what it was.

Or I could just ask...

“What is it you’re not telling me?”

Another frustrated growl, this one more wounded than angry.

There is a small stretch of silence, followed by shuffling and then my body shifts as Colton climbs up onto the far end of the mattress. “Like I said back in Boston, knowing won’t make this easier.” Lifting up the covers, he scoots in next to me, far enough away that we’re not touching but close enough for me to feel the warmth of his shirtless body and smell the heat of the day along with a faint trace of cloves on his skin.

My lungs squeeze, and I close my eyes as tight as I can in a vain attempt to keep the ache at bay. “I thought you said you shouldn’t sleep up here?”

His head lands on the pillow. “What’s one more *shouldn’t* when the list is already a mile long? I just want to be close to you.” He mumbles that last part under his breath and then clears his throat. “I’m sorry about everything I said at the party. And about breaking my promise.”

Turning toward him, I let my eyes roam over the familiar angles of his moonlit face. “You look like you again. I should have known you’d start acting like you again, too.”

JOLTING AWAKE FROM A NIGHTMARE, I find Colton’s side of the mattress cold and empty.

For one panicked beat, I think he’s already left Eden. Then I find the note on my bedside table saying he’ll meet me at The Pack later for the phone call with Vic.

I burrow back into my blankets, unsure if I’m upset with myself for being so affected by the idea of Colton leaving, or if it’s the nightmare that has me feeling so out of sorts.

Dreaming of something other than the night Jack died would normally be a welcome gift... This was anything but.

My body still trembles from the image my unconscious brain conjured of an army marching on Eden with Charles Eastmann at its center.

No matter what our Jackals did to stop him, the army kept advancing. The thunderous boot steps of the faceless horde

shook the very foundation of the earth as they drew closer for a final battle.

Like something out of *Game of Thrones*, we met in an open field. Despite being outnumbered one hundred to one, we stood our ground. It was a long shot, but we had a plan—a trap we'd set that the opposing army was about to walk right into.

Then Eastmann's archers stepped forward, and with painstaking clarity I realized they could take out every Jackal without ever having to set foot near our trap. Danny was frantically trying to reorganize our defenses, calling for some of the Jackals to fall back and others to rearrange themselves, but it was the end and we all knew it.

My breath quickens all over again at the memory of one lone man breaking from the Jackal line to walk out into the middle of the open field.

Eastmann's row of bowmen shifted center. Their bowstrings snapped, and thousands of arrows originally meant for an army sailed in slow motion through the air straight for the man.

Fate sealed, he turned back around to face us, spreading his arms wide as if trying to draw as much fire as possible—and that's when I saw Colton's face.

I screamed for him to run, but it was too late. Every single arrow found its mark, piercing his flesh with bone-chilling accuracy, something inside of me dying a slow, painful death with each sharp *thunk*.

Then I woke up.

And now my skin feels prickly and raw, just like my nerves.

I know it wasn't real—I had a sword for God's sake, and I'm almost certain Charles Eastmann hasn't sprouted horns since the last time I saw him—but something about the dream felt like a message...or a warning.

Okay, it's official. I'm losing my mind.

Scrambling out of bed, my bare feet pad across the chilly wooden floor to my computer. I boot her up, only to have a notification pop up from Minhó. The same notice appears when I try my laptop.

Take the morning off.

-M

No matter what I do, I can't get past the notification. *Perfect.* Right when I need a distraction, I can't even throw myself into work. I glance down at my jackal tattoo, which has finally stopped being insanely itchy.

I guess I'm going for a long run. Danny said I can't risk being seen, but I'm tired of being cooped up in this house and I need to clear my head. I'll just have to be extra careful.

Struggling to get my long-sleeve compression shirt over my head, I stumble into the kitchen only to be blasted by an explosion of color and the sweet scent of a hundred blooming flowers.

Blue hyacinth, pink carnations, and bright-yellow sunflowers take up the entire counter while white tulips, pink roses, and garnet geraniums are scattered throughout the rest of the space. Each flower is more beautiful than the last, and every single surface of the kitchen and living room is covered with them.

My knees go weak as the meaning of blue hyacinth comes to me from a book I read back in high school. I think it's safe to assume all the flowers have similar symbolism: *I'm sorry.*

My eyes sting and my ribs grow tight, restricting me from taking a full breath.

I don't want these flowers, and I don't want an apology.

No matter how reluctant I am to admit it to myself, what I want is for Colton to stay.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

COLTON



THE DEMOLITION CREW loads the last of the rubble from my parents' place into the back of a dump truck. Sections of the warped roof crack and splinter as the tractor operator uses the scoop to pack it down, sending a plume of debris into the air and wood splinters into the surrounding grass. The bulldozer rolls in next, pulverizing any remaining evidence that a home once stood here.

The house was in ruins, well beyond any semblance of restoration, but it's still an odd sensation to be the one to order the last piece of my parents' memory wiped from the face of the earth.

Then again, the only thing I'm good at lately is tearing things down.

Breaking them.

My phone buzzes, and after dusting bits of yellow-orange pollen from my shirt, I shove my hands into my pocket to retrieve it. Surprise, surprise, it's another text from Frank. He's been losing his goddamn mind in the Dead Kings' group chat all morning. It's gotten so bad that a few of the guys who were ignoring him have now resorted to sending pictures of themselves flipping him off.

It'd be funny if Frank's immediate response hadn't been to order me to drag them back. He's lost control, and his desperation makes him even more dangerous.

I type out a message to Ashlynn.

Me: I thought you were handling this?

Ash: No one wants to come back. Dad's freaking out.

Her speech bubble pops up and disappears repeatedly before another text comes through.

Ash: I tried to convince him to let you go. I know what you're thinking, but please don't hurt him. Use what I gave you. I'm begging you.

Dammit. I should have killed Frank months ago—Eastmann, too. Rylee would have never touched me again after seeing the monster I really am, but it's not like there's any hope for me now anyway. Not after I leave again.

Smashing my face with my hand, I turn to walk over to my bike, only to spot Rylee running down the road. She's covered in sweat, her chest heaving with each long stride. She looks so lost in thought I'm not sure she notices me until she's skittering to a stop three feet away.

"Whoa," she says, squinting at where my parents' house used to stand. "You actually did it."

Remnants of pollen dust her sleeves and the tip of her nose, like she took the time to smell every flower I left her before setting off on her run. Reluctantly, I tear my eyes away and shrug. "Can't stay at Danny's forever. Figured it was time to build a place of my own."

Let me pretend like I'm not leaving for one more minute...

She opens her mouth like she's going to argue or fight but surprises me by going along with it. "Why would you ever stay with him when the alternative has a view like this?"

I can't help but smile. *I fucking love this woman.*

With a pollen-stained finger, she taps her chin thoughtfully. "Maybe I'll drop by later with a housewarming present. I've suddenly found myself with a bunch of flowers I don't know what to do with." She smiles and scans the field. "Last time we were here, it was too dark to see. Is all this yours?"

My weak smile slips away. Of all the questions she could've asked, she had to go with that one. "You're not going to like the answer."

"Go figure." Her shoulders curve forward. "Tell me anyway."

So much for keeping this light.

"You see the tree line over there?" I point off to our right, and she holds her hand up to her forehead to block out the morning sun. "Those trees are where my property ends. Eastmann owns everything else, all the way to the old mill. Charles Eastmann, as far as the fucking eye can see."

"That's all you see when you look at this? Not the beautiful meadow or the hills in the distance? Not what you could make of this place?" Rylee's lips pull into a deep frown. "You just see him."

"Yep." I pop the *p* for a dash of extra sarcasm, but when I glance down at her devastated expression, I wish I hadn't. "Fine, that's not all I see." I search the property for anything I can point out to wipe that awful pout from her beautiful face. "At the bottom of that far hill, just under the outcropping of rocks, there's a little green pond Jeremy and I used to fish at."

Her frown lessens, so I keep going. "Danny and Minh refused to come with us because Jeremy would always push them into the mud."

"He didn't push you in?"

"He tried." I snort at the memory of a waterlogged Jeremy emerging from the murky pond. "It never ended well for him."

She laughs, and the musical sound fills my chest with warmth and light. Desperate to hear it again, I search for something else to show her. "Do you see the crazy overgrown patch over there? That was my mom's garden."

"Really?" Her eyes brighten. "Do you have any fun memories of helping her?"

My forehead wrinkles in thought. "Just one. We woke up early to pull out our zucchini after it'd been infested with these

giant grubs. I wanted to keep a few as pets, but she said we couldn't risk it. Leaving any of them alive meant they could come back and kill the other plants. She made me burn them along with the zucchini in the firepit."

The flames from that fire dance across my memory, licking at my cheeks.

I close my eyes and try to see more, realizing too late the reason these pictures are still so vivid in my mind all these years later. "That was the last time I saw her. She died that afternoon." I snort and shake my head as more of the memory comes back to me. "I secretly kept one of the grubs. When no one came home that night, I thought she found out and I was being punished for not listening."

Rylee leans closer. "I'm so sorry." Her hand hovers over my arm before falling back to her side. "I never asked, how did you end up alone that day?"

Christ. Of all times to be talking about this shit.

I glance down at her grief-stricken expression and sigh.

"Like most of the other families in Eden, we were struggling." My nostrils flare. "Jack explained once how a lot of the married couples employed by East Mining Company worked opposite shifts, but when those overlapped, it wasn't uncommon for kids to be left on their own for an hour or two. He thinks that's what happened to me."

Rylee places her hand lightly on my arm, like she lost her internal battle not to, but I'm too far gone to stop talking now. "It was dark by the time I realized something was wrong." A bitter laugh bubbles from my chest. "Two weeks later, when the food in the pantry ran out, I picked that damn garden clean. I even ate the flowers. When those ran out, I went for a walk and Jack found me... Now that I think about it, Eastmann is in the garden, too."

I bring my fingers to my lips, whistling to get the demolition crew's attention before pointing to the patch of overgrown earth. The bulldozer operator maneuvers around,

and after one final confirmation from me, the garden is obliterated.

Rylee's eyes grow glossy as she turns away, like she's trying not to cry.

Fuck.

“Don't do that. Not when we both know I don't deserve your sympathy. I've made you cry enough.”

“I'm not crying,” she says, lying through her teeth as she dabs at her eyes.

“Yeah, you're not crying and I'm not the asshole who just took out his bad day on you.” I grab her bicep and spin her to face me. Using my thumbs, I wipe away the wetness under her eyes, letting my palms linger on her cheeks. “There. Are we done lying to each other?”

Closing her eyes, she nods. When her wet lashes crack back open, her throat bobs once and then she straightens her spine. “If we're done lying to each other, I have a few things I want to ask you.” After removing one of my hands, she flips it over to examine the marigold. “Why did you get this?” With her other hand she reaches up, using two fingers to trace the tiger on my neck. “And this?”

My flesh pebbles beneath her soft touch. “Probably for the same reason you got that lily on your arm.”

“Colton,” she says firmly, as if sensing the evasion.

“You know why.”

“Say it anyway.”

“I needed you with me.” It's not the full truth, but I can't risk saying anything that's going to make my leaving harder for her.

“Did you get them before or after you saw Mac and I in the alley?”

“Before.”

She nods, like she already knew. “Why did you have open spots when everything else on you was covered? Why wait so

long to fill them—why now?”

I drop my eyes down to where she’s still holding my hand, bracing myself for the moment she lets it go, but it doesn’t come. My brow grows heavy. “Why are you asking me this?”

Moisture pools in her lower lids as she gives a little shrug. “Who knows when I’ll ever get the chance to ask again?”

After adjusting my too-tight collar, I hold up the rose on the back of my opposite hand. “This was Danny’s first tattoo. By the time Jack saw it, we’d already added four more.” I lift my pant leg to show her the sword on my shin and the moth beneath my kneecap. I flex my neck and point to the jackal and then wiggle Jack’s and my brothers’ initials on my knuckles.

“For some reason, Jack specifically wanted to know what the rose meant, and when I didn’t have an answer”—I laugh at the memory of his stern lecture—“he looked at me and very seriously recommended I save some prominent spots for the things that would end up being important to me. So that’s what I did.”

A single tear rolls down her cheek, and I wipe it away while trying to fight back the emotion creeping into my voice. “I might have lost you, but that doesn’t mean you weren’t the best fucking thing to ever happen to me. It doesn’t mean you’re not still the most important part of my life.”

Her bottom lip quivers, and I want to beat my own face in for being the cause. This was exactly what I told myself *not* to do. I shouldn’t have come back to Eden. I should have resigned myself to a miserable life without her so she could finally be free from me and all the pain I’ve brought her.

Rylee’s grip on my hand tightens. “Tell me why you left. You had a reason and whatever it was, it was good enough for everyone else. Why can’t you tell me? Especially now, when you’re leaving again?” She tugs on my arm, emphasizing her desperation for answers and pulling on the frayed threads of my resolve.

Grinding my teeth, I contemplate what to say. She deserves the truth, but can I risk telling her right before she calls Vic? Rylee said last night she feels like everything is riding on her shoulders. Knowing her, she'd find a way to blame herself for Frank threatening her to secure my compliance.

My phone rings, and after seeing Frank's name flash across the screen, I chuck it as hard as I can into the road. It crashes to the ground, flipping and bouncing off rocks until finally sliding to a stop.

Why would she ask me that now? I've been home for nearly a month. She's seen me every single day—

My muscles tense and I glance down, taking in her closeness, the way she's pressed herself against my arm and that look in her eye that's dangerously close to hope.

Realization hits me like a right hook: The only reason Rylee would ask me why I left *now* was if she was finally ready to forgive me.

Bitter laughter bubbles up from my chest. The universe sure has one sadistic sense of humor.

No matter how badly I want her forgiveness, it's not worth it if the price is causing her more pain when I leave.

I reach out to cup her cheek. "This is who I am."

There is a flash of something fiery in Rylee's eyes and she draws back.

She continues moving away from me until she's in the middle of the road and something crunches beneath her sneaker. Pausing midstride, she swoops down to pick up my cell, briefly glancing at the screen before taking off at a full-on sprint back toward Jack's house.

I take one step in the direction of my bike to chase her down, but a whistle from the construction crew pauses my pursuit. Closing my eyes, I rub my forehead, and by the time I look at the road again, Rylee is nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

RYLEE



THE RUBBER TIRES of the Chevelle squeal and smoke as I slide into the parking lot of The Pack.

After taking the fastest shower of my life, I threw on a black dress, shoved my essentials into the soft cotton pockets, and sped over with Colton's voice ringing in my ears and his phone sitting in my lap.

This is who I am.

"Fucking Colton," I say to myself, slamming my car door and stomping to the bar. He really thought I wouldn't figure out why he was leaving again? I gave him the chance to come clean, but of course he had to be a martyr.

"Danny! Minhó!" I bellow, busting through the thick metal door of The Pack.

The bar is closed, so the smell of cigarettes is minimal and the music is off, but you'd think I'd interrupted a wedding by the way the Jackal leadership gawks at me from their regular booth.

I point to Colton's phone. "You know he thinks he's going back to Frank, right?"

"No electronics in the bar, Rylee," Minhó says mockingly.

"Not funny." Striding over, I toss Colton's phone onto the table with Frank's most recent messages already pulled up on the screen.

Frank: You have 48 hours to get back here or I'll make good on my word.

Frank: Don't make me do it, boy. You know I will.

“Everything on Colton’s phone was wiped.” I pause to toss a seething look in Minh’s direction because Colton sure as shit doesn’t know how to do that on his own. “Everything *except* his text threads from this morning. I don’t know exactly what that message is about, but it’s pretty clear Frank is blackmailing him into going back to the Dead Kings.”

My chest rises and falls as I struggle to control my rage. “What the hell does Frank have on the club, and why wouldn’t you have told me about this?” I’m practically screaming, but I’m so frustrated and furious that I don’t have enough energy to care about the octave of my voice.

No one at the table will meet my eye, everyone ducking down or shying away from me—like that could possibly protect them from my wrath.

“Out with it,” I demand, slamming my palms on the table when no one answers.

“Ry, just breathe for a second and calm down,” Minh says, adding fuel to the flame of my ire.

“No. Not until you give me some answers.”

Minh draws in a wide-eyed breath. “You have a call with Vic in,” he glances at the clock over the bar, “two and a half hours, this is literally the worst possible time to talk about this.”

Danny spreads his arms over the back of the booth. “She deserves to know. It was a bad call for Colt not to tell her. We’ve already given him three weeks’ worth of opportunities. Go ahead and explain, but be quick about it.”

“Fine. Give me a sec.” Minh scoots out of the booth, returning a minute later with a laptop from the back office. “You might want to sit.”

“I’m good.” I tap my fingers against my thigh before shoving my hand into my dress pocket to clutch my trinket, hoping it will keep me calm and grounded.

Minho begins by explaining Frank’s former role in the club, detailing the hundreds of documents and decades’ worth of knowledge he has access to before delving into how Frank is threatening to use that information against the Jackals.

My stomach sours as I struggle to comprehend how a former member of the club could do something like that. “But how is Colton involved? Why—”

Danny holds up a hand. “Let him finish.”

Minho’s eyes dart around the table. “Frank needed Colt for several reasons, namely his influence and ability to keep people in line, but we think his legal skills and usefulness in gaining entry to your father’s fighting ring were also high on the list. Colt hasn’t exactly been forthcoming with the details—as I’m sure you’re already aware. Basically, Frank’s been using the threat of outing the Jackals to control Colt however he sees fit.”

Waves of ice corkscrew into my spine, every hair on my body standing at attention. “For how long?”

Minho’s gaze flits over to Danny before returning to me. “Frank gave him the ultimatum the same night we arrived in Lockwood...last year.”

Guilt over every spiteful thought I’ve ever had about Colton worms its way through my stomach. Leaving the club, the Pit fights, kidnapping that rich guy, and all the other horrible shit Frank forced on him... Colton did it all to protect the club and his brothers, exactly like our oath dictates.

My grip on my trinket becomes painful as it digs into my palm. “Frank wouldn’t let him come back, would he?”

“Correct.” Danny’s jaw stiffens. “Colt couldn’t have come home. Not without damning all of us. He’s been protecting the club.”

My mind spins, the room tilting on its axis as my entire understanding of the past year is rewritten. *Holy shit.* My

knees wobble, and I take a seat next to Tate. “Why didn’t he tell us?”

Why didn’t he tell me?

“Colt’s always done whatever it took to protect those he cares about. Frank knew exactly how to weaponize his loyalty.” Danny’s ringed fingers thrum against the back of the booth. “We needed Frank’s vote to confirm me as president, and *he* needed an Original to propose his charter’s succession from the club. Frank used his vote as leverage and, just to make sure Colt didn’t get any fancy ideas, he also... On second thought, you should see this for yourself. Minho, can you show her?”

A bead of cold sweat drips down my neck when Minho slides over his opened laptop. “That’s a backup copy of Colt’s phone from before I wiped it. Bring up the text and click on the video file in the messages from Frank.”

Colton’s home screen, a picture of me sleeping on his chest, stares at me from the computer. My long hair is fanned out around me, my freckles on prominent display from a summer spent in the sun. Even in sleep I have a smile on my face. I look peaceful and happy. It’s only been a year, but I barely recognize myself.

I’m about to bring up the text thread when it dawns on me that there must be a pretty significant reason Minho wiped Colton’s phone and why he felt the need to back up the files. It also occurs to me that I’m done being left in the dark.

As quickly and calmly as I can, I copy the file and send it to myself. Tate watches me from the corner of his eye but doesn’t say anything—though I swear I see his lips tug up on one side.

With that out of the way, I pull up the text thread right as the front door to The Pack swings open and then closes. Even if I couldn’t smell the faint hint of sunshine and cloves riding on the early autumn air he brought inside with him, the crushing tug on my ribs and the shiver running down my spine would be enough to tell me who just walked in.

I want to run over to Colton and bang my fists against his chest. I want to shake him and scream at him for the choices he's made. But I also want to hold him and slide my fingers through his hair. To apologize for not giving him the benefit of the doubt, and not putting it together when he told me he was doing all this for the right reasons back in Boston.

Boot steps approach the table, and even though my chest is caving in, I still don't turn. "I need to watch this before I talk to you."

"Rylee." Colton's voice cracks.

"No," I say, pressing Play.

The video must have been longer at some point, but the portion Frank sent to Colton is only five minutes. I watch every second of it with rapt horror.

While I'd never claim to know anything about what sort of evidence is admissible in court, I'd bet my life the explicit conversation recounting how I killed Logan and Knott, followed by what was done with Logan's body and car, is more than enough to convict me ten times over.

Frank must've had the camera hidden in his clothes because the footage bounces as he walks out of the meeting. The boisterous sounds of a busy party echo in the video, and then I catch the tiniest glimpse of a petite blonde scurrying away from a blurry shot of Colton.

"He wants nothing to do with the other girls, and he's already asking questions," she whispers to Frank.

"I'll handle it."

Frank leads Colton outside, and I see firsthand how he leveraged his vote over Danny's presidency and manipulated Colton to get what he wanted.

My fingernails dig into the booth, fighting the sudden urge to hit something.

When there are only thirty seconds left of the clip, the table around me goes still, the first time they've shown any outward sign of discomfort while watching with me.

A knot forms in my stomach as I stare at the image of Colton's shadowed face on the screen.

"If you refuse my proposal," Frank says confidently, like a man who already knows he's won, *"or betray me in any way once you agree, I'll tell Charles Eastmann who killed his son and show him exactly where to find that little girlfriend of yours."*

The video goes black, and I take a shuddering breath.

"Rylee..." Colton's strained voice is closer now, drenched in the same devastation as his expression in that video.

"You were protecting *me*..." My words are barely audible as I struggle to corral the stampede of emotions coursing through me.

"They shouldn't have shown you that."

"You're right." My damp hair bounces when I shake my head. *"You* should have. And *you* should have been the one to tell me."

"If I had, you never would've let me go. You and the club would have tried to find me a way out of it. Frank would've ratted you out, and the second you were in police custody Eastmann would've had you questioned and then killed. I had to do it. I had to protect you and my brothers."

I can't exactly fault him for that line of logic. None of us would have let Colton do this on his own, and if he hadn't... where would we be now?

I glance at Danny and Minho, and then at Lee, Nolan, and Tate, finding my own feelings reflected back at me. However flawed Colton's methods might have been, his reasoning is undeniable.

He broke our hearts to save our lives.

I rise from the booth, still not turning. "You have to be the stupidest, most masochistic, stubborn-ass man on the entire planet."

Danny and the rest of the table flinch with each word, and when I finally turn to face Colton, his eyes are hooded, his

posture slumped.

“How dare you not trust us—trust *me!*” My voice cracks. “You don’t just get to make these decisions on your own, and you definitely don’t get to sacrifice yourself.”

I mean to lower my tone, but the exact opposite happens as I choke out my confession. “It felt like I was dying without you.” I throw my hand in the direction of the men at my side. “We all felt like that!”

“I was protecting you,” he growls, before more softly saying, “This is the only thing I’m good at. If I can’t keep you or the club safe, then what use am I? *This* is how I earn my place. *This* is how I pay back Jack for taking me in.”

That can’t be what he really thinks?

“How do you not see how flawed that logic is? We don’t love you because of what you do for us, we love you for who you are, you absolute moron! Can’t you see that?”

He looks at Minho, who nods, and then, one by one, everyone at the table does the same.

“She’s right,” Danny says. “Brother, you don’t need to earn anything. Not with us.” Minho and the others echo his statement.

Colton’s hands rise to his sides, palms facing upward. “I had to keep you all *safe*. This was the only way I knew how to do that. This is who I am.”

Those blue-green eyes of his are so vulnerable and full of pain that I crack, my body trembling as every lie-filled barrier I built to convince myself I couldn’t love Colton again explodes into a thousand tiny pieces.

I know who Colton is. I’ve always known. It’s why I was so reluctant to believe he’d abandoned me. It’s why I’ve struggled so much to let him go...

A sob escapes my lips and then I run for him, launching myself into his arms and burying my face in his neck. *God, he smells good. Why does he always smell so damn good?* I lock my legs behind his back and breathe him in.

His arms wrap more firmly around my waist and ass, pulling me closer. “I’m so sorry,” he repeats over and over into my hair. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Never again,” I say against his skin before pressing my forehead to his. “You can’t make decisions like this on your own. You can’t shut me out.”

His hand slides up my spine into my hair. “If there was any other way, I would have found it. The only thing I wanted was to keep you safe and get back to you, but there was no way for me to do both.”

Burying my head against his neck, I hug him tighter in a desperate attempt to erase the scars that time and hurt built between us.

“I’m so freaking mad at you,” I whisper, clutching him tighter.

He moves an inch away so he can look into my eyes, but even that minuscule bit of distance feels like too much. “I’m going to kiss you now,” he says breathily. “And if you turn away from me again, so help me God—”

Lee claps his hands. “Alright, boys, that’s our cue.” He hastily ushers everyone out—or at least that’s what it sounds like he’s doing. I can’t tear my gaze away from Colton long enough to verify.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

RYLEE



COLTON'S MOUTH is so close to mine, every time we breathe our lips almost touch. A door shuts, and his grip on my ass tightens as he walks us over to a pool table.

Setting me on the edge, he places his hands on either side of my hips, boxing me in. We're eye level now, nose to nose, and the air around us is so thick, I could drown in it.

"I can't let Frank destroy everything I love," he says, pressing his forehead to mine. "I still have to leave. You understand that?"

You knew exactly what you were getting with Colt.

What if he leaves again?

Fly south with him.

Our noses brush against one another when I nod. "I understand."

His eyebrows lift the tiniest fraction as he searches my face, almost like he's looking for the lie or waiting for me to take it back. "You're okay with me leaving?"

I shrug one shoulder. "I'm coming with you, so yeah."

"You're *what*?" He pushes off the table, only taking a single step away from me before I yank him back by the shirt.

I lock my ankles around his waist for good measure. "I'm going with you."

"No." He closes his eyes, rapidly shaking his head.

Gently, I cup his stubbled cheeks, forcing him to still so I can bring his head down to my level. “This isn’t your choice, it’s mine.”

His eyes pop open, their swirling depths showcasing the raging war within. Before he can pull away again, I lean back, drawing him closer until his hands are once again on the emerald green felt of the pool table.

“Colton, listen to me when I say this: There is nothing you can do or say to stop me from going with you. I can’t do that again. I missed you every second of every day, even when I was trying my hardest to hate you.” I breathe against his parted lips. “Promise me you’ll never go somewhere I can’t follow again.”

He laughs, the beautiful melody rumbling deep inside my own chest. He tilts his head, running the tip of his nose up my jaw and kissing my neck. The sensation is exquisite, sending a thousand fluttering wings across the surface of my skin. His arm snakes around my waist, slamming my body flush with his.

“Okay, Tiger. Never again. Where you go, I go,” he says huskily, and then his lips are on mine.

The kiss is hungry and hard, desperate and urgent as every pass of his rough mouth over mine erases the cold ache in my chest, filling it with bright, warm light. The arm banded around my waist tightens at the same time his tongue dives into my mouth. Sparks erupt behind my eyes and fire sizzles across every surface of my skin, like my entire body is coming to life under Colton’s greedy reclaiming.

He nips at my lips and sucks on my tongue, our kiss so consuming I don’t think either one of us is breathing, but like it always is with him, it’s not enough. My fingers weave into his hair, drawing him closer and kissing him back with as much fervor. I shove my hands between us to go for his belt, but Colton grabs my wrists to stop me. For one panicked moment I think this is going to be a repeat of last night.

“My gun,” he says breathlessly, shifting away just far enough to extricate the weapon from his jeans.

My eyes trail the path of gleaming silver as he switches on the safety and slides it to the other end of the pool table. I don't initially realize my hand instinctually went to my pocket to clutch my trinket until Colton points it out.

His brow furrows. "Show me."

I think about hiding it from him, but there can't be secrets between us. Not anymore. Taking my hand from my dress, I unfurl my fingers and let him pick up the resin marigold he made for me. It's worn and dented, the once clear resin now opaque in some places from my constant touch, but the flower within is still visible.

Colton smirks, his dimple more pronounced than I've ever seen it before as he pockets the flower. "I knew you still loved me."

My heart thuds. "I never stopped."

He lunges for me, his lips crashing into mine at the same time his hands slide under my ass. Deepening the kiss, he picks me up off the pool table so my head is above his. I run my hands through his hair, sucking on his lower lip and drawing his breath into my lungs before ripping his shirt off over his head.

Heat pulses between my thighs at the sight of his bare chest, and I move to recapture his mouth, but he's already clamping down on my breast. I moan as his hot breath penetrates the thin fabric and again as he bites down.

When he releases me, the cloth over my nipple is wet and his pupils are blown. "You're not wearing a bra," he growls. And a second later I gasp as my back slams into the wall, sending pool sticks clattering to the ground around us. Colton uses his hips to pin me in place, leaving his hands free to push up my dress before removing it completely. Once it's off, he dives back in, and I grip the mounted cue rack above my head, holding on for dear life as he worships my peaked nipples—all the while grinding his pelvis against my soft center as he takes his sweet time nibbling and swirling his tongue around my swollen buds of flesh.

Coming up for air, he palms my heavy breasts. “So fucking beautiful,” he whispers, kissing me once more before letting me slide down the length of his body.

I reach for his belt buckle, fumbling for a second until figuring out the mechanism and unzipping him. Hunger takes over, and the next thing I know, his pants are shoved down and I’m gripping his cock with both hands, pumping until he’s half groaning, half growling at the friction.

His abdomen contracts, making his thick shaft even fuller and more mouthwatering, but when I lean over to taste him, he spins us, pushing me toward the pool table and shoving my underwear down around my ankles.

Cool air rushes between my slick thighs, and Colton takes a step forward, putting pressure on my upper back until I’m bent over, ass out and arms splayed across the felt.

My heart races at the feel of his erection pressed between my ass cheeks, the movement pushing my bare pussy against the cool shellacked wood and making my clit throb with need.

Colton leans forward, nipping at my ear. “I’ve thought about this every fucking day.”

He grips his cock and runs it over the sensitive flesh at the apex of my thighs, coating himself in my wetness. Then he drags a single finger down my spine, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. “The way your skin flushes when you’re close. That look on your face the second before you come.”

My body quivers.

Grabbing me by the back of the neck, he spins me to face him. “But I need to know you can forgive me. God knows I don’t deserve it, but I have to know it’s possible. Otherwise, I —”

“Colton.” I stare up into the depths of his soul. “I’ve already forgiven you.”

“Thank fuck, because this is it for me. *You* are it for me.” A deep hum emanates from his chest that vibrates low in my stomach. “Nothing ever comes between us again.”

“Never,” I agree.

“I mean it, Tiger. Absolutely *nothing*.” He drops his forehead to mine, sucking in a sharp hiss of air as he parts my lower lips with the crown of his cock.

My heart races, understanding stealing my breath as he nudges at my entrance, waiting for permission.

I don’t even have to think about it. I want *all* of this man. I want to experience everything life has to offer with him. When I close my eyes, the image of Colton crawling around on the floor surrounded by kids doesn’t feel like a dream, it feels like a future. *Our* future.

“*Nothing*,” I whisper, shifting my hips to coax him farther inside.

“I need you to be sure.” It sounds like a question, but he’s already hoisting me onto the edge of the table and spreading my knees.

“I’m sure,” I breathe.

Intent on drawing him closer for another kiss, I place my hand behind his neck, pausing when I realize there’s one more thing that needs to be said. My cheeks flush. “I’m not on birth control.”

Chest rumbling, he slides his hands from my waist to my flat stomach. “Fucking good,” he growls, leaning over to kiss and nip at the sensitive flesh behind my ear before returning to capture my mouth.

Breath heavy, I take his face in my hands. “I love you, Colton Archer. Now I need you to fuck me.”

“Fuck.” He pushes inside me with one powerful thrust and I have to dig my nails into his back to keep from screaming out in ecstasy. I’d forgotten how big he is, but the burn is exquisite, my entire body aflame with the delicious stretch.

Colton’s eyes flutter open and closed each time he pulls out, and inch by painstaking inch, slides back in. Stilling, he tilts his chin skyward, holding himself in that position as his forearms quake. “I want to be gentle, Tiger,” he says through

clenched teeth, “but you feel too fucking good. I don’t know if I can.”

“Then don’t.”

That’s all the permission he needs before drawing back and driving into me. I’ve never felt so whole in my entire life. I roll my hips, wrapping my arms around his neck while he rocks into me, pumping faster and faster until little bolts of euphoria shoot up my spine.

“So fucking perfect, like you were made for me,” he grunts through powerful thrusts, the pool table below us groaning in protest as it grates against the old wood floors.

Colton trembles, and he slows his movements, running his hands up the inside of my legs until his thumbs come to rest in those two little creases on either side of my pussy.

Breathing heavily, he watches his cock slide in and out of me, enraptured, like a priest before an altar. Then he stops moving altogether and grits his teeth. Thinking he wants me to take over, I try to buck my hips against him, but his grip on my thighs tightens, holding me in place.

“Are you okay?” I ask, reaching out to lift his chin.

His fingertips dig into my flesh. “More than okay. I’ve never... Not without... I don’t want to...” His cheeks flush pink, and my heart melts.

I capture his lips with mine, the heat between my legs building with each stroke of my lips and tongue over his.

“That’s not helping,” he growls, pumping once before pulling out. My core aches with the sudden loss of him, but not for long. Fire shoots up my spine as he grabs his slick shaft, sliding his thick head over my clit, rubbing faster and faster until I’m covered in sweat and begging for him to fuck me again.

Colton’s free hand threads up the base of my skull, curving me forward and drawing me closer so I can see his cock slowly push back inside of me. “I want you to watch how well you take me. So fucking tight. All fucking *mine*.”

Body trembling, I grip the edge of the pool table to steady myself, turned on out of my mind as I watch my pussy swallow his cock. He pulls halfway out and plunges back in, repeating the process while yanking on my hair to tilt my chin up. “I missed you so goddamn much,” he growls into my mouth, all the while thrusting inside of me like our lives depend on his movements.

He kisses me, and I am gone.

There is only this. Only him. Only us.

Removing his hand from my thigh, he wraps one of my arms around his shoulder and then uses his thumb to press on my clit, rubbing delicious circles in perfect time with his exploration of my mouth.

I moan, and his movements quicken.

“Oh fuck,” he says, grabbing onto my hips while hammering into my pussy. “Hold on.”

Heat floods my core at the desperate sound of Colton’s satisfied groans, my nails digging deeper into his back each time he slams inside of me until bright specks of light appear in my vision and my body quakes. The feel of his bare cock, knowing that there’s *nothing* between us, it’s too much. It feels too good. “I’m—so close.”

Colton growls and climbs up onto the pool table, laying me flat on my back and pressing deeper into me while pistoning his hips. I bring my knees up and spread my legs just a little farther apart, drawing him deeper until I’m impossibly full. His teeth scrape along my jaw. “That’s it, Tiger. Open for me. Take my fucking cock.” He keeps moving, grinding into my clit in a way that steals my breath.

Oh fuck.

My pussy flutters around his length, and he slows again, his hand in my hair sliding to the back of my neck so he can look me in the eye before burying himself to the hilt.

Resting his forehead on mine, he begins to pump again. “I would burn the world down to keep you safe,” he grunts, plowing into me with such passion I’m sure I’ll split in two.

I run my hands up his sweat slickened back, wrapping them around his neck and moaning incoherently as he drives us into the table.

His cock swells. "Tell me you love me," he pants against my ear. *Thrust.* "I need to hear you say it again." *Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.*

"I love you." My brain is so addled with pleasure, I don't know if the words come out fully formed or not.

Colton slams into me harder and I whimper, my stomach coiling tighter with each of his perfectly punishing strokes.

"I have never, *will never*, love anything as much as I love you," he says, and I shatter, exploding into a thousand fragments one second and burning up in a flash of white-hot heat the next. I cannot see anything but Colton. I cannot feel anything but the wildfire burning through my veins.

This is ecstasy.

Muscles still convulsing, Colton reclaims my mouth, fucking me through the most cataclysmic orgasm of my life. "Fuck, you feel incredible," he pants, wrapping an arm around my lower back and lifting my ass to tilt my pelvis so that he's hitting that delicious spot I never knew existed before him. I moan, and even though I'm still riding out the sparkling waves of pleasure from my first orgasm, my body begins to shake again as another one crests.

"Fuck." A groan rips from his throat. "That's it, Tiger. Milk my fucking cock."

Colton's movements become wild and jerky, my breasts bouncing with each of his erratic thrusts. My mouth opens in a silent scream, heat building and building until another orgasm rips through me with the force of an atomic bomb.

My pussy clamps down, drawing Colton into me, claiming him. With one last powerful thrust, he swells and spills inside me, both of us riding the wave of oblivion into the darkness without an ounce of reservation because from now on, wherever we go, we go together.

CHAPTER SIXTY

RYLEE



COLTON'S ARM is around me, his face nuzzled into my neck as he tells me over and over how much he missed me and whispers all the dirty things he's going to do to me...once he can walk again.

We've been wrapped up in each other for the better part of two hours, avoiding discussions that might remind us of the turbulent world raging outside our little bubble—like Colton having to go back to the Dead Kings, my impending phone call with Vic, and the practicality of if I'll actually be able to go with him based on what we find out.

Instead, we've been taking our time remembering the feel of one another's skin and, once we forced ourselves to put our clothes back on, enjoying the peace of relaxing in each other's arms.

Our escape from reality comes to an end all too soon when Danny and the others emerge from the back office, rejoining us at the booth.

They have to at least suspect what we were up to out here... I was so gone in lust, I never once thought about keeping my voice down.

God, I hope they didn't hear us...

Heat vines up my neck and blossoms over my cheeks as they fill in the empty spots around the table. I straighten, quickly smoothing down my hair and dress, but Colton makes no such move. He barely looks up to acknowledge them. Surprisingly, no one says anything about what we all know

just happened. No jabs, no jokes, no whistles, not even a raised eyebrow.

Danny taps his knuckles on the table like a judge calling the court to order. “Rylee, you ready for this call?” I nod and lean forward out of Colton’s arm. “Good, let’s go over some basic ground rules. Most of these go without saying, but it’s easy to become flustered when we’re under pressure. Try not to take it personally.”

“You don’t think I’m an idiot, got it.”

He gives me the tiniest answering smile. “Okay, here we go: Don’t disclose your location. Don’t admit to killing Logan. Avoid saying your name or anything that can be used to confirm your identity. We need to be cautious in case Vic is setting you up.” He jabs his thumb to his right. “Minho will record the conversation via Ghost Rider, but put the call on speaker so we can all hear. The controls on your phone still work, but place one finger on the table for Minho to mute you and drag your finger across your throat if you want him to end the call. Any questions?”

“Seems straightforward enough.” There’s only one thing that might present an issue. “If we want Vic to trust me, I need to be as honest as possible. Is that going to be a problem?”

Danny stares off into the distance like he’s considering his options. “We’ll default to your judgment, but check in with me if you’re unsure about something.”

My legs bounce under the table, and Colton presses his thigh into mine, the warmth soothing me enough to stop my fidgeting. “Is that it? No other instructions?”

Although I’m feeling nervous and jittery, Danny is the picture of nonchalance, which gives me pause. Does he really have this much faith in me, or is this for my benefit?

“That’s it,” he says. “Vic knows what Jeremy saw on that file. We need them to give us as detailed of a description as possible so we can make the same connections.”

Pursing my lips, I exhale and hand my phone to Minho. After plugging a little device into the charging port, he places

the phone back in front of me.

“Alright, good to go.” He hovers his hands over the table before throwing them into the air as if scalded, his face contorting into a grimace as he turns to look at Colton. “Wait, not *here*, right?” His eyes widen suggestively while the corners of his mouth sag into a frown. “Like, not on *this* table? I’m not going to put my hands in anything *sticky*, am I?”

Colton reaches over to push Minho’s face away with an open palm, and the table bursts into laughter. My cheeks flush and my head disappears into my neck.

So much for not commenting.

The shrill sound of my phone ringing silences their laughter, and I startle—like I wasn’t waiting for this exact thing to happen. Under the table, Colton places a steadying hand on my thigh, and a wave of calmness washes over me.

I shake out my hands before giving Minho the signal to answer.

“H-hello?” *Of course my damn voice cracks.*

Rustling.

“Why am I on speakerphone?” Vic’s voice is low and flat. Wary.

“Jeremy’s brother is on the call with me.” I probably should have run that one by Danny first, but it’s too late now.

“Where’s Jeremy and why didn’t he just tell you what I showed him?”

Vic doesn’t know...

I clear my throat, briefly glancing over to Colton for reassurance before answering. “Jeremy died a little over a year ago.”

Silence. Complete and utter silence.

Looking up, I try to gauge the mood of the table, but everyone is stone-faced, their eyes narrowed at the phone like Charles Eastmann himself might pop out from the screen at any second.

“How did he die?” A sliver of tightness laces Vic’s voice.

Shit. Okay, here we go. “Jeremy was shot on his way back from Eastmann Incorporated. He never made it home, and we didn’t have a way to read the thumb drive until recently.”

“Was it my father?”

“No,” I croak, my throat so dry I can barely swallow. “It was someone who blamed Jeremy’s dad for something your father did.”

Vic laughs dryly. “You say no, but it sounds like my father’s actions were the contributing factor. It’s always something with this family.” I can hear more rustling, like Vic is shaking their head. “Bottom line is you found the USB, you killed my brother and used his computer to access the audio file, and now you want to know what I showed Jeremy?”

Danny’s voice rings in my head: *don’t admit to killing Logan.* “I need to know what he saw.”

A sharp intake of breath sounds from Vic’s end of the line. “Well, what *I* need is proof that everything Jeremy told me about his people is true. I wouldn’t put it past my father to buy you off and set me up, so I need evidence you’re not playing me. If you can give me that, I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Shit.

Minho mutes the call. “I don’t like this. If they ask you to video chat, I’ll hang up.”

Lee unbuttons his suit coat and runs his hand through his hair. “What can we say that won’t leave a trail of breadcrumbs straight to our door? We have to tread carefully. There’s a chance Vic really did want to help Jeremy but has since been corrupted by their father and is now trying to entrap Rylee.”

Tate and Nolan nod their agreement, making me purse my lips.

I’ve already explained Vic’s motivations, but having seen the truth and hurt in the youngest Eastmann’s eyes makes it much easier for me to believe them than it is for the men

around me to. I can't blame either side for being cautious, but I need to convince them to trust one another.

“Guys, I understand where you're coming from, but none of you have spoken with Vic like I have. We'd be asking for the same thing if we were in their shoes.” My eyes momentarily land on the photo wall behind the bar and an idea hits me. “What if we send Vic a picture with Jeremy in it? Eastmann Incorporated has to have his image from his ID badge and employment file. If they haven't tracked him back here by now, a picture of him would be safe, right?”

Minho smiles. “Jer and I hacked into the Department of Defense and scrubbed his image from every database imaginable to prevent that from happening. But yeah, that's actually a good idea. Ask if that will work.”

Vic's voice interrupts our conversation. “I'd prefer to do this in person, but I can't imagine you'd agree to that. I'd also suggest a video conference”—everyone at the table freezes midaction—“but I can't prove I'm not recording you, so that's out of the question, too.”

The Jackals take a collective breath, and I reach out to unmute the phone. “What if I sent you a picture of Jeremy proving that I knew him? Would that work?”

Vic pauses to consider. “*Two* pictures. Each sent within the next two minutes, that way you don't have time to doctor what you send. Time starts now.”

Already anticipating my next move, Minho mutes the line, and Colton snatches my phone off the table, following me as I hightail it to the photo wall.

My eyes volley from frame to frame, looking for something suitable. When Colton catches up, he reaches over me, going straight for the memorial picture of Jeremy—the one where the sun makes it look like he has a halo around his head and the background has been blurred out. “Try this one, but don't show anything behind it—walls and wood floors can be traced regionally.”

I hold out the picture frame and snap the shot, using the crop feature to cut out the background, and hit Send.

Vic's reply is instantaneous. "Great picture, but doesn't prove the connection. Try again."

My stomach drops, and I whip back around, frantically scanning for an alternative.

Panic sets in as I realize that Jeremy is too young or standing in front of some sort of identifiable landmark in almost every single shot.

Out of everything on this wall, there's only one that might work. It's a picture of Jeremy and Colton standing by the Chevelle—the car I just so happened to have been driving around for the past year. Vic could easily make the connection, but it doesn't matter because I can't send it. Even if I covered Colton's face, all his tattoos are on prominent display, which means Vic might recognize him from the Pit fight, and I'd rather die than put him at risk.

Bile burns the lining of my throat. "None of these work. What do we do?"

Colton steps forward, his chest pressing against my back while his palms run up and down the length of my arms. I lean into him, and once my pulse slows, he turns toward the booth. "Can someone go grab the picture from Jeremy's old desk? Should be in the top drawer, the one with Holly in it."

Nolan takes off at a sprint, his shoulder slamming violently into the doorframe on his way to the back offices.

The pictures on the wall sway and rattle, but only one falls off its hook. *The one of Colton and Jeremy in front of the Chevelle.* Colton lunges, catching the frame centimeters before it shatters against the counter. He briefly scans the image, and hands it to me. "Send this one."

"I can't. Vic saw you at the Pit."

"What other option do we have? Send it."

"No," I say forcefully. With the first photo still clutched in my hand, I scan the bar for anything else we could use and

spot the Jackal flag on the wall by the pool tables.

NO ONE IS FREE WHILE OTHERS ARE OPPRESSED.

A lightbulb goes off in my head.

Strategically, I place Jeremy's memorial photo over the center so the Jackal is hidden but the words are still visible and snap the shot.

Vic responds as soon as I hit Send. "Yeah, that works. You're running out of time for that next one, though."

Nolan, slightly out of breath, appears back at the bar, slapping a picture frame on the countertop. "This one?"

Colton takes a peek. "Yep, that's it."

I go to snap the shot, hesitating over the button. It's not just a photo of Jeremy and my sister. It's a photo of all three of us.

The smell of burnt cake floods my senses as I squint for a better look. I've never actually seen this picture before, but I remember taking it so vividly I can still hear Jeremy and Holly's laughter. You can't see it in the picture, since I'm doubled over with my wild, unkempt hair obscuring my face, but there are tears streaming down my cheeks from laughing so hard.

Picking up the frame, I run my thumb across the glass.

It was my eighteenth birthday, and to say I was in a mood would be an understatement. The only reason I'd come out of my room at all was because Holly set off the smoke alarm while trying to bake. It was the first birthday without my mom, which meant I was of age and Holly and Jeremy would be leaving soon.

My sister had to trick me into getting dressed and insisted we take a picture before heading out to dinner. Jeremy, doting as ever, set the camera on a timer, but when he tried to run back, he'd eaten shit, falling flat on his face, barely standing up before the timer went off.

I remember that moment so powerfully because it was the first time I'd laughed in months. It was the first time I'd felt

like I might actually be okay one day—

“I used to stare at that picture and wonder what your face looked like,” Colton whispers against my temple.

Someone’s fingers snap in my face. When I look up, I find the Jackal leadership have vacated the booth and are now crowded around me at the bar. The urgency of the situation immediately comes back to me, and I take the photo, quickly cropping it and sending it off to Vic. “Does this one work?” I ask after unmuting myself.

“Yeah.” Long pause. “Small world, isn’t it? This is your sister? The one my father’s after? Which means—”

“Jeremy was my brother-in-law.”

Danny makes a speed-it-up motion with his pointer finger, but I shake my head, pinching my brows together as I wave him off. Vic might not be saying anything, but I can hear their wheels turning.

Another whole minute passes without a word.

I’m about to ask Minho if the line went dead when Vic finally responds. “You need to swear you won’t cut me out. I’ll explain what I showed Jeremy, but I want two things in return.”

My gut tightens. “Name your price.”

“Jeremy alluded that he could get another copy of the tape I showed him. If what I tell you leads you to finding it, I want a copy for myself on the USB Jeremy gave you. I also want a hand in ending my father’s reign of terror.”

My heart beats so fiercely I’m surprised Vic can’t hear it. “I won’t cut you out. I swear it.”

“And you’ll bring me a copy of what you find?”

For this one, I check in with Danny, who nods.

“Yes,” I breathe.

“Alright. If you’re not already secretly recording this, go ahead and start now because I’m only going to say it once.”

Colton grabs my hand, interlacing our fingers.

I scrunch my brows, almost pulling my hand back to prove that I'm fine, but a quick glance at his gritted teeth, followed by an even quicker look around the group, makes me pause.

I'm not the one who needs comforting, Colton is.

It's not me who's scared, it's them.

Twenty years in pursuit of justice and answers and the Jackals are finally close to achieving their goals... They must be terrified—and rightly so. After so many setbacks and disappointments this year, it's hard not to assume this won't turn out the same way.

Leaning my head on Colton's shoulder, I squeeze his hand. After setting the phone on the counter, I place my free palm over Danny's, who's been silently thrumming his rings on Cook's spare notepad.

He stills, looking at our linked hands before placing an arm over Minho's shoulder. That continues down the line, and in a few short seconds, all of us are touching in some way.

“We're ready.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

RYLEE



“I’M NOT the best storyteller, so bear with me,” Vic says. “As I explained to Jeremy, I have no idea how the video file made it past the cleanup sweep after your sister’s data breach, but I do know how it got there in the first place.

“About ten years ago, Eastmann Incorporated went paperless and everything was digitized. When I say everything, I mean *everything*. The company we hired loaded files into the system that should never have seen the light of day. Most of it was taken down, but a few of the unassuming pieces, like that video file, slipped through the cracks.

“The footage I showed Jeremy was originally taken by the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration as part of an investigation into a series of safety complaints at one of my father’s mines. From what I remember, the video starts off with two Mine Safety investigators conversing. Most of their team was already below ground, but these guys stayed above to outfit some of the miners with cameras for documenting portions of the mine that the government personnel weren’t permitted into.”

Vic pauses. “This is where it gets a little interesting, so pay attention,” they say, like I wasn’t already hanging on their every word.

“A miner in his early thirties walked into the frame, and the Mine Safety guys started outfitting him with a camera and mic rig. One of the government guys droned on and on about how durable the camera equipment was—crush resistant, fire resistant, waterproof up to a certain depth, the whole nine

yards. He talked so much the miner looked like he nodded off before abruptly announcing he needed to take a leak.

“The government guys warned him that the camera was recording and suggested he not look down unless he wanted their whole office to know what he was working with below the belt.” Vic chuckles. “Then the miner made a crude joke and walked off frame to relieve himself.

“The video went mostly quiet until two more men, dressed in black tailored suits, appeared out of nowhere. They talked with the Mine Safety workers for a second or two, asking how many people were down in the mine, how far they were into the investigation, and a few more questions along that line, then, without warning, they shot both workers in the head.”

Vic clears their throat. “I’m not sure how much detail you want here...”

I bite my lip. “Everything is important. As much detail as you can, please.”

Danny is squeezing my hand so tight I don’t have any blood left in my fingertips, but I grit my teeth and bear it as Vic continues.

“The men in black suits were well trained and well equipped for the task—expensive silencers, collecting their spent casings. They knew exactly what they were doing, which shouldn’t be surprising, considering they were Vipers.”

A chill creeps up my spine. “How could you possibly know that?”

“One had a viper tattoo on their inner wrist, and the other had your dad’s sigil on his cufflinks and *Viper* spelled out across his knuckles. There was no mistaking the markings, both of them passed right in front of the camera,” Vic says flatly, like they’re annoyed I’m concentrating on the wrong part of the story.

My mouth falls open, and I nearly stumble backward. “No. That’s not possible. Are you saying it was *Rick* who blew up the mine?”

Nausea sweeps through my stomach, threatening to spill from my mouth. How is Colton still touching me now that he knows it was *my* father who killed his parents?

Vic snorts. “Rick isn’t technically responsible, but judging by that response, I’m going to go out on a limb and assume you aren’t aware that my father has been contracting yours to do his dirty work for decades?”

“He *what?* I thought their business arrangement was new, for Sidewinders?”

“Not unless you think thirty years is new. Their partnership, if you want to call it that, has always been tumultuous, but most of the time the benefits outweighed the hassle of dealing with one another. Rick entered into the agreement back when he was young and trying to make a name for himself, not realizing it’d be permanent. He’s tried to get out of the deal on several occasions with no luck. My father even let it slip one time that he had your sister abducted to keep Rick in line after he refused a job.”

My hands clench and unclench with the need to hit something, but Colton and Danny’s grips are as firm as their silent refusal to release me.

Vic lets out a deep, humorless laugh. “That wasn’t the only time they’ve almost come to blows either. Your sister’s data breach nearly caused a war between them. The only way your dad was able to prove he wasn’t involved was by agreeing not to prevent my father from placing a price on her head and hunting her down.”

That son of a bitch.

According to Holly, it was Rick’s idea to send her inside Eastmann Incorporated in the first place. Which means my bastard father knowingly used and put his own daughter in danger just to get out from beneath Eastmann’s thumb.

Sensing my impending outburst, Minho quickly mutes the line. “We didn’t know the details about your father and Eastmann, and we definitely didn’t know the part about Holly. Like you, we were aware they had an association, but your dad

literally works with everyone... Even Jack worked with him on occasion. This is news to us, too, I swear.”

“This is beyond fucked up.” I almost say that I can’t believe it, but that’s not true.

I might not have known Rick and his Vipers had a hand in what happened here in Eden, but I knew he was a monster. He made it clear during our final conversation that he was willing to do anything, sacrifice anyone, to get ahead in life. I mean, he tossed aside his daughters, his wife, his second-in-command. Why shouldn’t I believe he’s been helping Eastmann do his dirty work?

“You still there?” Vic asks.

Minho unmutes the line for me.

“Yes. Please keep going.”

“The Vipers in the black suits argued over whether they should contact their boss or the person they were contracted to and decided to go with the man financing the job. The guy with the viper cufflinks made the call, informing whoever was on the line that the government investigators were already underground and then abruptly pulled the phone away from his ear like he was being screamed at.

“The Viper put the phone on speaker while the man on the other end of the line continued losing his shit. And that’s when my dear ol’ dad identified himself by name and ordered a status report on the demolition devices. The man stated everything was in place as requested, then my father ordered both of them to blow the mine.”

“I fucking knew it,” Colton sneers.

“Yeah, your brother said the same thing,” Vic replies, mistaking Colton for Danny. “I won’t burden you with the details of what that mine sounded like when the charges were detonated, or how the screams from the administration building still haunt my nightmares, but I will tell you that while those Vipers were dragging away the first government worker’s body, the miner who went to take a piss came back...”

Holy fuck. I've been so caught up in the other details and revelations I'd completely forgotten about the miner.

“The ground was shaking bad enough that the camera had fallen over by that point. Even so, the miner could clearly be seen checking for a pulse on the remaining victim. He was freaking out pretty bad, mumbling to himself, his head going back and forth from the body to the dust plume in the sky, so he didn't hear when the Vipers returned. They popped a couple shots off at him, but the ground was tremoring so violently they missed.

“The miner searched around for a place to run, but fire was literally shooting up from the cracks in the earth. Everywhere he looked was more dangerous than the last. The Vipers ran after him—”

Vic takes a deep breath and I find myself doing the same.

I don't know who told them they were a bad storyteller, but I can see exactly what they're describing—the image in my head is vivid enough that I have goose bumps.

“This next part is rough. The miner had to be a hundred or so feet from the camera, but even at that distance I'll never forget the expression on his face. Desperation. Acceptance. One last look of defiance. The miner glanced at the sky, his lips moving like he was murmuring something, and then he jumped into a massive fiery hole in the ground.”

I want Vic to say more. To describe the miner climbing out. To tell me he found an ax and got vengeance on my father's minions...

But what Vic says next has that gnawing pit opening wider inside my stomach.

“The Vipers waited to make sure the miner didn't climb back out. When he didn't, they went over to the Mine Safety investigators gear and shut off the cameras.”

Vic lets out a breath. “That's it. That's what I showed Jeremy. The company detected us poking around in the system and deleted the file while we were still watching. Then they

came for Jeremy. Luckily, I got him and the other guy out in time.”

My stomach hollows.

The recounting of what happened was gut-wrenchingly horrible, but without an actual recording of Eastmann admitting guilt, we still have absolutely nothing. I don’t know why I let myself get my hopes up again. How many hits can we take before we finally break?

I’m almost too nervous to look at the others, but I know I have to be strong for them.

Trying to gauge his mood, I peek up at Colton. My brow instantly creases at his expression. *Why is he smiling like a maniac?* Actually... They all are. Even Lee has all his pearly whites on prominent display.

“What am I missing?” I ask no one in particular. “The miner died. How can we possibly recover the footage?”

Colton leans down to speak directly in my ear. “He didn’t jump into some random pit, he jumped into an elevator shaft... and crawled out.”

Chills speckle the surface of my skin.

Cook.

“That’s what Jeremy said, too,” Vic says at hearing Colton. I can hear the grin in their voice. “If this guy survived like Jeremy claimed, then the footage survived, too.”

I shake my head. “Even if C—” *Shit. I almost used Cook’s name.* “Even if the miner has the footage, what could it possibly show? You said he was off peeing.”

I don’t mean to sound skeptical, but we can’t afford to get our hopes up if it’s going to pan out to nothing.

“He saw the whole thing.” Vic heaves a sigh. “I watched that clip four times in total, but it wasn’t until the third viewing that I noticed the miner hiding in the bushes. He walked into the background of the frame for a millisecond before the first gunshot went off and he dove into a bush. He

hid there for the remainder of the clip, but if you zoomed in, you could see his helmet camera aimed right at the action.”

My chest thuds. That would mean Cook not only saw what happened, but got the whole thing on video, including Eastmann giving the order to blow the mine. “This is incredible, thank you.”

“One more thing,” Vic sounds hesitant. “Eastmann Incorporated is holding a press conference to make an announcement tomorrow. It’s going to be a massive public event. Tons of lawmakers, wealthy businessmen, super PACs, anyone who’s anyone will be there in a bid to be let in on my father’s new venture. If you’re serious about exposing corruption the way Jeremy was and you can get your hands on the miner’s footage, that’s when you take him down.”

I inhale a sharp breath. “How?”

“The jumbotron is going to be hardwired, but if you get me a copy of the footage, I can play it during the conference. If I’m the one to publicly out my father, there’s a good chance I can maintain control of the company and right the wrongs he’s caused.”

Unease churns my stomach. Vic’s already maneuvering to take over... That’s not what this whole thing is really about, is it?

The Jackals and I exchange an uncomfortable glance, but it’s Colton who vocalizes our concern. “How can we trust you won’t be as bad as your father?”

“You can’t,” Vic says simply. “I could assure you of my intentions until I’m blue in the face, but only time will prove if you made the right decision.”

A heavy silence falls over the bar until Vic says, “Can you get the footage to me by tomorrow or not?”

It does sound like the perfect opportunity, but we haven’t even had time to confirm Cook still *has* the recording. I look to Danny to tell me what to say, but he just dips his chin.

“We’ll do our best,” I reply warily.

I have a strong hunch I already know the answer to my next question, but now is not the time to be caught off guard. We need absolute certainty. “What’s the announcement?”

“I’m not sure how closely you follow global energy trends, but with the developing world’s increased reliance on coal, there’s been renewed interest in mining. My father was determined to capitalize on the skyrocketing price of coal outside of the US markets. Took him a year to set everything up—bribing senators for land reappropriation, publishing falsified reports to make coal seem less attractive to investors—but he was able to snatch up a handful of new and old mines across the US. He’s finally ready to announce that he’ll be breaking ground on the first one next week. That poor damn town has no idea what’s coming for them.”

“What do you mean?” I rasp, voice trembling. “What’s coming for them?”

“The coal vein goes right under the whole town. He already owns most of the surrounding land, but he’s going to have to knock the entire place off the map once the actual mining starts. We can stop him, *if* you get me that footage.”

I’m too nauseated to speak, but Colton isn’t. “Do you know the name of the town?”

The sound of shuffling paper fills the line. “It’s right next to the mine. Eaton, Easton... I have the map here, let me check.”

“Eden,” I say, my dread-filled eyes locking on Colton’s.

“Yep, that’s it. Eden.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

RYLEE



EVERY TIME DANNY HITS A POTHOLE, the whole truck rattles like it's going to fall apart. I was warned the road to Cook's house would be bumpy, but I didn't fully understand what that meant until now.

I don't know what's worse, the strain in my biceps from keeping my hands braced on the roof or the dust from the dirt road filtering in through the air conditioning. Even with the old bandanna Colton tied around my nose and mouth, the grit has found a way into my nostrils and lungs.

"How much farther?" I ask through sputtering coughs.

"Less than a mile," Colton says. "It should even out any second now, just hang on." He has his shirt pulled up over his nose, his knuckles white from his grip on the oh-shit bar, his other hand pressed down on my thigh to keep me from flying through the windshield.

After another minute of being tossed about like ice inside a martini shaker, the truck finally crosses over onto even ground. My brain is all jumbly—and I think I cracked a tooth—but the lack of bouncing at least allows me to think again.

"What's the move here?" I ask, jabbing Danny in the ribs.

He startles, like he forgot I was sitting right next to him. "Lee is taking a team back to New York to scope out the press conference. Nolan and Tate are staying here to look into ways we can prevent East Mining Company from breaking ground."

"And the plan for Cook?"

“Alex and Minho are meeting us there. You and Alex have the best relationship with Cook, so I’m sending both of you in to convince him to hand over the recording.”

The question that’s been eating away at me for the past hour forces its way out of my lips. “What if the helmet camera footage didn’t survive the fire? Or what if Cook destroyed it?”

Colton and Danny exchange pointed eye contact, but it’s Colton who answers, “Nothing we can do if the fire got it, but if it survived, Cook still has it. He doesn’t get rid of anything.” He removes his hand from my thigh and points down the road. “See what I mean?”

I squint. “The gate? Or all the junk piled around it?”

“Both,” Danny says, pulling up next to an old washing machine with a solar-powered intercom system sticking out of it. He lowers his window and presses the faded-orange button. “Hey, Cook, it’s Danny. I brought Colt and Rylee by for a visit.”

There’s a strained buzzing and then the sheet-metal gate swings open on rusted hinges, revealing mountains of decaying relics. It looks more like a junkyard than someone’s home.

“This is where Cook lives?”

Colton and Danny exchange another significant glance.

I throw my hands in the air before crossing them. “Seriously, can you guys stop doing that?”

“Easy, Tiger.” Colton squeezes my inner thigh, a smirk tugging at his frustratingly beautiful mouth.

Shaking his head, Danny maneuvers the truck around a pile of tires. “I really do forget you weren’t there sometimes. It sounds crazy, but it feels like you’ve always been a part of this.” He blinks rapidly, whether to get the dust out of his eyes or rearrange his thoughts, I don’t know. “To answer your question, yes, this is Cook’s property. He used to have a place in town but retreated up here to his family’s hunting land after the collapse. His cabin is about a mile back from the gate.”

“You might have heard how the news reported no survivors? That’s because Cook, with his severe burn wounds and all, crawled out of the elevator shaft and lived up here for three whole years without anyone knowing he was still alive. If he’d gotten medical attention, those scars wouldn’t be nearly as bad, and he might still have use of his vocal cords.” Danny shakes his head. “It makes sense now why he didn’t. He must’ve been terrified of someone coming after him for what he saw.”

My heart aches for Cook. I can’t begin to imagine the pain he must have been in after those burns. And to go through that all on your own in this desolate place? The landscape is breathtaking, but after a certain point I’d imagine the quiet would have been haunting and lonely.

“How did he survive all by himself?”

“Cook is very self-sufficient. Like a lot of Appalachians, he comes from a long line of preppers.” Danny chuckles to himself. “If all your physical needs are met, your only real concern is keeping your mind busy. As you’ll see up ahead, Cook has no problem in that department.”

The truck veers left, and my eyes bug wide at the ornate metal archway spanning across the dirt road. “Are those—”

“Two horses made of car parts? Sure are.” Colton points to another sculpture, a massive bird of prey with its wings splayed wide—this one welded together with old, rusty pipes. “That’s the eagle Danny modeled the tattoo on my chest after,” Colton says proudly. I catch the slightest flush on Danny’s cheeks.

As we travel, hundreds of other sculptures appear, mostly animals, but all made of some sort of recycled material.

Colton continues pointing out his favorites, including one of a *very* busty mermaid with a tail made out of spatulas that look like real fish scales. “Eventually the whole town caught on that Cook was alive after he was spotted dumpster diving at the local scrap yard. After that, Jack used to bring us up here once a month to deliver supplies. He would spend hours trying to convince Cook to rejoin society, but he always refused.

Each visit when Jack inevitably gave up, Cook would take us on a tour, proudly showing off his new art pieces.”

Colton’s head drops as he laughs. “He never got upset when Danny and I climbed all over his artwork, and he always took the time to show Jeremy and Minho how the solar panels—or whatever other technical project he was tinkering with—worked. Then, at the end of the day, he’d feed us and send us on our way.”

I don’t know why the idea of Cook up here all alone bothers me so much, but I can’t stop imagining that moment when the boys left and the property grew silent again. “When did he start coming back to town?”

Danny takes this one. “He started working at Maggie’s ten or so years ago. Jeremy had already left for the military and the rest of us stopped coming with Jack as often, like the asshole teenagers we were. Cook once confessed to Lana that he was tired of cooking for one, and that he only came down so he could feed people again.”

A soft smile graces my lips. That sounds exactly like the man I know.

After a gentle right bend in the road around a large outcropping of sycamores, the junk piles dissipate and a tiny, albeit well-maintained, cabin comes into view. It’s set apart from the tree line, surrounded by raised garden beds organized neatly by seasonal plots positioned for optimal sunlight. Cook is outside, one hand on his hip, one hand waving to greet us.

I wave back, elated and relieved to see him healthy and smiling after hearing the awful details of him jumping into that flaming elevator shaft. The enthusiasm in my wave quickly dwindles as the magnitude of the conversation I am about to have with him sets in.

The truck slows to a stop, and Colton opens the door, grabbing my hand to help me slide out. “Alex still isn’t here. Does she have to go in by herself or can I go with her?”

Emotionally exhausted from the call with Vic, the thought of not having to do all the talking or bear the responsibility of

convincing Cook to hand over the footage he's kept hidden for twenty years is more exciting than it should be.

Danny mumbles something under his breath and then says, "I don't want Cook feeling overwhelmed or pressured. Alex will be here in a minute, Rylee will be fine on her own."

Colton pulls down the handkerchief covering my nose and mouth so that it's resting around my neck. Using the back of his sleeve, he wipes the dust from my face and kisses me between the eyebrows and on the tip of my nose. "I'm right outside if you need me. Remember, no matter what Cook says, he doesn't throw *anything* away."

"Got it." Despite my best effort to hide it, my nerves make my voice quiver.

I only take one step before I'm yanked backward by my hand and Colton's lips are on mine. Soft at first, then more passionate as I return the kiss, until finally he takes my lower lip into his mouth and bites down. I release a quiet moan, my mind clearing of everything except for the taste of him—minty with the faintest hint of dust from the road.

When he leans away, it takes all my willpower not to sigh aloud.

"Okay, now you can go," Colton says with a smirk, clearly aware of the effect he's had on me.

All nervousness melted away, I'm halfway to the cabin when Danny says to Colton, "I never thought I'd say this, but I think I liked it better when she was mad at you."

They both erupt into laughter, the playful sound lightening my footsteps. When I look up, Cook is staring at me with a knowing gleam in his eye.

I smile right back at him. "Yeah, yeah, we worked it out. No one likes a gloater."

He claps to show his approval and holds his hand out toward the door, pausing as his head juts back at Danny's truck in a silent question.

"Nope, just me. Alex should be here soon, though."

Cook lifts his shoulders and guides me inside.

AUTUMN ISN'T in full swing yet, but Cook has a small fire going in the wood-burning stove in the corner. It crackles and pops, filling the room with that light smoky aroma that reminds me of a cold winter's night.

On the floor next to the cast-iron stove lays a small box with used folded notepaper and crumbled labels I assume Cook uses for kindling.

A memory surfaces of him shoving used notepad paper back into his apron at The Pack, and then another one of him reluctantly allowing me to take out the expiring food from Maggie's Diner last summer. At the time, I thought it was chivalry, but now I wonder if he was planning to take the food home for himself so it wouldn't go to waste.

I search for more clues I might have missed about his habits, but the cabin itself is immaculate. Rough-sawn floors, walnut-paneled walls throughout, and beautiful exposed shelving with a single set of tableware displayed. Not a knickknack or keepsake in sight. Cook might have thousands of useless items piled up in his yard, but in here, he's a comfortable minimalist.

After pouring me a glass of water, we take seats at the kitchen table, and he whips out a notepad. Through the window, I can see Danny and Colton deep in conversation inside the truck.

Cook taps the table and then points to his notepad.

Trouble?

"Yes." I'm having difficulty meeting his eyes, and he must be picking up on that.

How bad?

Why didn't the boys come in?

I glance out the window again. Colton is gesturing angrily at his phone while Danny leans his head against the steering wheel.

Still no sign of Alex.

The call with Vic pushed thoughts of Frank from my mind, but the way Colton's looking at his cell tells me that was a mistake. Every minute I waste here is another minute for something to go wrong; another opportunity for someone to try to take Colton from me again.

I take both of Cook's scarred hands in mine. "There is no easy way to say this, but I know what really happened to you on the day the mine collapsed. Jeremy saw the footage."

Cook rips his hands away, like my touch is the flame that scarred him.

"I am so sorry that you had to witness those men being murdered right after losing all your friends." I reach for his hands again. "I hate that jumping into that burning elevator shaft was your best option for survival. The pain you must have experienced is unimaginable..."

Cook closes his eyes tightly, making the damaged skin near his temples taut and shiny.

I feel awful that I'm the one forcing him to relive these horrendous memories but we're out of time. "You asked me if the Jackals had a plan to stop the new mine. We finally do."

His eyes shoot open, and he leans forward.

I take a deep breath. "You have something in your possession that will prevent Charles Eastmann from ever hurting anyone again. I need you to give me the footage from the collapse." My bluntness makes me cringe, but what other choice do I have?

Cook grabs the notepad.

Don't have it anymore. Too risky.

Remembering what Colton said, I keep my face neutral. “That’s not true.”

Cook stands so abruptly the table jumps and his chair topples over.

He paces the floor, itching the tight skin on his arms and neck, and I imagine Jack sitting in my chair, trying to convince Cook to leave this place. Jack always had a way with words, but even *he* was unsuccessful in persuading Cook to do something much easier than what I’m asking of him now.

If I want to succeed, maybe I do that by saying nothing at all...

When Cook stops pacing, he faces me, like he’s waiting for me to continue attempting to talk him into it. I cross my legs and take small sips of my water.

Annoyed, he holds out his hands, as if to say *well, aren't you going to talk?*

My lips remain sealed.

He wiggles his scarred fingers in front of his mouth, which—if I remember correctly from last year—is the sign for *talk*.

Slowly, I shake my head. “There is nothing left to say. I know you still have it, and I already told you about the new mine. You know what’s at risk here. I’m not going to waste my breath trying to convince you when you’re the one who said you wanted to make a little noise. You do that by giving the Jackals the footage you recorded. That’s how you honor Jack’s memory.”

Cook returns to the table, slumping into his seat before reaching for the notepad.

You don't understand.

I scoot forward. “Then help me understand.”

Cook's eyes drop to the table, not in fear, I realize, but something else entirely. I stay still and silent while he shakily scrawls out another note.

I hid.

Like a coward.

Everyone will know.

My chest cracks. "You are not a coward, Charles Eastmann is. He's the one who put you in that situation, and he's the one who chose to kill hundreds of people instead of taking responsibility for his actions."

I scoot my chair closer to Cook's, ducking so he's forced to look me in the eye. "You might not have realized it at the time, but when those men made a phone call, Eastmann identified himself before ordering the demolition of the mine. All of that was recorded on your helmet camera. You were not a coward then, and you certainly aren't one now. But the bravest thing you can do is give me that footage so I can show the world what kind of man Eastmann really is—so we can expose him for what he did here and what he's done all over the world."

Cook's weathered face blanches. He stares at me for a long time, unsuccessfully attempting to blink away his tears.

Somewhere in the cabin a clock ticks, the sound inexplicably growing louder each second that Cook doesn't respond.

Jaw hardening, he nods once and reaches for the notepad to scrawl something down. Without showing me what he wrote, he slips the note into his pocket and motions for me to follow him outside.

I trail behind him, running every third step to keep up. Colton slips out of the truck when he sees us, but I can't look him in the eye. If I do, I know he'll see the excitement there,

and I don't want to get his hopes up. Not until I have the footage in hand and I know for sure it's usable.

I lose sight of Cook as he rounds the cabin, only breathing again once I spot him at the end of the stone path, slipping through the rustic door of a workshop that's twice as big as the house. Inside, shelving structures hold rows and rows of glass jars full of every type of nut, bolt, nail, and screw imaginable while others house every tool ever invented. There are shelves of preserved fruits and pickled vegetables, as well as hundreds of coffee cans and other types of strange containers holding who knows what. It's a library of self-sufficiency.

Cook strides right past all of it, stopping in front of a massive cabinet hidden behind the very last shelving unit in the very last row. Using his shoulder and body weight, he steadily pushes against the wood.

The cabinet—more of an armoire, really—is made of solid oak and has to weigh hundreds of pounds. When I offer to help, Cook waves me off. Three grunting pushes later, he steps to the side, revealing a small hidden hatch in the floor.

This is it.

I reach into my dress pocket for the resin marigold, realizing too late that Colton must still have it.

Please don't be another dead end...

My pulse pounds in my ears as Cook uses his foot to pop open the hatch. The lighting isn't great, so I have to lean over to see inside, but when I do, I nearly fall to my knees.

It's covered in dust, with more than a few scuffs and soot marks on the sides, but otherwise the mining helmet and attached camera look intact.

I want to jump up and down and scream in delight.

I turn toward Cook, ready to hug and thank him, but he's already facing me, a note clutched in his outstretched hand.

Unfurling the paper, I smile at its contents.

Fuck making noise.

Let's start a riot.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

COLTON



COOK'S FOOTAGE is worse than Vic described. So much fucking worse.

I've seen a lot of shit in my life, but watching the moment my parents' lives were snuffed out of existence is next-level fucked up.

Thankfully, Rylee had the foresight to take her resin marigold back and excuse herself from the bedroom before the two Vipers started shooting. At the time, I'd convinced myself that I needed to stay and see this, but now that the first screams from the admin building as it's swallowed up by the sinkhole have started pouring in through the speakers, I wish I'd left with her.

Sweat beads on my neck and temples. My eyes flit to the door. I should go check on her, but as one woman's shrill lament rings out louder than the others, my feet refuse to move.

Is that my mom screaming in agony? Or is she one of the quieter ones begging for help?

It's been so long since I've heard her voice that I can't tell.

Whoever the woman is, when the screaming finally stops, I shamefully find myself grateful that her suffering is over.

By the time the recording ends, my nails have fused with the back of the computer chair and it's taking all my self-control not to tear this room apart and punch a hole in every wall.

Minho doesn't look much better. Danny, on the other hand, is the picture of serenity as he picks up the phone to call Lee. "The footage is a go," he says smoothly. "It's better than we could have hoped for— Yes, all the evidence we'll ever need. Continue canvassing the Eastmann press conference and book us some rooms overlooking the area. Keep the crew as minimal as possible. Minho will copy the data onto the thumb drive for Vic, and we'll join you."

It's better than we could have hoped for?

I'd scoff at his assessment, but I'm thankful at least one of us was able to look at that footage objectively because that's sure as fuck not how I would have classified what we just witnessed.

Then again, I also never would have had Danny's foresight to send Lee and a team to New York before we even knew if Cook's footage was usable. Because of his leadership and Rylee's ability to accomplish whatever this damn club asks of her, it's finally starting to feel like we're a few steps ahead of our enemies.

Now, if only Danny could come up with something equally as impressive to get me out of Frank's new deadline so I don't miss the Eastmann takedown, maybe I could breathe easier.

I'd been so caught up in Rylee and the idea that we might finally get the evidence we needed to end Charles Eastmann that I put Frank on the back burner. Then the texts came flooding in while Rylee was with Cook, and the bottom line is, I'm out of time. I pushed my luck too hard and now he wants me back before midnight.

The crazy thing is, bringing down Eastmann at his own press conference gives me the perfect opportunity to wipe Frank off the face of the earth. Even if some of his remaining followers try to avenge his death, it won't matter because if my brothers are successful, there won't be anyone for them to rat Rylee out *to*. As far as the dirt he has on the Jackals, if he didn't share it with his own daughter, I doubt he shared it with any of the lower-level members of his club.

Danny still wants me to explore *any* other option, but my path forward is clear.

Tonight, Frank dies.

“I need to talk to you guys,” Minho announces, drawing me from my homicidal musings.

Too exhausted to stand any longer, I lower myself onto the corner of the bed. “Is this about why you and Alex didn’t show up to Cook’s until we were already halfway down the mountain? Rylee shouldn’t have had to do that on her own. She’s brand-fucking-new and you guys load her up with another task every ten seconds.”

Minho’s eyes narrow as he rears back. “First off, asshole, she’s not new. She was a Dove for a year, and without her we’d all have been fucked. Second, she’s a Jackal. This is what she signed up for and you’re going to need to deal with it. Third—” he tucks his thumbs into his worn suspenders. “Yeah. It *is* about why we were late, but you’re still an asshole.”

Danny’s phone goes off with a series of new message alerts. He takes his time reading them, and then types out a response before looking up. “Alex doesn’t want Minho to go to New York.”

Minho whirls on him. “How did you know that?”

“Rylee texted from the living room.” Danny holds up his phone.

I laugh and quickly try to bury it under a cough.

Minho glares at me anyway. “I should be able to do everything from here. I can queue up the video file I’m sending to the news stations and put it on a scheduled release. If I need to, I can also take over broadcasts so they’re forced to show the footage at the same time. Rylee will be with you in New York if anything urgent comes up.”

He spins the chair in a circle. When it comes to a stop, he plants his feet wide and hangs his head. “Alex has never asked me for anything. He took care of Eden while we were gone without a single word of complaint. He’s put up with so much

of my bullshit for so long, I don't think I can refuse him on this one. I can't go with you."

Danny considers the request while I lean back and wait for him to tear Minho a new one.

"That's fine," Danny says. "But I want long-range earpieces for everyone. We need an open line of communication between each other and you. Have that ready for us in the next few hours and I'm fine with you running the tech side of things remotely. Rylee is capable of taking point on this if need be, but I'm not even sure we'll need a hacker on site at all."

"Seriously?" Minho looks so relieved I'd swear he has tears in his eyes.

"Yeah, it's fine. Honestly, *I* don't even need to go. The only person that's absolutely essential is Rylee. Vic trusts her, she can handle the tech shit, and she always gets the job done. Hell, Lee thinks she should replace you as VP."

Danny winks and Minho belts out a laugh, the sound high-pitched and genuine.

"I'll just move aside and let her have it. That will probably be the next thing Alex asks me for anyway. He's already mentioned kids twice since I proposed. Which was, what, twenty-four hours ago? Might as well start prepping Rylee now."

Danny shakes his head with an amused chortle. "I don't think she needs any prepping. You know she emailed me a list of possible new Jackal projects to tackle? She included detailed spreadsheets for cost analyses and timelines, too."

"Oh no. What's on it?" Minho asks, still laughing.

Danny rolls his eyes while leaning back to rest against the wall. "It would be easier to tell you what *wasn't* on it. For starters, she wants to build a community college in Eden. Apparently, she also stole a file with a list of Viper clients before the raid on Sidewinders. It's all coded, but she thinks we can get some new high-profile targets off of it."

The sound of Minho's suspenders snapping fills the bedroom. "Perfect. Looks like she's coming for your job, too."

My gaze volleys between Danny and Minho. I know they're joking about the VP thing...but holy fuck. I didn't fully understand until this moment, but Rylee isn't just mine anymore. She belongs to my brothers and to the club, just like they belong to her. The faith they have in her proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Rylee being so deeply involved should terrify me, but the warmth spreading from my chest into my limbs makes it hard to feel anything but grateful. Grateful for her. Grateful for them. Grateful that if something happens to me while I take out Frank, at least she has a life here. She has a family that loves her and recognizes her value.

Which makes what I have to say next slightly easier to stomach. "There is something else we need to address. Frank expects me back tonight. I can't go to New York."

Footsteps sound in the hall as Rylee chooses that exact moment to return, casually leaning against the doorframe and crossing her arms. "I'm going with you."

"Tiger, you can't. They need you in New York." It's not that I want to be apart from her, but I hate the idea of her being there when I kill Frank. I don't know if I can stomach that look in her eye when she questions her choice to be with me. "You—"

She holds up a hand. "Danny and I have already discussed this. We can change and shower first, but you and I are leaving for Lockwood in an hour. You'll show your face to Frank, tell him you're hunting down runaway Dead Kings—or whatever you need to say to buy yourself more time—and then we're headed to New York. Together."

My head whips to Danny. "When the hell did you two have time to make this plan?"

Minho leans back in his chair. "We have a group chat that you're not on. That's what happens when you act like a lone

wolf and try to take on the weight of the world without your family for a whole damn year.”

“Shit.” Danny pushes off the wall as if startled. “That reminds me, I need to take care of your neck before you go.” My palm flies up to cover the tiger as he brushes past me on his way to the closet. “No, not that one,” he says. “The jackal that made it onto the national news when you kidnapped the rich guy.”

“You’re going to take his mark?” Rylee asks, stepping through the doorway to sit beside me. I place my hand on her thigh and squeeze, her warm skin against mine soothing in a way that’s difficult to describe, like that first sip of coffee in the morning—or the feeling when you’re camping and you’re the first one awake and the world is still and full of possibility. It makes me feel quiet and peaceful in ways I never knew possible before her and never could replicate without her.

My throat bobs as Danny emerges with his tattoo equipment in tow. “Of course not. Colt’s mark is on his back. The jackal on his throat is from before the club was officially formed, and I just need to alter it enough that it can’t be used to identify him.”

Mark or not, I hate the idea of losing my jackal almost as much as I hate the reminder of my role in what happened to Jeffrey Segretto. “If it protects the club, then let’s get this over with.”

WITH ONE HAND perched on the steering wheel, I flip down the visor of the Chevelle and examine my new tattoo.

I’ve been looking at this thing on and off for two hours, but I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to having a fucking wolf on my neck instead of a jackal, especially not one riddled with arrows. “Christ. I thought he’d forgiven me,” I mumble to myself before returning my eyes to the road.

Rylee's attention bounces between me and her phone. If I hadn't seen her diligently working while I drove, her silence would have made me think she was pissed at me again.

She leans over to slap my mirror closed. "What do you mean *forgiven you*? And can you please keep your eyes on the road? Just because I let you drive doesn't mean this is your car. I won't have you crashing her because you couldn't stop checking yourself out."

Let me drive? She'd ordered me into the driver's seat so she could continue coordinating New York with Lee and Danny.

Switching hands on the steering wheel, I bare my throat and point. "Look at it. Danny inked over my jackal with a dead wolf. Why else would he do that unless he was still pissed?" I place my hand on the back of her neck, gently squeezing and kneading her tense muscles. "A fucking *wolf*. I wish he'd just blacked the whole thing out instead."

Oncoming headlights illuminate Rylee's scrunched nose. "It's not just a wolf, it's *you*. Danny did that to remind you that you're not a shield. You don't need to take every bullet for this family. The lone wolf doesn't survive."

I take another quick look at it in the rearview mirror.

Well, I'll be damned.

She shrugs off my hand on her neck and pauses. "Danny thinks you're going to kill Frank."

My muscles go rigid and then relax when I realize she doesn't sound scared or disgusted. It's almost like she's trying to gauge my reaction to see if it's true. "That's why he agreed to let you come with me? I should have known."

He thinks she can stop me.

The problem is, Danny is smart, and Rylee being here is throwing a wrench in my plans. I haven't exactly figured out how I'm going to make this work.

She scoots closer, picking up my arm to place it back around her shoulders. "I was coming whether he wanted me to

or not. Where you go—”

“I go,” I finish for her, kissing her forehead because I can’t fucking help myself.

She looks up at me with doe eyes. “Full disclosure? I do have orders to stop you from doing something you can’t take back. Please, just tell Frank whatever he needs to hear to buy you more time, okay?”

“Sure.” I can’t hide the amusement in my voice, which earns me a soft elbow to the kidney. “Alright, ouch, damn. Fine, in and out. I’ll do my best, promise.”

Fuck. I exhale, hearing my mistake too late.

Why would I say that? I shouldn’t have made a promise I don’t know if I can keep, but the way she’s wrapping herself tighter around me reminds me that holding myself to that accidental promise might actually be worth it, especially if it keeps her happy.

Although, I am starting to realize the things that tend to make Rylee happy are *very* different from the things that keep her safe.

When we pass the first Lockwood sign, she tenses against me. “This is where you spent the last year?”

It’s dark, but you can still see the poorly illuminated smokestack from the factory in the distance and the panoramic vista of dismal industrial yards beyond. We’re only two and a half hours from Eden, but it might as well be a different world. “We popped into a few safe houses here and there, but yeah, this is where I spent most of it.”

I pull off the exit and Rylee scoots closer, neither of us speaking until the rundown concrete and yellow-brick exterior of the Dead Kings’ clubhouse comes into view. A single light illuminates twelve bikes outside, which means barely anyone has come back.

Frank is going to be livid.

Shutting off the engine, I run my fingers through Rylee’s hair. “I fucking hate it here.”

She shifts in my arms, lifting herself to kiss my neck, carefully avoiding the area with new ink. My eyes flutter closed at the feel of her soft lips trailing down my jaw, and then snap back open as she climbs into my lap to straddle me. Regardless of how awful this situation is, my cock still twitches when she settles on top of me. I run my hands up her thighs, letting my thumbs rest in the crease at the top where her leg gives way to hip and torso.

She wraps her arms around my shoulders, filling my lungs with that fresh floral scent of hers. “If you’re not back outside in twenty minutes, I’m coming in.”

Jaw hardening, I grab her chin, probably too roughly, and force her to meet my eye. “No. I don’t want you anywhere near Frank. If things go south, I *will* kill him. Stay in the car.”

When she nods, I smash my lips into hers, brutally memorizing the feel of her mouth and the taste of her before pulling away and sliding out from underneath her.

I already have one foot on the pavement when she tugs on the back pocket of my jeans. “Whatever you end up doing, as long as it’s for the right reasons, I’m with you.”

My throat works to swallow.

I don't deserve her.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

COLTON



IT'S dark inside the Dead Kings' clubhouse—the only light in the whole damn building emanating from the cracked door leading to the back room. Beer cans on the floor, wall safes open, even the damn pool table's been ripped apart. It looks like the place has been raided, but there are hushed voices coming from Frank's office.

The hair on my neck rises as I push through the door.

Frank barely spares me a glance. "It's about fucking time," he says, flipping the page he's reading. He looks drawn, ponytail unbraided, eyes red, even the cigarette between his lips clings on precariously, like it, too, wants to abandon him.

Except for the paper-filled box on his desk and a half-empty one on the floor, nearly every available surface of his office is covered in empty crates. Thanks to the roaring fireplace—which was the light source I saw coming in—it's also fucking sweltering in here.

The four Dead Kings in the room dip their chins in my direction. There's something off about them that I can't put my finger on...

Then it hits me, all these guys are new, brought in after the whole Jeffrey Segretto debacle... There's no one here from Frank's original crew.

Unease slithers up my spine. "Where's Ash, and why are all the lights off?"

"I'm right here." Ashlynn pushes the door farther open with her hip. She has a stack of hard drives in her hand that

she dumps straight into the fireplace. “That’s the last of it. Everything else is in the box on your desk,” she says it to her father, but she’s making eye contact with me and raising her brows, like I’m supposed to know what the fuck she’s talking about.

Frank hands her the stack of papers he just finished reviewing and grabs a new load. “Add those to the fire, sweetheart. Then you can explain what’s going on while I wrap this up.”

Ashlynn tosses the papers into the flames and, after making sure Frank’s not looking, adds three or four more she covertly takes from the half-empty box on the floor.

She rises to her feet and dusts off her hands. “Feds tapped the phones. Dad had to cut the power.” I take a step back, my immediate reaction being to get Rylee the hell out of here, but I stop when Ashlynn shakes her head. “No raid just yet.”

“Then what’s this all about?” I bring out my phone and activate Minho’s signal-disrupting app, just in case we’re being listened to.

“We’re preparing for the new mission,” Frank says from a cloud of smoke. “Getting rid of anything that implicates me and my boys while holding onto just enough evidence to keep the Jackals in line.”

“Where is everyone else?”

“This is all of us.” Ashlynn’s mouth pulls tight, like she’s going to be sick—

Movement behind Frank catches my eyes.

One of the Dead Kings, I think his name is Nick, is shuffling from foot to foot. When our eyes meet, he points to Frank, mimics shooting everyone in the room, then points out back. I lean to the left, catching a glimpse of glowing embers from what was once the bunkhouse.

Fuck.

Frank stacks the papers in his hand. “Loyalty is worth more than gold. Only needed a small crew anyway.” He hands

the stack to Ashlynn. “This one we’re keeping.”

She takes it, her wide eyes catching mine in a silent warning.

What the fuck did you let me walk into, Ash?

I force myself to look away from her. “What’s the new mission?”

Frank’s saccharine smile makes my gut roll. “You’re going to bring back all the deserters. The rest I’ll tell you on a need-to-know basis.”

Dammit. He’s presenting me with the perfect opportunity here to do what Rylee and Danny want. *Get in and get out.* No matter how much I want to kill him, I owe it to them to at least try. “Alright, I’ll start tonight. Who do you want me to go after first?”

Frank pauses, and my spine stiffens as he leisurely sets the documents aside to look at me. “You’ve never once said yes on my first ask, boy. Not once.”

Fuck.

“Where are the boys you left with, Colt?” His tone is level, his inflection expressionless, but there’s a false quality to it that makes me grateful I can see both his hands.

Angling my body to create a smaller target, I quickly scan the room, almost missing the pistol sitting on the chair by the fire until a surge of flame catches on the mother-of-pearl grip.

Good, he’s unarmed.

Now I just need to say whatever it takes to get out of here and back to Rylee. “I went off on my own. Shouldn’t be hard to track them down.”

He clicks his tongue. “Time and time again you’ve let me down, but you’ve never lied before. The only reason you’re still breathing is because of Ash, but what good is a henchman you can no longer control?” Frank rises from the desk, thankfully moving in the opposite direction of his gun. “Still, I promised her I wouldn’t kill you. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

Ashlynn's eyes drop to the floor. "Yes, Daddy."

Revulsion rolls through me. The worst part is, no matter how disappointing I find Ashlynn's actions, it's not her I'm disgusted with. It's me.

Has she really been going along with Frank's filth to protect me?

Is *this* what I looked like to Rylee and my brothers?

It's like she's holding up a mirror and my reflection looks much different than I imagined. "Ash, this has to end. We can't keep letting him control us like this."

Frank is across the room with his finger pressed into my chest in the blink of an eye. "Don't you dare try to turn my own daughter against me, boy. Do you think I don't know the poison you've spread among *my* crew? Promise or not, I will not let you corrupt my own flesh and blood."

Rage coils my hands into fists as I consider ten different ways to snap his finger...*and neck*.

"Don't, Colton. Please," Ashlynn rasps.

The front door to the club creaks open, followed by the crunch of a beer can and soft footsteps headed in our direction. My entire body freezes. There's no way it's already been twenty minutes, but sure enough, Rylee's petite frame is visible through the open door.

And, of course, Frank's already spotted her. "You brought me a gift?"

I act without thinking, slamming my fist into his gut and bringing the heel of my opposite hand straight up into his nose. Screaming, he folds, and I use his own momentum to send him careening to the ground.

Rylee's footsteps draw closer, her pace quickening right along with the tempo of my pulse. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* She's almost to the door.

My eyes drop to Frank on the floor. He's down and unarmed, but as he turns over to face me, that stupid smile is

still stuck on his disgusting mouth, and my rage crowds out all rational thought.

I want this to be over with once and for all. He needs to be bleeding out on the floor by the time Rylee makes it back here so he can never threaten her or my brothers ever again.

The things he made me do—things I can never take back...

He took a year of my life from me.

I shouldn't do this, but at this point, what's one more *shouldn't* on the list?

Dropping my knee onto his chest, I pound my fists into his face. Left, right, right, left, over and over again until there's so much blood in his mouth he finally stops smiling.

It's not enough.

He's still breathing.

Chest heaving, I use both hands to grip his skull and slam it against the floor. Once, twice, three times...

"Colt."

Click.

The sound of a gun being cocked echoes in the room, and I stop moving as the warm barrel of a mother-of-pearl pistol is pressed against the center of my forehead.

"Colt, get off him," Ashlynn orders.

With my hands in the air, I cautiously rise to my feet.

Ashlynn motions for me to move back and leans over. "Dad, get up. We're done here." She attempts to help Frank to his feet with her gun still trained on me.

He shakes her off. "No."

"Please," she begs, reaching for his arm.

"I said *no*," Frank hisses. "We're done when I say we're done. I've waited too long to do things my way. Now that I finally own the factory, I won't let one of Jack's boys ruin that for me. Not now."

Own the factory? What kind of crack has he been smoking?

A fresh floral scent assaults my senses.

“I would listen to your daughter if I were you, Frank,” Rylee says from the doorway.

Fuck.

“Rylee,” I growl, “go back to the car.”

I take one step right to position myself between her and Frank, but realize Ashlynn still has the gun pointed at me and that only puts Rylee in more danger.

Cornered, bloodlust still making me half feral, I hungrily rake my eyes up and down Rylee’s body, praying she brought something to defend herself with. But not only is she unarmed, she looks completely nonplussed by the fact Ashlynn has a gun aimed at my head. She leans against the doorframe, cool as a cucumber—the same way she was earlier at Danny’s.

My eyebrow perks up in confusion. She looks...bored.

I blink to see if that helps me make sense of it, but my second inspection results in the same conclusion. Rylee looks completely unfazed by all of this.

The floor creaks as Frank finally rises to his feet.

Dusting off his clothes, he spits a mess of blood at Rylee’s feet. “Check your tone with me, girl. I’m the one holding the nuke here.”

Rylee doesn’t move, but I catch the faintest tremor of her hand before she casually shoves it into her pocket. “Here’s the thing, Frank,” she says, “you might want to watch the video I just sent to your phone before you threaten me.”

What is she talking about?

Grinding his teeth, he does what she says. The sound of Ashlynn killing Jeffrey Segretto fills the office, and Frank’s face goes ghostly pale.

How the hell did Rylee get that video...

Frank gulps and then tries to compose himself. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Rylee shrugs.

This crazy woman of mine fucking *shrugs*.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong,” she says lazily. “Colton might not, but I definitely would. In fact, I already have. Took me less than an hour during our drive over to set up a failsafe that requires me to enter a password twice a day. If that doesn’t happen, the system sends the video of your daughter murdering Mr. Segretto to media outlets and law enforcement agencies across the US. I went the extra mile and included a list of your known safe houses, too, just to be thorough.”

Christ. Is that what she was doing on her phone the whole ride over?

I am in awe of her. Pissed she went over my head with this, but still in awe.

She’s also doing one hell of a job acting like she doesn’t feel an ounce of fear right now. I’d almost believe this little act of hers if it wasn’t for the subtle way her hand moves in her pocket, a sure sign she’s clutching the marigold.

Time for me to take over.

I turn toward the remaining Dead Kings, snapping my fingers to get the attention of the one currently standing in a puddle of his own piss. “Grab the rest of the paperwork and burn it.”

Nick, the one who warned me about Frank, springs into action, immediately dumping both boxes into the fire. I address my next question to him. “Is this the last of it?”

He nods vigorously. “The plan was to finish these last few boxes and set the clubhouse on fire. We would have been done by now, but he made us—”

Ashlynn coughs. “That’s all of it. Let these guys go and I’ll personally light this place up when you’re gone. You’ll never hear from me or Dad ever again. I swear.”

I look her straight in the eye. “You better mean that, Ash, because I’ll kill him if I ever see him again.”

Frank laughs, and Ashlynn shushes him. “I know you will,” she says.

“Go.” I jut my chin toward the door, and the four Dead Kings are gone so fast I barely see their blurs whiz by. I’ll have to track them down later to make sure no one talks, but that’s a problem for another day.

Heat flares into the room, the last of the documents going up in flames.

There is a flash of movement on my right, and Rylee shrieks as Frank grabs her by the neck, slamming her against the doorframe.

I draw my weapon, my entire life flashing before my eyes. “Get your fucking hands off her or so help me God I’ll blow your head off.” I cock the gun, biting the inside of my cheek so hard I taste blood. “I’d really like to avoid getting your brains all over her face, but I won’t ask again.”

Ignoring me, Frank presses down on her throat, making my insides curdle and scream. “You don’t know what you’ve done, girl,” he screams in her face.

Stepping forward, I push my gun into his temple. I’m curling my finger over the trigger when Rylee’s laugh stops me dead in my tracks.

“I’m okay,” she says, and all I can do is stare at her, blinking in disbelief. “I don’t think Frank here realizes a good hand necklace is my favorite kink.” She winks at me, and I nearly drop the gun.

Brow furrowed, Frank tilts his head to the side. “What the hell are you—”

Rylee slams her knee so viciously into his ball sack that Frank collapses into the fetal position. He withers in pain, sputtering for breath, but that doesn’t stop Rylee from getting right in his face. “Come after me and mine again and I’ll destroy everything you love, starting with your daughter.”

She spits on him and then grabs my hand to lead me back out through the door. I am so fucking flabbergasted—not to mention hard as fuck—that I follow without question.

Her footsteps slow halfway to the car, and I have to put my hand on her lower back to get her to keep going. By the time we reach the Chevy, several fires are burning inside the clubhouse.

A loud *pop* followed by glass shattering rings out into the night. Rylee barely has time to flinch before I press her against the car. Covering her with my body, I look over my shoulder, but there's no one following. "I think it's just the fire breaking the windows."

"O-okay," she says through chattering teeth.

Shit, I need to get her out of here.

As quickly as possible, I fish the keys out of her pocket and ease her into the Chevelle before peeling out of the lot.

The roof of the Dead Kings' clubhouse blazes to life, lighting up the black sky with an ocher glow by the time we're on the highway. I make a quick call to Minhó to divert emergency services if need be, and we speed off into the night.

"My hands are sh-shaking," she says, teeth continuing to chatter. "I'm n-not cold, though. I-I'm not s-scared either. I don't know what's h-happening."

I tuck her more firmly against my side and run my palm up and down her arm. "It's the adrenaline wearing off. It will fade the farther I get you away from Frank."

"O-okay."

Fuck. She sounds so small and helpless that it's tearing up my insides. I lean over and kiss her hairline. Then it hits me... She's seen the Jeffrey Segretto tape. What if this *is* fear... Fear of *me*?

I remove my arm from around her, and she balks, grabbing me and burrowing herself into my side. "I-I know what you're th-thinking and w-what you're trying t-to do. D-don't."

Shaking my head, I lower my speed as a police cruiser passes us on the other side of the highway. I don't speak until it disappears in the rearview mirror. "How can you possibly know what I'm thinking, Tiger?"

She lays her cheek flat against my chest. "You're thinking about the video I sent Frank. You're worried that I think differently of you now."

My collar suddenly feels too tight, the air too thick. "You saw what I did. You know what I'm capable of."

She pushes off my chest to look at me. "Colton, I've killed two people. But you're right, I did see what you did. I saw you try to save him after Ashlynn slipped with the knife. I saw the horror on your face when you realized what was happening."

I keep my eyes on the road. "You saw me kidnap and beat the shit out of him before that. He was terrified when he died, because of *me*. Tonight, you watched me almost kill Frank with my bare hands."

Rylee puts a warm, steady palm on my face. "You beat the shit out of Mac right in front of me. You were literally covered in blood spatter the first time we met. This sort of thing is kind of a given by now."

Her voice and hands no longer shake as she says it. And after placing a quick kiss on the side of my mouth, she shrinks back down to rest on my chest and yawns. "No more of that, okay? I'm too tired."

My hand instinctively weaves itself into her hair, and within a minute, her eyes start to flutter closed, her comfort and trust in me making something in my chest glow. "I'm not scared of any part of you, Colton Archer," she says sleepily. "I know what I signed up for, and I want it all."

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

RYLEE



NEW YORK IS DIRTY.

Even at night pollution-halos surround the streetlamps and distant high-rises. Every movie I've ever seen made New York out to be a magical place, full of possibility and hope. This is not magical. It's loud and chaotic and reeks of restlessness.

The street we're driving down is narrow and filth-lined, crowded with run-down apartments and rowhomes that likely cost an arm and a leg to live in.

We pass a man in a ridiculously expensive suit stepping over a houseless man bundled up inside a torn sleeping bag, and a sex worker in the middle of a job right across from a woman pushing a fluffy white dog inside of a trendy stroller.

A few minutes later, I spot a group of rats fighting over a dead pigeon outside of an art museum. On the next block, a bachelorette party is taking a slightly racy group selfie in front of a floral mural dedicated to child victims of human trafficking...

I let loose a puff of air.

Is this really how we were meant to live? Is *this* the pinnacle of human accomplishment and the new American dream?

I turn away from the window. "Have you been here before?"

Colton's thumb stops tracing mindless circles on my thigh. "Twice. Once for a deposition I was helping Lee with, and

another time for a Pit fight, but that was in a less affluent part of the city.”

My face pinches. “I don’t think I like it here.”

Colton’s fingers splay and contract on my leg before the corner of his mouth pulls up, my favorite dimple making an appearance like a ray of light in the dark. “Me neither, but we’ll be home soon enough.”

Colton resumes his absent-minded drawings on my thigh, right below my Jackal mark, and my body hums with a sense of inner peace.

There were times I thought the emptiness and ache of the past year was a sign that he and I never should have been together in the first place. But, despite what we’ve been through today, there is a bright glimmer of hope and belonging in my chest from just being near him that makes me realize the anguish was because we never should have been apart.

Colton’s phone goes off and his body stiffens.

I reach up and place my hand on the back of his neck. “Frank isn’t going to bother us anymore.”

He nods, but the corded muscles under my palm remain strained. “I’m throwing away my phone when we get back to Eden. If anyone needs me, they can text you.”

I bob my head and fight back a smile. “Sounds good to me.”

Colton empties his lungs, removing his hand from my leg to read the text. “It’s Lee. He wants us to meet up and switch out the Chevelle for something less conspicuous.”

Thirty minutes later, we’re rolling into the financial district in a charcoal-gray sedan. It’s like we’ve crossed into a different world. The streets are still dirty, but the sidewalks are wide and the planter boxes are full of greenery instead of garbage. Unlike where we just came from, everything here is so well illuminated you could almost forget it’s nearly 2 a.m. Then there is the hotel we pull into...

Colton and I barely have time to shrug on a set of sweatshirts before valets open our doors and take our bags from the trunk. On edge and unwilling to risk being recognized, I keep my head low as we head inside.

The gold-framed glass entrance doors are held open for us, and I inhale whatever hypoallergenic signature scent this fancy-ass hotel is pumping through the air conditioning. I lean closer to Colton, praying we make it upstairs without someone realizing there is a half-million dollar reward for information on my whereabouts.

Sensing my unease, Colton takes my hand while checking us in under the false names Lee provided. We keep our hoodies up in the elevator, and when the valet offers to unpack our bags, we politely decline.

The room, a suite more accurately, is immaculate. The beige carpet is decorated with a raised fleur-de-lis pattern that I'm almost afraid to walk on, while the walls are painted a deep shade of midnight blue and accented with gold sconces. There is a door off to the left that connects us to the other room Lee booked and another one leading to a lavish en suite.

The money we must have spent on the room makes me a little queasy, but the floor-to-ceiling windows across the entirety of the back wall make the reason Lee booked it all too clear.

As if in a trance, I make my way to the thick glass and catch my first real glimpse of Eastmann Incorporated Tower. It's a monstrosity, its black obsidian windows blocking out our view of the city.

Colton joins me, taking my hand in his as we stare out at the monument of greed.

Silhouetted in this window, hand in hand, I imagine the picture we paint is very similar to that last scene in the movie *Fight Club*—the one where Edward Norton looks down at Helena Bonham Carter and tells her, “Trust me. Everything is going to be fine,” right before the whole city blows up around them.

If I remember correctly, they accomplished their goal, but I'm pretty sure everyone died in the process...

Perfect, that's exactly what you want to be thinking about right now, Rylee.

Without having to communicate, Colton and I step forward. A horrible sinking sensation makes my knees wobble as he points down to where a large section of the sidewalk and part of a small park have been roped off for the press conference.

We're so high up I have to squint, but I can just make out a massive stage backed by an even bigger jumbotron with a dozen guards patrolling the area.

"I don't like this." Colton leans forward, his forehead meeting the glass. "We should leave the second after the thumb drive handoff."

I swing our clasped hands to get him to look at me but he doesn't move. "You don't want to see the look on Eastmann's face when his empire comes crumbling down?"

"Not enough to risk putting you in danger." He closes his eyes, rolling his forehead against the window. "I know this was Vic's stipulation for helping us, and I know you won't go back on your word, but is there any chance you'd let me deliver the thumb drive?"

I shake my head. "We wouldn't have this recording without Vic. I'm not going to give them a reason not to trust us now. It has to be me."

Colton's shoulders sag, his exhaustion warping the air around us. Feeling his fatigue as if it were my own, I let go of his hand to rub his back. "Why don't you hop in the shower and I'll join you in a minute?" I say it playfully, hoping to get a rise out of him, but after a quick kiss to my temple he just walks past me, and a minute later the shower turns on.

Wriggling my phone out from my tight pocket, I shoot off a text to Danny.

Me: We're here. Video worked on Frank. Evidence against the Jackals has been destroyed. Everything good on your end?

Danny: Glad to hear it. Just finished with the thumb drive. Headed your way in a few hours. We'll go over the plan in the AM.

I clutch the phone to my chest. Now, just one last text.

Me: Copy made. Handoff at noon okay?

Vic (Evil?) Eastmann: Yes. There is a coffee shop inside the hotel across from EI Tower. Put the USB in a cup, and when I spill my coffee onto the floor, feel free to be a Good Samaritan and come help me clean up. I have something you might find interesting. I'll keep it in a backpack at my feet. I take the cup, you take the bag.

Me: Got it.

After screenshotting Vic's reply and sending it to Danny, I toss my phone onto the bed and strip my clothes off on my way to join Colton in the shower. My stomach inexplicably twists into knots as my palm hovers on the handle.

Today has been such a wild ride. It's hard to imagine that yesterday I didn't know where Colton and I stood. Our time apart put me through the wringer, but I'm not the only one who's been hurting.

I take a deep breath and push inside the bathroom.

I can barely see Colton through the steam. He doesn't move when I step into the shower with him, and he doesn't stop me when I turn down the dial so it's no longer scalding his already pink flesh.

It's the first time I've seen him fully undressed in over a year, and my hands instantly ache with the need to reacquaint myself with every inch of his skin. I devour the sight of his sculpted body, just as beautiful as ever, the water streaming across his flesh bringing the ink to life. He is perfect, and although he has new scars, I know the worst of them are below the surface.

My heart thuds, and I wrap my arms around his muscular back. “Are you okay?”

He clasps my hands, holding them to his chest as the water gently peppers us. “I don’t know. That shit at Frank’s... It was way too close.” He leans forward, water streaming down his spine and between my breasts. “You were incredible, Tiger. But now we’re putting you right back into danger. This is... difficult for me,” he admits.

I’d been terrified at the Dead Kings’ clubhouse. The only reason I’d kept it together at all was because Colton’s life was on the line.

“It all worked out okay.” My lungs squeeze as I kiss the Jackal mark on his back. “It was nice to protect you for a change. I know I never said it, but thank you for keeping me safe this past year. Thank you for selflessly protecting the club and our family.”

Colton’s shuddering exhale vibrates my cheek and jaw. “You never have to thank me for that. No matter how awful it was, I’d live that whole damn nightmare all over again with a smile on my face if I knew it would lead me right back here, to you.”

I squeeze him tighter, trying to fuse our bodies and take away the pain so evident in his words.

His broad back expands under my lips as he inhales. “I’m tired, Tiger.”

I press my cheek more firmly against him, the weight of his words settling into my bones. “We’re almost home.”

Turning around, he takes my face into his hands. Water droplets cascade down his chest as he shakes his head. “I’m already home,” he says, before kissing me softly, every movement of his lips a song of gratitude and love. He pulls an inch away. “You are the only home I need. If I have you, that’s all that matters.”

He raises his knuckles to brush my jaw but pauses when he notices Frank’s blood still caked in the creases.

“Let me wash you?” I offer, and he closes his eyes and nods.

“Sit.” I guide him toward the bench seat in the corner, redirecting a few of the multiple shower heads onto him so he doesn’t get cold. Quickly, I wash myself before grabbing the shampoo and working the lather through his hair.

He sighs, the contented sound making my heart swell.

I wash his shoulders next, kneading and massaging as I go, reveling in the way his hard muscles feel in my hands. He must have at least partially bathed before I came in because everything except for the knuckles of his right hand is already free from the grime of the day, but that doesn’t stop me from doing it all over again.

Colton’s eyes remain closed throughout my gentle ministrations. He makes small grunts and groans of appreciation, letting me know he hasn’t fallen asleep as I work, but nothing quite like that first sound he made when I was washing his hair.

So, when I’m done scrubbing his body, I position myself between his knees, running my fingers over his scalp, massaging the same way I did earlier.

He hums in delight, the sound resonating in my chest before settling deep between my thighs.

When I start massaging the base of his scalp, Colton’s hands rise to rest on my hips, his blue-green eyes fluttering open.

I’m instantly lost in their depths.

Rivulets of water trail down my chin and neck, between my breasts and thighs like a soft caress, keeping me warm. I lean forward to touch my lips to his nose and then his mouth. He kisses me back, slow and unhurried, before letting his eyes drop to my chest, locking on the subtle way my breasts bounce while I continue working my hands through his hair.

Colton’s gaze darkens and his cock twitches, making heat and hunger stir low in my belly.

One of his rough hands on my waist slides across my skin to cup my breast, his thumb grazing back and forth over my nipple. "I'm not tired anymore," he says huskily.

I shiver, the deep timbre of his voice electrifying every nerve in my body.

He pulls me to him, setting his chin on my sternum so that he's looking up at me. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." He uses his calloused hand to push the hair away from my forehead. "Beautiful here," he says, applying light pressure to my temple. "And so incredibly beautiful here." His hand slides down my neck and across my collarbone before stopping over my rapidly beating heart.

"I love you," he whispers, the heat from his palm and the overwhelming look of adoration in his eyes healing the remaining fissures of my wounded heart. I kiss him once on the lips, and then the jaw, then in that little divot at the base of his throat before sinking to my knees.

Colton's hooded eyes are on mine, his body still except for the throbbing erection laying on his abs.

Not breaking eye contact, I kiss his stomach and wrap my palm around his thick cock. I squeeze, and he hisses in pleasure, thrusting into my hand before leaning back to rest his shoulders against the shower wall and spreading his knees wider.

Keeping eye contact, I run my hand up and down his shaft while kissing the inked skin of his lower abdomen. He shudders, closing his eyes, and that's when I bring my lips to the head of his cock. Heart racing, I lick his slit, the muscles in my inner thighs clenching at the delicious salty taste of him.

Using only my tongue, I trace the vein running under his ridge all the way down to his base and then back up again, swirling around the tip. Colton's eyes shoot open. "Fuck," he pants, and the sound of his quick breaths sends a heated rush of desire straight to my core.

He wants this so bad he's shaking. I wrap my mouth around his cock, taking as much of him as I can, using my

hands to work where my lips won't reach. He groans when I hollow my cheeks and bob my head, the ache between my thighs increasing with every stroke of my tongue as the water beats down on us.

“So goddamn beautiful,” Colton says, his hand rising to my jaw to massage my strained muscles. I relax under his warm touch, allowing his dick to slip deeper inside my mouth. His head falls back onto the tile, and he slides the hand on my jaw behind my head, pushing me farther down on him, like he can't help himself.

My lips and cheeks are stretched to their limit and I'm drooling all over myself, but the strained grunting noise he's making has the ache between my legs throbbing with need.

I want to take more of him, but I'm not even halfway down and already he's butting up against the back of my throat. I hum in frustration, and Colton's cock pulses on my tongue. “Oh, fuck,” he groans, inching out before thrusting in once more. I hum again, feeling powerful knowing I have this effect on him.

When he hits the back of my throat a third time, I cough and gag. Colton smirks, extricating himself before pulling me onto his lap. Using his thumb, he wipes the saliva from my chin, and kisses me deeply, sliding his hands lower to grip my ass. His fingers are dangerously close to my soft center, but not close enough.

“Are you done showering?” he asks.

I bite my lip and nod.

“Good.” After shutting the water off, he runs a soft towel over our bodies. I squeal when he picks me up and carries me out of the shower to the bedroom where he gently lays me down and crawls between my legs. A deep, satisfied rumble emanates from his chest when my thighs automatically part to make room for him.

His body against mine, he combs the hair from my face and kisses me on the neck and behind my ear before doing the same thing on the other side. “The moment we met,” he says,

“my entire reason for existing flipped on its axis.” He kisses one shoulder, and then the other. “You are so brave and fierce, Tiger. I could live a thousand lives and never deserve you.”

He kisses my stomach and a million butterfly wings dance across the surface of my skin.

“After tomorrow,” his kisses trail lower, “I’m taking you home and we’re going to stay in bed for a month.” His lips travel down my stomach to meet the soft mound of flesh above my pussy, my core tightening when his breath ghosts across my clit.

“Deal,” I pant, my fingers sliding into his hair to push him lower.

He chuckles darkly before dragging his tongue down my center, savoring me with long strokes. My back arches off the mattress each time he dips inside of me and I moan, rolling my hips against his face.

Colton’s lips and tongue are everywhere. One second he’s licking me from bottom to top, the next he’s sucking on my clit. My body is on fire. I am being eaten alive—devoured. I have never felt anything as good as his rough mouth against my pussy. That is, until he takes my ass into his hands and lifts me up to give himself a better angle. My legs shake as his tongue delves deeper before returning to circle my needy bundle of nerves.

Oh God.

I can’t think. I can’t breathe. The muscles in my stomach are wound so tight I think I might explode. Colton is literally making love to me with his mouth. Showing me just how much he missed me with every single stroke of his tongue.

“I’m gonna— I’m gonna come. Colt—”

I detonate, panting and convulsing against his face. He laps me up, and when my body stops shaking, he plants one final kiss at the crest of my thighs before grinning at me with a devilish smirk.

I grip his hair, pulling him upward until his arms are braced on either side of my head. Lips still glistening with my

arousal, his cock presses against my swollen center. He gently bucks his hips to slide across my opening, teasing but not entering.

He leans down, brushing his lips over mine. “You called me Colt,” he says, pushing inside of me with one swift motion and capturing my muffled cry with his mouth.

I arch my back, and he quickens the pace, every movement of his cock sending lightning firing up my spine. My pussy flutters again and he hooks an arm under my knee, tossing my leg over his shoulder before sliding deeper.

“Say it again. Say my name again.”

“No,” I pant through labored breaths.

He slows his thrusts, head tilting to the side. “Why the hell not?”

I grab his face in my hands, moaning with each movement of his hips. “Only your friends call you *Colt*.”

He slams into me, burying himself to the hilt with the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen. His blond hair, still damp from the shower, falls forward when he lifts up. “You’re right.” He pistons into me with shallow thrusts that have fireworks erupting across every surface of my skin. “And we were never meant to just be friends, were we, Tiger?”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

RYLEE



SOFT LIGHT FILTERS in through the window, the satin hotel sheets clinging to my naked body as I turn to face Colton. Tucked safely under his bicep, I gently run the pad of my finger across his brow, his nose, his Cupid's bow, noting the new frown lines at the corners of his mouth. I plant delicate kisses over all of them before carefully extracting myself from beneath his heavy arm.

Slipping on one of his clove-scented T-shirts, I make my way to the window. The world outside is gray, the early morning fog so thick Eastmann Incorporated Tower is barely visible. I know it's there, though, because I can still feel the danger thrumming in my blood.

Shivering, I remind myself that by the end of the day my sister, nephew, and all of Eden will be safe. *I will be safe.*

Theoretically.

Getting rid of Eastmann won't erase my arrest warrant, but when he's behind bars, there won't be anyone to push the police after me or plant additional evidence. I can hide out in Eden and use a false name for years while we figure out what to do, just like Holly did.

Strong arms and the scent of sunshine wrap around me, bringing with them a sense of calm as I lean into Colton's bare chest.

"I have something for you," he whispers against the crest of my ear.

I shiver *everywhere.*

I'd almost forgotten how sexy his morning voice is, all rough and textured with sleep. Pretty sure I know what that *something* is, I reach back between us, slightly surprised to find he's wearing sweats.

"No, not that." Colton's throaty laughter bounces against my back. "Don't move."

Curiosity quells my disappointment when he brings his arms over my head a moment later. "Lift your hair," he commands softly, and I do, catching a tiny glint of gold before a featherlight weight settles over my clavicle.

"This was my great-grandmother's," he says, clasping a delicate chain around my neck. "The demolition crew found it at my parents' house right as you ran off with my phone."

I grasp the pendant, examining the thin gold disk and the raised image within it. It's beautiful, but it takes me a second to connect the significance. "An arrow for Archer?"

"*Mm-hmm.*" Crouching down, Colton rests his chin on my shoulder, wrapping his arms around my waist. "My dad gave that to my mom on their third date. She tried to refuse it, but he told her she was going to be an Archer one day so she might as well get as much use out of his only family heirloom as possible."

A smile cracks over my lips. I'd always wondered where he got the stubborn side of his personality from—because it certainly wasn't Jack. An unexpected laugh bubbles out of me as I imagine Colton's mom's futile attempts to refuse this necklace—or trying to deny an Archer anything they have their mind set on.

"Christ, did I miss that sound," Colton says so softly I almost don't hear it.

I lean my head against his. "It's beautiful, thank you."

"It was always going to be yours." He kisses my shoulder and my neck, spreading chills up my spine. Then he drops his hand to the hem of my oversized shirt, his fingertips trailing across my flesh as he slides the fabric higher and higher up my thigh.

“You asked me once what I wanted out of life,” he says against my neck. “You asked me what I saw—”

A knock sounds from the adjoining room, followed by Danny’s voice. “Are you guys up? We need to go over the plan.”

I turn to face Colton. *Finish what you were saying*, I silently plead.

Danny knocks again. “Colt, she needs to be as prepared as possible.”

Colton’s eyes move across my features before he kisses my forehead and clears his throat. “We’ll be over in two minutes.”

Moment broken, Colton and I dress quickly and head over to the adjoining suite with a new heaviness in my stomach.

Except for an enormous conference table where the bed should be, the room is an exact replica of ours. Danny is seated at the head with Lee on his right, six coffees and a tablet between them. As we make our way over, two Jackals I’ve never seen before dip their chins in greeting, but otherwise make no move to leave their station by the door.

Colton doesn’t sit. Instead, he silently takes a position behind Danny’s shoulder, folding his arms neatly in front of him in the same way Mac always did behind my father.

I shake my head to clear the image and take the seat across from Lee, keeping my trembling hands tucked safely underneath my thighs.

Danny doesn’t look away from the tablet to acknowledge us, but he does reach for one of the steaming coffees and, without looking, holds it over his shoulder for Colton, who grabs the to-go mug and gulps it down greedily.

I lean forward. “What are we looking at?”

He slides over the tablet. “It’s the floor plan of the first level of the hotel. The coffee shop you are meeting Vic at is here”—he points—“and Lee has our Jackals stationed—”

“No, don’t tell her,” Lee interrupts. “It will be too tempting for her to try to identify them, and we don’t want to arouse

suspicion.” He looks up at me apologetically.

I wave him off. “It’s fine. Won’t I recognize them anyway, though?”

“Unlikely,” he answers. “These guys only show up to mandatory votes, otherwise we keep them off the radar for situations exactly like today. They are there to have eyes on security and get you out if the drop ends up being a setup. We’re ready for anything, though. I’ve got an interpreter, a medic, one of the guys even specializes in—”

Lee pauses when he notices me wringing my hands and exchanges an odd look with Colton. “This is all just precautionary, of course,” he says, clearing his throat. “If everything goes to plan, you’ll be in and out never having known they existed. *But* if things go south, do not go with anyone unless they say the phrase ‘*Miss Angela, your car has arrived.*’”

“Miss Angela, your car has arrived,” I repeat, picking at the hem of my shorts.

Danny taps his rings against the wood as he stares at me. “I think we got a bit ahead of ourselves. This should be relatively simple, but we still need to go over everything from the top.”

He reaches into a bag and places a small box onto the table before sliding a to-go mug in my direction. “The coffee cup in front of Rylee has the thumb drive in it. Rylee, you’ll take the elevator down exactly thirteen minutes before noon. Our guys have been in position all morning, so we should know ahead of time if Vic has any plants in place for a setup. Vic will spill their coffee, giving you an excuse to approach and make the handoff. After you have the bag, head for the spa and check in for your appointment on the fifth floor.”

“A spa appointment?”

“We need to make sure you’re not being followed.” Danny points to one of the guys by the door, who waves at me. “Trey over there will meet you at the reception desk and escort you through a back exit up to our room. The whole thing should

take under half an hour, and we'll be in constant communication through the earpieces Minho provided."

He slides the box of communication devices in my direction. "Any questions?"

"What do I do if someone recognizes me from the news?"

Danny points over to the closet. "You'll be in disguise. Brunette wig, colored contacts, and some non-flashy but high-end clothing to help you blend in as much as possible."

I glance at the wardrobe skeptically, hoping it's enough. "Where will all of you be?"

"We'll be here." Danny chews on his lower lip before turning around. "Brother, your tattoos are too recognizable. You'll draw too much attention and put her at risk."

The way Colton's jaw works makes me think he's about to either break his own teeth or break Danny's face. He does neither, instead turning his gaze on me. "Are *you* okay with this?"

"I am," I reply as confidently as possible.

"Then so am I."

Eyes wide, Danny quickly faces forward like he's trying to hide his surprised expression. "After the drop-off, there's not much for us to do, unless Minho reaches out that something went wrong on his end."

On the tablet, he pulls up some sort of spreadsheet with timelines and a list of major media outlets. "The press conference starts at 2:00 p.m. Minho has Cook's footage set to go to news stations at exactly 2:01 p.m. He'll be monitoring their responses. If it doesn't look like they're going to air it on their own, he'll push it out himself. The four of us will watch all of that unfold from up here and head back to Eden in the morning."

Danny reclines in his chair. "The idea is that the news breaks while Eastmann is trapped on that stage. If we can do that, then by the time he's ready to walk off, it should be straight into a set of handcuffs. Vic also has something

planned for the conference that we've not yet been made aware of, but we have their approval to move forward with this plan."

"Rylee," Danny says, pulling up a new screen on his tablet, "Minho coordinated these plans with Vic via text from your number. Make sure you scan through that conversation in case Vic references it during your meeting."

I dip my chin. "Will do."

"A million things could go wrong, but there are two in particular that need addressing. The first is a severe thunderstorm headed our way. The press conference should be long done by the time it rolls in, but weather is unpredictable. If it comes in early, the whole event could be canceled or moved. If that happens, we need to decide whether we uphold Vic's wishes to include them in the takedown. The second issue is when to send Cook's footage to law enforcement."

I lean forward. "What do you mean? I thought we were sending it at 2:01?"

"That's when we alert the media. Law enforcement is a different story. Too soon and we risk the agencies in Eastmann's pocket tipping him off. If that happens, he'll go into hiding or try to change the narrative by discrediting the footage before it's out. But, if we don't do it soon enough, the authorities won't make it to the press conference in time to arrest Eastmann—once again giving him the opportunity to go into hiding."

"Fuck," Colton says, launching everyone into a heated circular debate that makes my brain hurt.

Ten minutes later, when they're still no closer to a resolution, I slap the table to get their attention. "Have we called Andy for his input?"

"Andy, Nolan, and Tate are leading the effort to delay East Mining Company from breaking ground," Danny says with a shake of his head. "I don't want him distracted."

"Fucking *Andy*," Colton mutters under his breath.

I glare at him. “Okay, wise guy, what about your contact? The one who warned you about the raid on the Vipers?”

“Frank’s contact.”

I pause, considering. “What if we just don’t send it? The court of public opinion is going to hang Eastmann out to dry anyway. Who cares if he goes into hiding? Whether he’s arrested today or next year, he’ll lose his company and will never be able to hurt people again after this. Especially if Vic is in charge.”

Lee stands. “We’re still putting a lot of faith in the idea that Vic isn’t going to turn out exactly like their father.”

“We wouldn’t have the footage in the first place without them,” I reply with a sigh. By this point I am starting to sound like a broken record, but I still have to say it. “Jeremy trusted Vic, that’s good enough for me. Besides, we already know Eastmann has the local police in his pocket, why risk giving them any chance to mess with our plan?”

“She’s right,” Danny says, picking up the tablet and ending the debate. “It’s decided, no law enforcement notification. Either they’ll do the right thing after the footage airs or they weren’t going to in the first place. I’ll update Minh. Rylee, go get ready, and we’ll fit you for the earpiece.”

COLTON SMOOTHS out the sleeves of my silk blouse, doing a fairly decent job of pretending he’s okay with me meeting with Vic, but I don’t think he’s blinked once in the past hour and I can feel his restlessness.

“Ready?” he asks, hands running over my arms. I give him a tight nod, and he untucks a strand of dark-brown hair from behind my ear. “Your earpiece is well hidden, but keep your hair forward just in case. The wig is secure, so you can mess with it as much as you want to. How are the contacts?”

I blink a few times. “Weird, but fine. I keep wanting to touch my eyes.”

Danny walks up and hands me a pair of thin black-rimmed glasses.

“Thanks. I think I’m all set.” I take a step back from them to do one final mirror check and give myself room to breathe. The way Colton and Danny have been fussing over me for the past few hours has me so wound up I’m actually looking forward to meeting with Vic.

“Minho, can you hear me?” I ask into the ether.

“Sure can.” His voice vibrates through the earpiece.

“Can you tell these guys I’m fine and remind them that I’m just going downstairs?”

“Hey, shitheads—”

“We heard,” Danny says dryly. “Rylee, it’s time for you to head down.”

I find Colton’s eyes in the mirror. “Walk me to the door?” He nods, the tendons in his neck strained and his movements stiff as he follows.

Stopping in the doorway, I place my palms on his chest. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I know.” He hooks his finger under my chin, forcing my gaze to his. “In and out. Give Vic the drive, grab the bag, come back to me.”

“Yes, sir.” I steal a quick kiss, and a flash of Colton’s worried blue-green eyes is the last thing I see as I shut the door between us. The sight of his troubled expression has my stomach churning with unease as I hover in the hallway. I raise my fingers to the handle, ready to rip the door back open and give him one last reassuring kiss, but drop it back to my side when I remember my tight timeline.

Moving on autopilot, I enter the elevator and let my mind go blank. It isn’t until the doors open and the clamor of the lobby floods in around me that I realize my grip has almost pulverized the paper mug with the USB inside of it.

“That’s the coffee shop on your left,” Minho says in my ear.

I pull out my phone and pretend like I'm using the voice-to-text feature so I don't look like I'm talking to myself. "Can you see me through the hotel's security cameras or do our guys have body cams?"

"Hotel cameras. No sign of Vic yet, but we still have three minutes. Also, in case Danny or Colt didn't already say this, make sure you're a good distance from Vic when they knock over their coffee. The earpiece isn't waterproof, and the tiniest bit of moisture will fry the thing. Oh! And don't forget to fake drink out of your own cup every so often."

It's a good reminder. I go ahead and take a fake sip and find a seat on a plush bench with a direct view of the coffee shop.

Head moving on a slow and steady swivel, I scan the room. I'm doing my best to appear calm, but static electricity has the silk blouse sticking to my skin and these expensive-ass pants make me itchy every time I bounce my legs. Plus, it feels like there are a thousand eyes on me.

My earpiece vibrates. "Vic is crossing the street now. Act casual and try not to react at all when you see them."

I cross and uncross my legs, then cross them once more. *Act casual, he says.* That's like telling someone not to think of pink elephants. Of course I'm immediately doing the exact opposite, and now I'm acting as awkward as possible.

"Vic just entered the hotel," Minho says.

Spine stiffening, I listen to him narrate what's going on for me. "Looks like Vic ordered their coffee ahead of time. They grabbed a cup. Now they're sitting. They just placed a leather backpack at the foot of their chair. Hey, what do you think the chances are that there is a bomb in that bag?"

If I'd actually been drinking coffee, I'd have spit it all over myself. "Holy fuck, seriously? Not funny."

"Agreed, not funny," Danny chimes through the earpiece.

Minho snickers, and a healthy portion of my trepidation bleeds away.

I stand and take my first steps toward the coffee shop. Vic looks up, their eyes passing over me without a second glance.

I'm ten feet away.

If we're still using spilled coffee as the diversion, it needs to happen now.

I cough to draw attention to myself, and Vic does a double take before looking to the ceiling and then back at the table.

Is that some sort of signal? Or is Vic just trying to acknowledge me?

I'm four feet away when Minho shouts, "Wait!"

My blood freezes. "What is it?"

"Four guards are running over from Eastmann Incorporated."

My head snaps left when the doors nearest the coffee shop burst open. With no time to think, I lunge for the bag, only to be yanked back roughly by my arm.

"Miss Angela, right this way," the man holding my arms says through clenched teeth.

I stop struggling. "There's still time, let me do this," I plead, but when I look back at the table, Vic is already gone—and so is the bag.

No.

My stomach sinks. This was meant to be the easy part. What happens now that I didn't make the handoff?

Peppery aftershave assaults my nostrils at the same time the grip on my bicep tightens, tugging me away from the cafe.

My chest hitches. What did this guy say when he grabbed me? *Miss Angela, right this way?* That's not the right phrase... Is it?

The man continues to half pull, half drag me across the room. I dig my heels into the ground, but my stupid ballet flats have zero grip and I end up gliding across the marble floors with him.

“Miss Angela,” he hisses, tugging me through a crowd of guests trying to check in.

This is bad.

“Rylee, what’s happening? I lost your position.” Minho’s frantic keyboard clicks fill my ear.

I grunt while trying to pry the stranger’s fingers from my arm. “He said the wrong phrase. He’s not one of us.”

The man pauses, his grip loosening. “Shi—”

I drive my elbow into his kidney as hard as I can, exactly the way Mac taught me, and slam my free fist up into his nose. That second part isn’t exactly what I saw Colton do to Frank, but it’s close enough and just as effective.

The man releases me, his hands flying to his bleeding face while I take off at a sprint, not slowing until the revolving door forces me to, and even then only for a second.

The valets look at me like I’ve lost my mind as I barrel into one of them and stumble onto the sidewalk. Surrounded by the disorienting blare of car horns and the footsteps of hundreds of commuters scurrying about on their lunch break, I glance wildly around and run from the hotel.

Every face is unfamiliar, every glance my way more sinister than the last. My pulse is so loud I can barely hear the cars rumbling by, but their engines almost sound like someone calling my name. I keep moving, slowing to a brisk walk so as not to draw more attention to myself and occasionally looking over my shoulder to make sure I’m not being followed.

“Rylee!” Minho shouts so loud I nearly rip the earpiece out.

“What?”

“Fucking hell, I thought the earpiece went dead. Stop running, that was Mikey. He’s one of our guys, he just fucked up the phrase.”

Oh, thank God. Throwing my back against the nearest building, a hospital by the looks of it, I clutch the crushed

coffee cup to my chest and attempt to control my breathing. “I’m not being followed?”

“No. You’re fine. Vic, on the other hand... I have no idea what that was.”

“I still have the thumb drive.” My stomach turns sour. “But someone got the backpack.”

Minho laughs. “No, that was us too. Colton is about to open it.”

Thirty seconds go by.

Then another thirty as I impatiently wait to hear what’s inside. “Someone tell me what it is or I’m going to lose it.”

“Tiger,” Colton’s voice eases some of the tightness in my chest, “it’s amazing. Vic gave us a copy of everything Eastmann did to frame you for Logan’s murder. The planted DNA sample. Police payoffs. Judging by this transcript, I think there is a tape in here of Eastmann giving instructions that you were to be brought to him after your arrest. There is a bunch of other stuff we’ll have to look into, but this is more than enough to clear your name.”

Clear my name. It’s a funny phrase to use, considering I really did kill Logan, but it feels incredible just the same. Vic is giving me my freedom. Now I can finish school next semester and volunteer at the Life Skills Academy. Colton and I can go out to dinner, and Lana and I can grab drinks. I don’t have to hide anymore.

My throat clogs with emotion, and when I try to form words, I end up making a choking noise instead.

Minho interrupts my thoughts, likely preventing me from crying. “Hey, I know this isn’t the right time, but I just clipped the security footage of Rylee breaking Mikey’s nose. You guys want me to send it over now or wait until later? We have to play this at the next meeting.”

Lee, Danny, and Colton all lay into Minho at once, but I’m laughing too loud to hear what they say.

“Hold up,” Minho’s voice rings out through the chastisement. “Rylee just got a string of texts from Vic. Do you want me to summarize?”

I straighten against the wall. “Yes.”

“It’s not good,” Minho warns.

My heart pounds. “Did someone tip off Eastmann? Was it a setup?”

“No, worse,” Minho says. “The storm is arriving sooner than we originally thought. They moved up the press conference and needed Vic for the dry run. It starts in thirty minutes.”

My feet are moving before he finishes talking, the wind whipping through the coarse strands of my wig as I clutch the coffee cup. “Minho, can you wipe my phone of everything except Vic’s contact information?”

“Give me five seconds... Okay, done.”

“Rylee, what are you doing?” Colton’s voice is low and threatening.

I glance up to the hotel where I know he must be looking out the window. Above me, the sky is a deep gray, but in the distance black clouds are already rolling our way.

Forcefully, I tear my eyes from the window. “I’m getting Vic this damn footage like I said I would.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

RYLEE



I HAD to take the earpiece out.

Between Colton threatening to come down after me and Danny trying to pull the *I'm the president of this club* card, I couldn't think. Now that I have a plan and I'm safely tucked into an alcove at the bank across the street from the hospital and next door to the press conference, I slide it back into my ear.

"Minho, I'm doing this with or without your assistance. If you're going to help, I need you to mute the others for me."

"Done," he announces. "I can hear them and they can hear you, but the only person you can hear is me."

"Perfect. I need you to text Vic from my phone. Say this: *I have your coffee, but I lost my badge in the scuffle at the cafe. Can you meet me at the entrance? I'm afraid no one will believe I'm your new assistant and security won't let me in.*"

"Oh, that's good. I like it— No, *you* shut the fuck up," Minho snaps, but I don't think it was directed at me. "Okay, sent. And just so you know, what Colt is threatening to do to you right now is getting me all hot and bothered."

Despite the situation, a smile pulls at my cheeks. Minho has to be making these wisecracks for my benefit, and I couldn't be more grateful.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"No problem." He pauses. "I get what you're doing, but I still have to tell you it feels like an unnecessary risk. This is

something Colt would do.”

My heart skips a beat. “That might be the nicest compliment anyone’s ever given me.”

“That’s not how I meant it and you know it.”

I cast my eyes toward the hotel window, imagining I can see Colton and the others up there. “We can’t blame Vic for their father’s actions any more than we can blame me for Rick’s. I have to do this. Vic gave us the tools to bring down Eastmann and secure my freedom, a copy of the footage was the only thing they asked for in return. This is the right thing to do.”

My earpiece goes quiet.

“Jack would be proud of you. We all are.” Minho clears his throat and with much less emotion says, “Vic is headed toward the press entrance, get ready.”

I take a deep breath. “Okay, headed there now.”

Once in line, I bounce from foot to foot. Thankfully, the press personnel I’m surrounded by are in a similar state of agitation so I fit right in. The winding line is long, maybe thirty people deep, but moving steadily. Prior to being permitted entrance, each reporter, cameraman, and news anchor is being thoroughly searched—their bags, purses, even their drinks are opened and examined.

My hand shakes, the thumb drive rattling inside the empty cup.

The line moves forward a single foot, and while I wait for Vic to show up in time to save me from being searched, I distract myself by listening in on the conversations around me.

“They move up the conference by almost two hours, then threaten to sue us for improper coverage if we don’t show up on time? It’s ridiculous,” one of the reporters says.

“Don’t worry, even if we do make it in on time, they’ll threaten to sue for whatever we publish.”

“Don’t I fucking know it,” the first guy responds.

Another voice catches my attention: “That’s her, midway through the line, dark-brown hair, ugly glasses.”

My head snaps up as a security guard taps me on the shoulder. “Come with me.”

For some ungodly reason, I put one foot in front of the other and do what he says without question. I keep my eyes on the ground, but when I finally risk peeking up, six security guards are staring back at me.

I am so fucked.

“There you are,” a familiar dry voice admonishes me from my left. “Hurry up, I haven’t got all day. Is that my coffee?”

Vic, with their hair once again styled exactly like Logan’s, snatches the cup out of my hand. “Let’s go.”

We waltz right by the security guards into the conference area, not stopping until we’re past another checkpoint and inside a roped-off area being used as some sort of sound booth.

“I have to admit, I thought I’d seen the last of you. I take it the object banging around inside this cup is the footage from the miner?” They say, rattling the mug.

“It is.” I lift my gaze, taking in Vic’s all-white suit, navy dress shirt and tie, and the impressed grin they’re trying to hide. Even knowing how much the Eastmanns all look alike, Vic’s resemblance to Logan always manages to catch me off guard.

They are not like their father and brother, I remind myself.

Still, there is this tiny voice in the back of my head asking *what if they are?*

I clench my fists. “I’m trusting you to be better than your father.”

Vic opens the cup and pockets the thumb drive. “I could say the same thing to you, but why don’t you stick around and see for yourself? Now that I have the recording, it’s going to be one hell of a speech.”

I glance over my shoulder to the hotel. *Get in, get out.* “Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

Vic follows the direction of my gaze. “Suit yourself. Do you want to meet up later when it’s all said and done? There are a couple of nice bars in the area.”

I might be overthinking it, but they sound almost lonely—which is not a good enough reason for me to agree. “I don’t know if that’s such a great idea. I’m still wanted for murder.”

The corner of their mouth drops for a second before they recover. “Then I insist you stay for my speech. I’m up second. What do you say?”

The clouds overhead are now a purplish-gray, the static charge of the approaching storm lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. Guilt, or maybe compassion, sits heavy in my stomach, and against my better judgment, I give in. “Sure.”

Vic motions for the guards behind them to join us, and two men in aviators and baseball caps slung low on their foreheads step forward. “This is my new assistant,” Vic says. “Please guard her with your life.”

“Will do,” the men reply, taking up positions on either side of me. The guards are way too close for comfort, and I feel boxed in. I’m trying really hard not to overthink this and freak the fuck out, but any time I move a fraction of an inch, they move with me.

“Rylee, you need to get out of there,” Minho says quietly in my ear.

I can’t talk because it will draw their attention, but hopefully Minho has eyes on me. I tilt my head left and then right.

“You can’t answer because they’ll hear?”

I crane my neck to look up at the Eastmann Incorporated Tower, trying to signal *yes*.

Minho curses under his breath. “Do you see any path out? I’ve got a visual on you, but all my angles are a little wonky.”

I close my eyes.

“Shit. Hang tight. I’m going to start working on a plan to get you out. Dammit—”

Minho must mute himself because his voice abruptly cuts out for ten excruciating seconds before he returns with an explanation. “Colt’s losing his goddamn mind, and Danny’s trying to stop him from running out there.”

My stomach hardens. I don’t want Colton caught up in the middle of whatever the hell this is. Tentatively, I peek over to Vic. Something about this situation feels off, but nothing has *actually* happened yet. Maybe I just need to take a deep breath and chill out...

I glance around at my surroundings.

Despite the moved-up timeline, the first ten rows of reserved seating for distinguished guests are full. I recognize several of them from Sidewinders, and even more from our surveillance of Charles Eastmann. Senators, judges, congressmen and women, all of them corrupt in some way or another.

In other words, the who’s who of what’s wrong with our country.

Before I can come up with a viable escape plan, a petite redhead clutching a clipboard nearly twice her size pushes through the crowd, striding straight up to Vic. “Miss Eastmann, your father requests your presence on the stage. The conference will begin in two minutes.”

Vic huffs. “I’ve told you, please just call me Vic. Tell him I’ll be right there.”

The woman, whose badge reads Public Relations, narrows her gaze. “*Miss* Eastmann, your father was quite adamant that you come now. Please don’t make this more difficult than it needs to be.”

“Alright, fine.” Vic rolls their shoulders and winks at me. “See you on the other side.”

As soon as they are out of earshot, I turn to the closest guard. “Is there a bathroom nearby?”

The guard barely spares me a glance. “The press conference is about to start. Vic wouldn’t want you to miss anything.” I shift my weight onto my left hip and take a tiny step back, and the guard mirrors the movement.

Okay, so running isn’t an option.

Minho’s voice sounds in my ear. “I just trapped Colt in the elevator. He’s not thinking straight, and he was only going to make things worse or get himself killed. Please don’t think this means I am abandoning you.”

Relief allows me to take my first real breath in minutes. *At least Colton is safe.*

“As far as getting you out of this mess,” Minho says, “I think I have a plan, but I need to make sure Cook’s footage airs properly first. Can you—”

Minho keeps talking, but the applause from the crowd drowns him out as Satan himself, Charles Eastmann, walks onto the stage. Cameras flashing, he approaches the podium, and I grind my teeth when he raises his hand in greeting. On the jumbotron behind him, his massive image echoes his movements with a half-second delay.

His presence is so imposing I’d swear I can smell his nauseating aftershave. Not wanting to cater to his ego, I tell myself not to watch, but no matter how hard I try, I can’t tear my eyes away.

“Thank you all for coming,” his voice booms through the surrounding speakers. “I have quite a speech planned for you —”

My earpiece vibrates. “Done. I just pushed the footage out to media outlets. Confirmation of receipt from every single one. Looks like about 73 percent of the recipients have already opened the file and are currently viewing.”

A whooshing breath escapes my lips, catching the attention of the guard on my right, but I don’t care. It’s about damn time one thing went right for us.

Charles Eastmann’s cold laugh draws my eyes back to the stage at the same moment a distant roll of thunder bounces off

the nearby high-rises.

“Trust me when I say our announcement will change the American landscape and the future of this company,” Eastmann says. “Before we get to that, I’m going to briefly hand the stage to my daughter, Victoria. Please help me in congratulating her on her new promotion, which will help mold and prepare her to lead this company when I retire... forty years from now.” He winks, and the crowd responds with polite, rehearsed laughter.

All I can do is roll my eyes.

“Victoria, come on out here.” Eastmann holds out his hand, and Vic takes the stage, their smile a carbon copy of their father’s.

A dropping sensation assaults my insides. *Come on, Vic, please don’t be evil.*

“Thank you all for coming out,” Vic says, but unlike when Charles said it, their smile falls the second their father is off the stage.

The jumbotron camera zooms in on them. “While I’d like to say it’s an honor to be named the newest member of the executive team at Eastmann Incorporated and to finally be acknowledged by my father as a member of this family, it’s not.”

Oh. Shit.

The crowd gasps, exchanging glances and shifting uncomfortably in their seats. Eastmann himself, so used to ignoring Vic, is chatting up a congressman, completely oblivious. Another few seconds pass, and I don’t know how it’s humanly possible, but he doesn’t seem to notice anything is amiss yet.

Vic leans closer to the microphone. “Under the direction of my father, Eastmann Incorporated has been responsible for the death of thousands across the globe.”

My blood is hammering so violently through my veins I can feel my rapid pulse in my fingertips and toes.

Still, Eastmann does not react.

“This company was built on the blood and exploitation of others,” Vic continues. “Twenty-one years ago, my father blew up a mine to cover up the unsafe working conditions he’d created. He ordered hundreds of people to be killed and then collected the insurance money while giving their families nothing.”

Vic bends over to connect something under the table at the same time a suited guard sprints up to Charles Eastmann, only to be shooed away.

Vic smiles into the mic. “For those of you who doubt the authenticity of my claim, and for the others who will try to spin this as some sort of elaborate ploy to supplant my father and force him into early retirement, I only have one thing to say to you...”

I hold my breath right along with everyone listening.

“I have evidence,” Vic says, a second before the mine footage starts playing across the massive screen behind them.

Knowing what’s coming, I’m tempted to close my eyes, but I force them to remain open. Only once the Mine Safety worker’s voices sound over the loudspeakers does Eastmann finally catch on that something is wrong. He glances around for the source of the sound before spotting the footage playing behind Vic.

As if in a daze, he stares, enraptured and unmoving, until the Vipers execute the government workers. He jumps, face blanching, and grabs one of his guards while the footage continues to play.

Vic and I lock eyes right as the Viper puts his phone call on speakerphone and the familiar voice of an angry man booms from the jumbotron.

The crowd falls entirely silent, all heads simultaneously turning toward Charles.

“I don’t care how many men are down there,” past-Eastmann says to the Viper in the recording. *“I want you to*

blow the whole damn thing. Each one of them is a liability, and I want them eradicated.”

“*But, sir,*” the cufflinked Viper replies.

“Don’t ‘but sir’ me. I’m Charles Fucking Eastmann. I own the man you call Boss. That means that whether I tell you to shoot a room full of children or whether I tell you to blow up a mine, you fucking do it! Now get it done.”

Vic grins, their face lit up by a thousand camera flashes.

Holy shit. They fucking did it. My chest squeezes at the confirmation that I put my faith in the right person.

On the screen, the mine blows, fire and screams erupting all around the bush Cook is hiding in, the flames dancing behind Vic until they stop the recording.

“I will not repeat the sins of my father,” Vic announces.

“Moving forward,” they say, “I will be taking over operations of Eastmann Incorporated. My top priority will be rectifying the wrongs of my father and his father before him. This company will *never* again be as prosperous as it was under my ancestors because I refuse to step on the backs of others to lift myself up. Once the company and all of our subsidiaries are operating under safe conditions and paying livable wages, a significant portion of our profits will be directed back into the communities we’ve harmed for so long.

“If you were in a leadership role under my father, you are now out of a job. Your access badges no longer work, and you will be notified when your personal effects can be picked up. Many of you will be joining my father in prison. If that’s the case, please designate a family member to come pick up your things or they will be donated.”

I bark out a laugh.

Vic puts a hand on either side of the podium, and I find myself leaning forward. “A friend of mine taught me that no one can truly be free while others are oppressed. That means that the luxury most of us live in on a daily basis might feel like freedom, but in reality, it’s just complacency. I hope you

will join me in becoming part of the solution.” A wide, toothy grin spreads over Vic’s face. “Now, are there any questions?”

Holy fuck.

I have to bite my knuckle to keep from cheering as the press erupts into a chorus of questions. Each time Vic answers, the camera clicks and flashes increase tenfold.

“Are you worried about the legality of taking over as CEO?” one reporter shouts.

“Not at all. There is a clause in our bylaws that a CEO can be removed for illegal practices that jeopardize the integrity of the company. There is another bylaw about the company staying under Eastmann ownership and direction. This means I am the *only* choice. Next question.”

When thunder rolls in the distance and the first raindrops start to fall around me, I catch Vic’s eye to let them know I’m leaving. They nod once, and as I make my way back toward the hotel, the guards wish me a good day and let me go on my way.

By the time I walk across the street and into the lobby, every TV in the hotel bar and in the cafe are lit up with images from the press conference or the mine footage itself.

Eastmann is nowhere in sight, but I couldn’t care less. The whole world knows what kind of man he is, and I have every confidence he won’t be able to hide for long. I give him a week, tops.

Vic has also shown the world who they really are. Not some secret to be shoved down in the basement, but a force to be reckoned with.

I pull out my phone.

Me: Fine, let’s get a QUICK drink. You okay if I bring a few friends?

The conference is over, and even though it’s raining, the cameras are still rolling while newscasters discuss the footage. On the TV over the bar, I watch Vic read my text, the smile

that spreads over their face letting me know I made the right decision.

Vic (Evil?) Eastmann: I knew you'd like the speech.

Me: Meet us at the hotel bar across the street?

I update their contact information while waiting for a reply.

Vic: Give me 5. I'm going to take a car over to avoid the press.

It's been a hot minute since I've heard anything from my earpiece, but I'm hoping the others will come down for a drink with us. "Minho, you there? I'm meeting Vic at the bar, can you see if anyone wants to join?"

"Still here. We're trying to track down Eastmann before he leaves the city."

Guilt lands on my shoulders like a lead blanket. "Do you need my help?"

"No, I've got this one. There isn't a computer there for you to use anyway. I'm sure you and Colt— *Oh fuck*. He's going to kill me. Hold on."

Behind me, the elevator begins to ding as it makes its descent.

"You left him in there the whole time?" Considering the rage monster about to be released from that elevator is headed in my direction, I shouldn't find that funny, but I can't help but laugh.

"Accidents happen. Hey, Ry, I'm going to put myself back on mute and mute you for a bit so I don't get distracted, but Colt heard where you're at. Please convince him not to kill me if you get a chance."

"Okay."

I've barely taken my seat at the mahogany-topped bar when a bartender with the most magnificent handlebar

mustache I've ever seen asks for my order.

I scan the labels. "Do you carry Dovetail?"

"Yes, ma'am. Do you prefer a hefeweizen or a blonde?"

I smile softly to myself at the first answer that comes to my mind—I'll take the broody-blonde—but obviously that's not what I say. "The hef, please, and a glass of whiskey. I don't care what type."

His mustache twitches as he smiles. "Coming right up."

My phone buzzes.

Vic: Change of plans. I've gotta better place we can go. I'm in the black limo outside.

I glance back at the elevator, which is still on the sixteenth floor, and then outside where a valet is already greeting Vic's driver.

A knot forms in my stomach.

We owe Vic *everything*, and this was my idea, but a quick drink downstairs was one thing, driving somewhere is going to add a bunch of extra time, which isn't fair if everyone else is still working.

This was a mistake. I'd been so caught up in the moment and so grateful...but I really need to get back upstairs and help the others.

Well shit. I guess if I'm going to cancel on Vic, I should at least do it face-to-face.

"I'll be right back," I say to the bartender, leaving my phone on the counter as proof of my intention to return and making my way out to the limousine, silently rehearsing my polite request for a rain check.

Wind rips through my wig the second I step out of the revolving doors. The rain is coming down hard enough that the gale carries it through the stone porte-cochère to pelt my cheeks.

The same valet I slammed into earlier opens the limousine door for me. Judging by the scowl on his lips, he hasn't forgotten or forgiven me for nearly knocking him over.

With my eyes still on the valet, I bend over to make my excuses to Vic. "Hey, I know we decided—"

The words die on my tongue as cool, hard metal grinds into my temple.

The gun cocks. "Don't make a fucking sound."

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

RYLEE



SLOUCHED in the seat opposite me, Vic bleeds heavily from a wound on the right side of their forehead. They're conscious, but barely, and every time I try to catch their eye, the gun pressed to my temple digs deeper into my bruised flesh.

I need to pay attention to where we're going, but the limousine heads into a tunnel so quickly after I'm forced inside that I have no idea what direction we're headed in.

Not only is my panic making it difficult to concentrate but the stench of stale cigarettes and body odor is so overwhelming that it's nearly impossible for me to keep my bearings through my watering eyes.

With one hand, Frank keeps the gun held to my head, while the other clicks away on his phone. His face is hardly recognizable, swollen and bruised from the beating he took from Colton last night, but his Dead Kings cut and president patch would give him away regardless of what his face looked like.

"What's the code to verify you're alive?" Frank demands with a rousing kick to Vic's foot.

"It's his...middle name," Vic slurs. "Richard."

Shit. Vic is in bad shape. I'm not even sure they're fully aware of what's happening, but I know giving Frank what he wants takes away our ability to negotiate.

"Vic, don't give him anything," I whisper.

“Shut the hell up,” Frank spits. He rears back, like he’s going to strike me with the butt of the gun, but thankfully the car slowing to a stop stills his hand.

The privacy divider hums as the driver lowers it. “We’re here, sir.”

Momentarily, the pressure on my temple subsides, but the gunshot that follows a second later is so deafening it’s like a physical blow.

The ear-splitting shot resonates inside my skull, rattling my brain. I raise my hands to my tender ears, but that doesn’t help. My vision blurs, black creeping into the corners as my past and present collide.

No, no, no. Not now.

One second Jack is clutching his stomach, the next Vic is wiping something red off their cheeks.

Vic’s mouth is wide open, their neck strained in use, but all I can hear is Danny screaming.

My grip on the present wobbles again as Frank morphs into Sheriff Knott and then back into himself to shove me out the door.

Desperate to keep my wits about me, I reach into my pocket only to find it devastatingly empty. Out of options, I resort to pinching my thigh through the fabric.

Thankfully, it works and the black spots in my vision recede enough for me to take in my surroundings. It looks like we’re in an underground parking structure. It’s dry and clean, and farther down the passage I can just make out a fleet of parked cars. Glancing back at the limousine, I catch a glimpse of the driver slumped over the steering wheel, his brains splattered all across the windshield.

Covered in bits of said brain matter and blood, Vic rises unsteadily out of the car, and we are herded in the direction of an elevator and a sign reading: Eastmann Incorporated Executive Parking.

Frank is saying something, but I can't hear it over the incessant shrill ringing in my head. Reaching up, I delicately touch my ears to check for damage. There's no blood, but the earpiece from Minho is gone.

Frank's mouth continues to form silent words as he pushes my shoulder, and when I don't answer his unheard question, his lips curl into a snarl. He gets more and more aggravated by my lack of response until he snaps, violently shoving me to my knees.

Hands scraped and bleeding, I reach for the glasses that slipped off my face in the fall, but Frank yanks me to my feet by my wig before I can grab them. I scream at the sharp pain—although I can't actually hear the sound above the constant ringing—and he continues tearing at my disguise until the wig comes off, taking chunks of my hair and scalp right along with it.

“Now get moving,” I finally hear him say. His muffled voice continues to cut in and out, but hearing anything is better than nothing.

“Go.” Frank jabs the barrel of the gun against my spine, urging me forward so he can use an Eastmann Incorporated ID badge to scan us into an elevator.

My brain is addled, and not having my full hearing is disorienting, but as we begin our slow ascent, the movement combined with the pain in my scalp awakens something inside me.

Fight back, Rylee. You can't let him get away with this.

I ready myself to jam my elbow into Frank's ribs or groin, but as soon as I curl my pinky finger, Frank aims the gun at the center of my forehead. “You got one up on me yesterday because Colt got a good hit in first. It won't happen again.”

My simmering frustration boils over. “Why are you doing this?”

His attention floats briefly to Vic, who's leaning against the elevator doors with their eyes closed. “It will be more fun for me to let you see for yourself.”

When the elevator stops, curiosity rather than compliance drives me up the stairs and through the roof access exit. This high up, the wind is a force in itself, tearing my hair free from the remaining bobby pins. The gale rips the door from my grasp, metal meeting concrete with a *bang* to reveal the rooftop beyond.

The storm has let up, but it's still raining, and the icy sheets drench my legs and feet.

A shadow near a cluster of antennas in the middle of the roof catches my attention, a shiver immediately raking down my spine.

Soaked from head to toe, his normally white hair is now an odd shade of pale yellow, but I'd recognize the devil in any form. I take a step backward, bumping straight into Vic while Frank ushers us out into the freezing rain and across the roof toward Charles Eastmann.

"Your son's killer, as promised," Frank announces.

Eastmann's mouth is tight, the muscles in his jaw clenching as he scans Vic, who's leaning against a ventilation shaft to keep themselves from toppling over. "Why is Victoria bleeding?"

Frank extends his arms and shrugs, his gun nearly colliding with my face in the process. "She put up a fight and tried to smash her phone so I couldn't use it."

"I see." Eastmann tries to hide his displeasure, his jaw working furiously in an obvious attempt to bite back whatever it is he really wants to say. Every time his lips open, I think he's about to jump down Frank's throat, but then his gaze flits to the gun and his mouth stills.

A long stretch of silence passes, and then he says, "May I ask my son's murderer questions before you kill her?"

"That was the deal." Frank pushes me forward. "You buy out the factory and sign ownership over to me, I tell you where to find your son's car and bring you his killer so you can finally get some answers. I'd say we're all squared up. Go ahead, ask away."

Black spots appear in my vision, and my fingernails dig into my palms. *That's* how they found Logan's car? Colton did every single thing Frank asked of him and this spineless asshole still ratted me out in the end.

Eastmann steps forward until we're only a foot apart, his new position allowing him to look down his nose at me. "Is my son dead?"

Craning my neck to meet his contempt-laced gaze, I blink the rain from my eyes and keep my mouth firmly shut. Whatever happens, I'd rather die than say anything that might hurt my family.

Frank taps the gun against the back of my skull, making me wince. "He wants to hear it straight from your mouth and there are plenty of painful ways to make you talk. Go on and tell the man what you did, otherwise the consequences of your silence will be paid by the people you leave behind."

Cold creeps up my spine.

I can't imagine Eastmann hasn't already been told what happened, so either he didn't believe Frank's version of the story or he really does want to hear it from me. Either way, the likelihood of me making it off this rooftop is slim to none. And if I'm going to die, the least I can do is make sure I take all the blame and protect the people I love.

"Yes, Logan is dead," I say, raising my chin.

Eastmann's mouth forms a tight line. "You're absolutely sure?"

"I burned his body, so yeah, I'm sure."

"I see." Eastmann tries to keep his face neutral, but the hope draining from his eyes is all too apparent. He looks... smaller somehow, less foreboding. It takes him half a minute before his lips unfurl enough to ask his next question. "How did he die?"

I meet his eye. "With my hands around his throat. Gasping for breath."

Inhaling deeply, I make sure Eastmann watches me inflate my lungs the way his son never will again. My vindictiveness surprises me, but if I'm going to die up here, I'm not going to do it quietly.

“Did he have any last words?”

I snort. “Besides a pathetic gurgle? No.”

“I see.” He blinks rapidly and then, as if flipping a switch, his composure is back like nothing happened. He turns toward Frank. “Victoria and I will be on our way now. I trust you'll ensure the Adder girl's death is as slow as possible?”

“Sure thing,” Frank quips.

Eastmann steps in the direction of the door, pausing when he notices Vic isn't following. I take the opportunity to spit at his feet, but he barely looks at me before turning his attention toward the vents. “Come along now, Victoria.”

“We can't leave h-her,” Vic slurs.

“Don't be ridiculous. We need to go.” When Vic still doesn't move, Eastmann reluctantly shoves his arm under their shoulder, and the two of them begin their painstakingly slow trek across the roof with Vic dragging their feet every step of the way.

Frank gives them a mocking salute. “It's been nice working with you, Charlie. Godspeed.”

A gust of wind rattles the nearby antennas and I whirl on him. “You sold me out to Charles Eastmann for a stupid factory?”

Frank gestures around the roof, rain pelting his extended arms. “Not just a factory, for this exact moment.” He closes his eyes, as if savoring whatever the hell it is he's talking about.

“It feels even better than I thought it would,” he says with a smile. “For years Jack shoved his patience horseshit down my throat. We wasted all our time stealing pennies from the assholes who wronged us—building houses and schools and creating jobs for people who had no idea how good they had it

instead of buying weapons and making these fuckers pay for what they've done to us."

Gun lowering to my chest, Frank uses his free hand to pull out a cigarette before apparently remembering it's raining and repocketing the pack with a scowl. "Then Jack's bullshit tactics got him killed, and I finally had my chance to prove we should have been doing things my way all along. Looks like I was right after all, doesn't it?"

I laugh at the ridiculousness. "Right about what? Losing your club? Betraying the people you swore a blood oath to protect? The Jackals brought down Charles Eastmann because we stayed true to Jack's legacy."

Frank tilts his chin to the side with a coy smile. "Did you really bring him down, though?" His voice is even and stomach-turningly amused. "Because it looks to me like you were going to let him just walk away."

Chills erupt beneath the rain streaming down my spine when Frank lifts the gun a few inches. I follow the path of his arm, but instead of pointing at my head like I expect, it's pointed across the roof to where Vic and Charles Eastmann are almost to the door.

As if sensing a shift in the air, Eastmann looks over his shoulder, the whites of his eyes expanding and locking onto my own for one drawn-out second.

He takes a slow-motion breath before shoving Vic through the doorway at the exact moment Frank fires a single round into his back.

Leaving only a spray of red mist as his legacy, the former CEO of Eastmann Incorporated collapses to the ground and does not move again.

Gunpowder floods my airway, and my world tilts, the corners of my vision darkening.

Jack is bleeding on the road.

Danny is screaming in agony.

I can taste iron in the air, smell Eastmann's blood on the wind and in the rain, but I am kneeling next to Jack in Eden.

I try to pinch my thigh, but my pants are soaked and clinging so tightly to my flesh that I can't get a grip on anything besides the wet fabric.

Frank's bellowing laughter cuts through the flashback, ripping me into the present as he throws his head back to confront the thunderous sky.

"Looks like I was right all along, Jack!" he screams. "I did what you couldn't. I avenged my wife." He pounds his fist against his chest. "It was *me* who got Eastmann in the end. Not you!"

My reality once again sharpens into focus, and I take a tiny step away from Frank. He's fucking lost it, and I'm next if I don't find a way out of this.

I take advantage of his momentary distraction, feverishly searching for an escape but coming up empty. Running for the door will only give Frank the opportunity to shoot *me* in the back, and unless I'm willing to throw myself off the side of the building, I don't know how the hell I'm going to get out of this.

Frank is pacing in circles now, howling at the heavens. If he keeps walking around like that, maybe I'll have a better shot at the door—

Movement in the stairwell catches my eye and my spine stiffens. Vic can't seriously be coming back for me, can they? They could hardly stand. No, absolutely not, I refuse to let them sacrifice themselves for me.

"So where do we go from here, Frank?" I ask, backing away in an attempt to draw him farther away from the door. I'm already so close to the edge that I don't move more than a few feet, but at least his back is to the stairs now. And if I keep talking, I can keep his attention on me and away from Vic. "Do you throw me off the roof? Shoot me?"

Frank's smile slips and he lowers his arms. "Are you that eager to die, girl? We'll get to that soon enough, but first we

need to clear something up.”

I scan his body, looking for an opportunity to attack as he advances on me, but always one step ahead, he aims the gun at my chest before getting too close. “When is the next password for the video of my daughter due?”

My brows pinch. *What the hell is he talking about?*

Frank’s bruised cheeks pull into a sinister sneer. “Well hot-damn. You never set up the Segretto video to go to the police, did you?”

Shit. He’s right, I didn’t. There was no way I could risk sending that tape to anyone, not when Colton was so clearly visible in every shot, but Frank thinking I was going to was my only bargaining tool...

Shit, shit, shit.

Frank’s head swings side to side, like he can’t believe his luck...or my stupidity. “You’re making this too easy. Did you honestly think you could threaten my daughter and I’d let you live?”

He levels the gun at my head, and I lift my trembling hands. “The Jackals have the video of Ashlynn,” I say, failing to hide the fear in my quavering voice. “If you kill me, they’ll send it.”

Frank laughs. “See, I don’t think that’s true, or else someone would’ve already done it. Unlike you, they love my Ash.”

Lightning cracks through the sky, but that’s not what makes me jump.

“Dad, stop,” Ashlynn says, stepping over Eastmann’s body and out into the rain.

“Sweetheart,” Frank chastises, eyes still locked on me, “I asked you *not* to come up here.”

He doesn’t bother looking her way, but if he had, he’d have seen Colton looming in the doorway like the shadow of death.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

RYLEE



HEART IN MY THROAT, I keep my face neutral and divert my gaze from where Colton and Ashlynn are using the rain to mask their steady progress in my direction.

The effort it's taking to refrain from screaming for Colton to get off this roof and save himself is making my knees unsteady and my breaths shallow, but there is no way I can warn him without also alerting Frank to his presence.

"I worked out a deal with Colt," Ashlynn calls out, already sounding closer. "We just have to let Rylee go and he'll come back to the Dead Kings. *Permanently.*"

My eyes snap to Ashlynn's, but she gives me a subtle shake of her head—as if to say, *just go with it.*

"Sweetheart, you know he will never keep that promise." There is a pitying edge to Frank's tone, but he keeps his gaze locked on me while talking to her. "Colt was never worthy of you. I should have taken him out a long time ago."

The little hairs on the back of my neck lift.

My eyes search for Colton, and although partially hidden behind the two people standing between us, my breath catches at the sight of his rain-soaked form. Even now, with the fear of imminent death curdling my stomach, he is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I can't let him die up here. I need to—

Frank takes a step in my direction, and when I back away, my heel bumps into something short and solid.

Wet hair whipping around my face, I glance behind me, noting the minuscule raised concrete lip running along the edge of the roof—the only barrier preventing me from plummeting to the street below.

Swallowing my bile with an audible gulp, I return my attention to the center of the roof where Colton, jaw hard and a pistol clenched in his white-knuckled fist, is trying to maneuver past Ashlynn.

What is he doing? There's no way he can shoot Frank from that angle without also shooting me...

Ashlynn forces him back, roughly shoving a single finger in his face, like she's demanding one more minute. Inhaling deeply, she spins in my direction. "Dad, let's just talk about this—"

"Go wait for me downstairs," Frank says over his shoulder, still not turning. "I'm almost finished here and then we can leave."

Taking one last step forward, he digs the muzzle of his gun into the center of my forehead, the warm metal searing my flesh.

Pulse racing wildly, I forget to breathe.

Another crack of lightning rips through the sky, casting Colton in a haunting mixture of light and shadow. His chest is heaving, his eyes dark and skin slick with rain. "Put the gun down, Frank," he growls, and God help me, my stomach flutters in response to his menacing tone.

Frank's features morph into a feral mask of rage, and he whirls around, firing off two shots in Colton's direction. The first one misses wildly, bouncing off a metal antenna with a sharp *ping*.

The second sinks into flesh with a gut-churning *thud*.

I scream in horror as Ashlynn's hands fly to her belly, dark-red blood blossoming beneath her palms. "Dad?" She falls to her knees, eyes wide and fingers clutching her abdomen.

Frank makes a choking sound and lunges forward, his elbow colliding with my jaw in his mad dash to get to his daughter.

I stumble backward, my heels catching on the tiny barrier behind me, and then I'm falling. Twisting my body, I flail my arms out—

Thwack.

My ribs slam into the side of the building a second before my chin and armpits collide with the overhang. Dazed, I scramble for purchase, the rough surface shredding my palms while I continue sliding toward my imminent death.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

Refusing to accept that *this* is the way I die, I channel every ounce of my strength into hoisting myself onto the roof. But just like when I tried to sneak back in through my window at the Vipers' Den, my arms aren't strong enough to pull me up.

I slide another inch over the ledge, and then another, until my arms are fully extended and my entire body is dangling from the side of the building, swinging in the blustering wind like a pendulum.

Boot steps thunder in my direction, barely audible over the sound of the rain and Frank's agonized apologies to Ashlynn. Colton is coming for me—*I know he is*—but I don't know if he'll make it in time. Especially with a gale this wild and unrelenting when I'm already barely hanging on by my fingertips.

Muscles quaking, I grind my teeth and dig my nails into the concrete eave. I just need to hold on a bit longer...but I'm already losing my grip again.

Panic-stricken and out of options, I look to see if there is anything below me I can aim for. There isn't. It's just a vertical drop to the street.

I cast my gaze upward, where one by one my fingertips slide off the edge.

I start to fall, a scream building in my throat, but I don't even have time to release it before my body jerks to an abrupt stop, the force of Colton's grip on my wrist nearly ripping my arm from its socket.

Jaw open in silent terror, I stare up at my savior as he hangs halfway off the building, every muscle in his arm strained and protruding to keep us from toppling over.

"I've got you," he grunts, hauling me up.

Gripping Colton with both hands, I stay as still as possible, trying to make sure I don't accidentally make him lose balance. One of my knees is almost high enough to hook over the ledge when a gunshot splits the air and Colton's shoulder explodes—a burst of red viscous liquid splattering across my face.

He lets go of my wrist, and my hands instantly slide down the length of his rain-slickened forearm. Just when I think I'm about to fall again, he swings his uninjured arm around, grabbing me under the armpit and throwing himself backward, dragging me all the way onto the roof with a monstrous bellow of agony.

Mind fraught with panic, I scramble to my knees and reach for Colton's shoulder, but he shrugs me off.

"We have to run," he says breathlessly, wincing as he staggers to his feet.

"Dad, *no*," Ashlynn groans. "Please—"

I lift my eyes, freezing at the sight of the god-awful scene taking place at the center of the roof, unsure whether I'm more horrified by the blood she's hacking up, the growing pool of gore leaking from her stomach, or Frank—who is kneeling next to his daughter, only using one hand to apply pressure on her abdomen while the other points a gun straight at Colton.

"This is *your* fault," he screeches, his bruised face now red and tear-streaked. "*You* made me do this!"

For one second, it's not Frank screaming at Colton...it's Sheriff Knott screaming at Jack. I shake my head and thankfully the image clears.

“I’m b-begging you not to kill him,” Ashlynn pleads, placing her hand on her father’s arm. “Promise me. Promise that you wo—”

Another bout of coughing racks her fragile body while she tugs feebly at her father’s arm. Frank hesitates, glancing from Colton back to his daughter, and then lowers the gun.

I stare, mouth slackening with disbelief. Why would Ashlynn, with her life slowly draining from her veins, use her last breaths to plead for someone else’s safety?

I shift my attention to the woman in question, noting the way the rain has turned her hair from a light golden-brown to a deep shade of umber that stands in stark contrast to her rapidly paling skin. Her gaze shifts from her father to Colton, and that’s when I see it...the same expression that greeted me in the mirror every day during my year with the Vipers. After everything Colton’s put Ashlynn through—even knowing he’ll never return her feelings—she’s still in love with him.

A wave of gratefulness washes over me, and I glance at her stomach. The lower half of her blouse is dark red, her breaths quick and erratic... *Just like Jack’s.*

As if sensing my attention, we lock eyes, and with her blood-caked lips she mouths one word:

Run.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

RYLEE



THE RAIN BEATING DOWN on us surges.

I blink, keeping my eyes closed a second longer than necessary in a futile attempt to stop analyzing just how similar Ashlynn's injury is to Jack's. When I open them, black is already creeping into the corners of my vision and Colton is positioning himself between me and Frank.

"We have to go. *Now*," he hisses, yanking me to my feet.

"But your shoulder and Ashl—"

"I'll come back for her," Colton says, dragging me by my bicep.

As we move, my gaze bounces from the stairwell entrance at the far end of the roof to where Frank is kneeling at Ashlynn's side...halfway between us and our only exit. A rock forms in the pit of my stomach. There's way too much open ground to cover, and no matter what path we take, we'll have to go right past Frank.

Ashlynn's desperate pleas may have stayed her father's hand, but what if he's just waiting to shoot us in the back the moment we reach the doorway, like he did with Eastmann...

Fear turns my feet into cement midstep. Without missing a beat, Colton wraps his left arm around my waist like he's going to pick me up and run us out of here, but Frank fires two shots into the ground in front of us and we skitter to a halt—our momentum causing Colton to pitch forward with a sharp gasp as his knee slams into the roof.

“Stop,” Frank shouts over the cacophony of rain pelting the metal equipment around us. His hand, and the gun clenched within it, shakes while he continues to apply pressure to his daughter’s stomach with the other.

Ashlynn whimpers. “Don’t. *Please.*” Her words are a ragged whisper, and with each beat of the drumming rain, her face pales.

Frank’s eyes drop to his daughter, and Colton rises to his feet, like he’s getting ready to run again, but his knee gives out on our first step.

“I said fucking stop, or I’ll shoot you both right here and now.” Frank’s voice is so grated and full of anguish that I can barely understand him.

“Dad,” Ashlynn croaks.

“*Shhh*, sweetheart. Save your strength,” Frank soothes, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “I won’t kill them unless they try to leave. How ’bout that?”

I think Ashlynn responds, but it’s too low for me to hear.

Colton takes the smallest step to the side so that I can no longer see Frank, barely catching himself when his knee gives out again.

“How bad is it? Are you dizzy?” I whisper, placing my shaking palms over his bloodied shoulder and ignoring the black haze threatening to take over my vision.

Swaying beneath my touch, he grabs both my hands with one of his, quickly kissing my knuckles before tucking them against his chest. “I’m fine. It’s just slippery up here.”

There is something unfamiliar in his voice that makes my chest pinch and my heart rate skyrocket, but I’m too fucking scared to identify it.

“Colt,” Frank roars, “if you don’t get your goddamn hands in the air where I can fucking see them, I swear to God I’ll put enough fucking bullets in your back that it kills your girl too.”

Ashlynn again says something I can’t hear over the rain, and Frank replies in a much softer tone. “I know, sweetheart.

As long as they don't try to leave, I promise.”

Colton releases my hands to raise his left arm above his head while the other hangs limply at his side. A gasp escapes my lips, and I reach for him again, pausing when he shakes his head.

“I've only got use of the one you didn't put a bullet in, Frank. This is the best I can do.” Colton directs his words over his shoulder, but judging by the way his gaze darts around the roof, he's using that angle as an excuse to map out our escape .

My heart skips a beat. Maybe he's already figured a way out of this...

A muscle in his jaw feathers, and the kernel of hope blossoming in my chest is promptly obliterated by his hardening expression. “Frank, we need to call Ash an ambulance. There's still time to save her. If you let Rylee go, I can help you.”

Frank laughs sardonically. “Do you think I'm dumb, boy? I know the second I let your girl go, you'll try to throw me off this roof. Besides, there is no one to call. The police were in Eastmann's pocket. They'd kill us all on sight if they found us up here with his body. Just stay right where you are. I'll deal with you in a minute.”

Colton's broad chest blocks me from seeing what's happening, but Ashlynn must try to say something because she mewls and starts coughing.

“It's okay, sweetheart. I didn't mean to upset you,” Frank coos, his voice coming in and out like he's rocking back and forth. “Just keep breathing,”

Ashlynn's wet coughing fit is followed by a gut-wrenching whimper, and then Frank begins to sing to her, his rough lullaby tear-stained and haunting.

I don't know the song and I can't hear the soft words he murmurs to his daughter in between verses, but I know what they mean just the same—Ashlynn's not long for this world, and when she takes her last breath, Frank is going to make sure Colton and I take ours.

Danny's anguished cry rips through my memory, followed by a flash of Jack bleeding out in the road.

No. No. No. Not right now.

Terrified that we'll be shot if I'm seen reaching down to pinch my thigh, I close my eyes tightly against the assault and clutch Colton's shirt.

"Hey, Tiger?"

My eyes flutter open to meet his piercing gaze.

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "I thought you said we were going for a drink?"

An unexpected laugh bubbles out of me, and I immediately stifle it so Frank doesn't hear.

"Christ, that's beautiful," Colton says, his bright smile instantly making my heart ache. "I don't know if I ever told you, but your laugh is my favorite sound in the world."

A crack of thunder booms overhead, and I jump, my hands trembling so uncontrollably they tap against Colton's chest like Morse code. He grimaces, as if my fear is causing him pain. "No secret marigold in your pocket?"

"Not this time." Wind tosses my hair around, plastering it to my rain-soaked forehead. I loosen my grip on the sopping-wet fabric of his Henley so I can spin Jack's ring with my thumb.

"You still with me?" He blinks rapidly, almost like he's struggling to focus.

I nod, my brow furrowing as my eyes dart to his shoulder. The lateral portion of his upper sleeve is shredded, and while I can't see the wound, I know he needs medical attention—and he needs it soon.

I have to get him off this roof, and there is no way for me to do that if I'm panicking.

Dropping my chin to prevent him from seeing through my false bravado, I make sure my voice won't waver before I speak. "If you get the chance to run, you—"

“Look at me,” Colton says seriously, bumping me with his chest to force my eyes to his. “I am *never* leaving you again. Do you hear me? Whatever the hell happens up here, I’m not leaving you. Where you go, I go.”

“Okay,” I respond through a snuffle, both of us flinching when Frank screeches out something incoherent. There is still a good amount of distance between us and him, but I lower my voice anyway. “Can Minho and the others hear us through your earpiece?”

He shakes his head. “Water fries them. Mine cut out when I was running after you.”

“Did they see where you went?” My pulse kicks up a notch. The Jackals have to be coming for us. We just need to hold out a little longer...

Colton’s eyes soften, his mouth pulling into a tight line before his attention flits to the body near the stairwell. “Everyone was trying to track down Eastmann when I ran out. I think we’re on our own.”

A sob racks my body as I see my own thought reflected back at me in Colton’s grim expression.

We’re going to die up here.

“Tiger,” he says softly, little rivulets of rain dripping from his face onto mine. “You are the fiercest, most incredible woman I’ve ever met. Loving you has been a fucking privilege and an honor. For the rest of my life, no matter how long that is—”

“*Don’t.*” I slam my fists into his chest. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to say goodbye or you’re gearing up to sacrifice yourself to save me. Either way, *don’t.* Not when we could be coming up with a plan instead.”

He smiles again, but this time it’s more of a smirk...and it’s accompanied by my favorite dimple. “I already have a plan,” he whispers, “and if you’re not going to let me finish what I was saying, then I need you to listen to me very carefully.”

After a quick glance over his shoulder, he continues, “As slowly as possible, move your hands to my belt.” He’s dropped his voice so low I have to lean up to hear him, but even then, I barely understand.

Eyelashes heavy with rain, I blink in confusion. “What?”

Colton glances over his shoulder again. “We’re running out of time. My belt. Now.”

Not wanting to spend our last few moments on this earth arguing, I slide my shaking palms down his abdomen and attempt to splay them flat against his low stomach, but something tucked into his jeans prevents me from doing so. My brow furrows, and he gives me a subtle nod to keep going.

I move my hands lower, loosely wrapping my fingers around the solid, metallic object hidden in his waistband.

Holy fuck. My eyes snap back to Colton’s.

“Be careful with the trigger, the safety isn’t on.”

“How —”

He shakes his head, a roguish half-smile gracing his ashen pallor. “Just listen. Ashlynn can’t hang on for much longer, and we’re only going to get one shot at this. As soon as I move, Frank will start shooting at me, leaving him wide open for you to take him down.”

I recoil. No. Absolutely not. He’s kidding, right?

There is no way I can make this work.

Does he not remember what happened with Jack?

I’ll fail again. I won’t be quick enough...

Water droplets fly from my hair as I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” Colton says more forcefully. “I can’t use my right arm. I won’t be able to grab the gun, let alone turn around and fire a shot off before he kills us both. It has to be you. You can do this. I know you can.”

Behind him, Ashlynn is gasping for air and Frank is just saying *no* over and over again. We have seconds before it'll be too late to do anything.

He's right, it has to be me. I can do this, I can get Colton off this roof.

I square my shoulders and nod.

“That’s my girl.” The pride radiating in Colton’s voice is enough to make my heart swell, bolstering my confidence. “Aim for the center of his chest, it’s a bigger target. And hey —” He waits, like he wants to make sure I’m listening.

Our eyes meet, and for one perfect moment, the wind whipping through our hair isn’t coming from the storm but from the open windows of the Chevelle. For just one second, we’re back in Eden with our entire futures ahead of us.

“I love you, Tiger,” Colton says, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. “Now grab the gun.”

I do, and the second my hand wraps firmly around the grip, Colton forces me down with a rough shove to my shoulder. He darts in the direction of the stairwell, and just like he predicted, Frank starts firing.

Hands shaking, I raise the gun and pull the trigger, taking the open shot at Frank as he struggles to his feet. But the kickback is so strong it rips the gun from my hand. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* I drop to one knee, barely catching the slippery metal before it falls into the pool of blood I’m kneeling in.

My heart thuds against my chest and my throat constricts. *What the hell...*

Limbs paralyzed with horror, I follow the trail of bright red to where Colton is dodging Frank’s firestorm of bullets.

There is so much of it... *Too much of it.*

My hand wobbles when I lift the gun, but lightning splits the sky above us at the exact moment Frank fires another shot, their combined *boom* so blaring that my hands fly to cover my ears. Time slows, panic freezing me in place as Colton collapses, his head hitting the roof with a sickening *crack*.

“Colton!”

He doesn't move.

“Colton!” I scream again.

Nothing.

No. No. No. This can't be happening, I chant in my head, but it *is* happening, and he still isn't moving.

Frank reloads while advancing on Colton's motionless body. Behind him, Ashlynn's ghost-white form lies in a pool of crimson, her eyes open and unseeing.

He finishes reloading, and I think I scream Colton's name again, or maybe I just scream... All I know for sure is that molten fire scorches my throat as I aim at Frank's cursed heart and pull the trigger.

The kickback nearly snaps my wrist, but this time, I'm ready for it. Hand no longer trembling, I squeeze the trigger again, and again, and again, screaming at the top of my lungs.

Frank's body jerks each time a bullet hits him, his eyes wide and disbelieving as he crumples to the ground. He twitches for two more rounds, but even when he stops moving, I keep pulling the trigger—over and over—until the gun *clicks* and smoke rises from the empty chamber.

Throat raw and chest heaving, I let the hunk of metal clatter to the ground and rush to Colton—who much to my alarm, is lying in a pool of blood two feet away from Eastmann's lifeless body and is just as still.

“Colton!” I sob, but he doesn't move. Even with the rain pelting down on his face and me running my hands all over him, he doesn't so much as flinch.

I rip the shredded fabric covering his shoulder, but the exit wound is shockingly small with only a trickle of blood marring his ghostly pale skin... It doesn't even seem to be actively bleeding anymore.

But the only reason he wouldn't be bleeding was if...

Icy fingers of terror grip my stomach, a chill snaking its way through my veins until my neck is stiff with dread.

“Colton!” I wail, slamming my fist into his chest.

Nothing.

“Colton, get up!” I hit him again, the tremor in my hands returning so violently it rattles my teeth. My knee slips in his blood, and my elbow comes down right on his sternum.

No response, only terrifying stillness.

“You promised you wouldn’t leave again. Get up!” I shake him as hard as I can, screaming his name one final time.

Still, he does not move.

“You fucking promised...” This one comes out as a cracked whisper, but it doesn’t matter because there is no one else to hear it.

I am alone.

Rain hammers against my back as my heart is cleaved into a million pieces. The pain is so ferocious it robs me of my breath. When I’m finally able to suck down a gulp of air, the resulting cry that escapes from my lungs splits my chest open.

He’s gone.

Desperate to spend one last second in Colton’s arms, to feel his warmth before that, too, is gone forever, I wipe the tears from my cheeks and lie down beside him. Terrified of the silence awaiting me where his once strong heart used to beat, my head hovers an inch above his chest without making contact.

Hot tears blur my vision, and I close my eyes, bracing myself for the quiet as I rest my head against his body.

But Colton’s chest isn’t quiet...

My eyes snap back open, and I press my ear harder against his rib cage to make sure I’m not hallucinating.

It’s barely there, but I can just hear the gentle *lub-dub* of his beating heart and the feeble *woosh* of his expanding lungs.

He's alive.

Vibrating with awareness and a renewed sense of purpose, I force myself to focus.

The first thing I check for is a phone to see if I can call for help, but his pockets are empty. Next, I use my knee to prop him up enough to look at the opposite side of his shoulder—just like the exit wound, the entry site is barely bleeding.

I scour his body for another bullet wound, but there is so much blood soaking his clothes it's difficult to see. It's everywhere: on my hands, my face, covering every inch of his tattooed flesh. I can't tell where it's coming from. Hell, I can't even tell how much of it belongs to Eastmann and how much of it belongs to Colton.

Lightheaded from adrenaline, but knowing that his life is in my hands, I keep searching until I discover a frayed hole in his jeans and the source of the bleed on his lower thigh, right above his knee.

As quickly as I can, I tear a wider opening into the denim, revealing a thin surge of bright-red blood seeping from a tiny laceration in his leg. I cover the wound with both hands, but every few seconds, more blood leaks out. I try using my body weight, but that does nothing to quell the flow.

Come on Rylee. Think!

Doing my best not to freak the fuck out, I'm glancing around for something I can use when lightning cracks across the sky, the bright flash glinting off Colton's silver belt buckle. My breath hitches as one of the stories Holly told me on our way to Boston comes rushing back to me.

Removing my hands, I rip off Colton's belt and, with quite a bit of effort, manage to make a tourniquet a few inches up from where the bullet got him. I press my ear back to his chest. I can barely hear his heart...and his breathing is even shallower now, but at least the bleeding stopped.

Rising to my feet, I grab his wrists, grunting as I attempt to drag him toward the stairs.

He doesn't budge.

I try again, but he's too heavy and I just can't move him.

My vision darkens around the edges, and when I try to take a breath, only a wheezing sound comes out.

I can't fucking lose him. Not again.

Dropping to my knees, I make sure the tourniquet is secure before removing Jack's ring from my hand and sliding it onto Colton's pinkie finger.

"I'm going to go get help." I bring his rapidly cooling palm to my cheek, leaning into his touch one last time and inhaling the beautiful scent of cloves and sunshine. "I promise I'll come back."

His chest rises with a sharp intake of breath.

"Colton?" For one second, I think he's going to wake up.

Then his chest rattles with the most horrifying wet gurgle I've ever heard...and it doesn't rise again.

My head snaps to the doorway as footsteps pound up the stairs.

I scream for help, and the tempo of their steps intensifies. There has to be hundreds of them for me to hear it over the rain. Part of me is aware that it could be anyone coming up those stairs, but at this point, I don't care who they are—

Colton's not breathing.

I place my fingers on his neck, but his pulse is so weak I can barely feel it. "We need help!" I scream again.

The first of the booted men appears in the open doorway, his broad shoulders filling the frame while he aims his firearm at my head.

My body shudders. "Danny," I whimper. "Save him. Please."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

RYLEE



Three Days Later

Early October

SOFT VOICES and the harsh beep of medical equipment draw me from a restless slumber.

Now that Colton's breathing tube has been removed and all but the medications keeping him comfortable discontinued, the hospital room is far less chaotic...

But it's almost *too* quiet.

The doctors and nurses still come in every hour to check his vitals and make sure the surgical incision in his leg and shoulder aren't infected, so this time I don't even bother prying my eyes open to greet them—what's the point when beneath my palm Colton's breathing is strong and unlabored, his heart marching in a beautifully steady rhythm that matches my own.

My hand clenches involuntarily, and I shiver at the unwanted reminder of when it wasn't.

I'll never forget the way the Jackals poured out from the stairwell and onto that roof, how quickly and efficiently they assessed the situation and acted. I'll also never forget the harrowing sound Danny made when he realized his brother wasn't breathing, or the gruesome *snap* of Colton's ribs breaking during CPR.

I squeeze my eyes shut even tighter, but that doesn't stop the memories from clawing their way to the surface.

After appearing in the stairwell, Danny shoves me out of the way so a man I've never seen before can start compressions on Colton's chest while another hooks him up to some sort of portable machine to shock his heart.

I scream as all around us, a swarm of Jackals flood out onto the rooftop—securing the perimeter and checking the three bodies for signs of life. I barely notice them. How could I when someone is restraining me while I fight tooth and nail to follow the man I love as he's carried down the stairs on a makeshift stretcher.

I press my ear firmly against Colton's chest, the strong beat of his heart grounding me in the present.

Thanks to Lee and his connections, Colton was in surgery within eight minutes of being carried off that rooftop. The doctors tried to tell me it was my tourniquet that bought him the extra time and saved his life, but without the Jackals who stormed that roof and the surgeons who operated on him... I don't even want to think about how this could have turned out.

I nestle into Colton's side, careful to avoid his broken ribs while trying not to jostle his opposite leg or arm.

"She'll want to know you're awake," Danny says from the foot of the hospital bed.

"Let her sleep for a few more minutes." Colton's chest rumbles against my cheek as he speaks, his good arm curving around my waist.

God, it's good to hear his voice. I've never heard a more soul-crushingly perfect sound and I nearly squeal with delight.

My eyes—heavy, caked with sleep, and dry from holding vigil at Colton's bedside—shoot open, but with my face semi-tucked into his side, I don't think either of them notice.

"How are you feeling?" Danny asks.

"Like Frank fucking shot me. *Twice.*" Colton laughs, but there's an edge to it that has my stomach tightening.

"About that," Danny says in a way that has me conjuring up images of a mocking grin. "*Technically*, you were only shot

once. According to the doc, it was a ricocheting bullet fragment that nicked the artery in your thigh, not a direct hit.” I flinch, my hand once again contracting involuntarily. “Honestly, I’m not sure if the shoulder shot counts either. If the bullet hadn’t torn the muscle so badly, you wouldn’t even have needed surgery on that one.”

Colton grunts, like he’s disappointed, and I roll my eyes.

Men.

At least Danny sounds like himself again. His playful demeanor and jesting words are a welcome departure from the ghost of a man I’ve spent the last three days with—the one who hasn’t been able to eat or sleep and refused to leave his brother’s bedside for even a second.

Now that Colton’s awake, I guess we’re all breathing a little easier.

“What happened while I was out?” Colton asks, sucking in a tight breath when he adjusts his right arm.

“I had Nolan and a few others guarding Vic’s hospital room after a bit of a commotion about the legality of a new CEO making decisions with a concussion, but that’s all sorted now and they’re headed back to Green River. Cloverville is still in Eden with Tate and Andy. They made sure the only thing Eastmann’s mining equipment can be used for in the future is scrap metal. And Lee and the boys are already back at work monitoring the fallout from the press conference.”

“And Minh?”

“He’s in the cafeteria with Alex.”

“They didn’t have to come to New York, I’m fine.”

“I called them in.” Danny pauses, like he’s choosing his next words very carefully or struggling to say them. “Rylee was freaking the fuck out. I needed the back up.”

Freaking out is a massive understatement.

My face heats. If I was to look over at Danny, I’d find a black eye, bruised cheeks, and fingernail marks up and down his forearms. At the time, I’d been so out of my mind that I

hadn't realized he was the one holding me back on that rooftop, but that doesn't make me feel any less guilty now.

A squeak echoes off the walls of the small hospital room that sounds like Danny scuffing the floor with his boot. "Rylee killed Frank."

"Good." Colton's fingers dig possessively into my back, his immediate acceptance and approval easing some of the tightness in my limbs.

"Minho got a camera angle off an adjacent building. Frank was coming to finish you off when she got him. It was too fucking close." Danny's voice cracks. "She saved your life."

"My girl really is something else, isn't she?" The pride and love in Colton's voice sinks straight into my bones.

"She is, and if you fuck it up with her again, I'll shoot you myself."

"Never again."

Danny grunts in approval. "Good. We're taking you home tonight. I'm going to go tell the boys you're awake."

"Danny?"

"*Hmm?*"

"We fucking did it."

There is a long pause and then Danny says, "I guess we did, didn't we?" I peek out just in time to catch a bashful smile on his lips.

"Jack would be proud of you, brother," Colton rasps. "*I'm* proud of you."

Danny's contemplative hum is followed by a dip in the bed as he leans over me. "He'd be proud of *all* of us." His voice is so close that he has to be touching his forehead to Colton's.

I bury my face deeper into Colton's side to hide the tears brimming in my eyes, and a moment later, Danny's footsteps disappear out the door.

"I know you're awake, Tiger."

I pop my head up, a giddy smile on my lips. “How’d you know?”

“Because your nails dug into me every time Danny mentioned me getting shot.”

Oops.

Pushing the hair away from my face, he chuckles before he spots the bruise on my temple and his smile fades. “Are you okay?”

Colton’s vital signs monitor beeps once in alarm, and out of habit, my head whips to the screen, searching for any of the warning signs the nurses were kind enough to explain to me. Besides a brief heart rate spike, everything looks fine as far as I can tell. But still overwhelmed by the fact that he’s awake and *alive*, my lower lip quivers. “I should be the one asking you that. Colton, you almost *died*.”

He grabs my chin, bringing my nose to his. “I’ve never been better. Now answer the question.”

I throw myself over his body, careful to avoid his injuries, and nuzzle into his neck, breathing in his spicy-sunshine scent and absorbing his warmth. “I am now.” He wraps his arms around my waist and places his cheek against the top of my head.

For a long time, we just lay there, savoring this moment. Each other.

“Did Ash make it?” I can tell by his flat tone that he already knows the answer, he just needs me to confirm it.

I pull back to look him in the eye. “No. They tried, but it was too late.”

A shadow crosses over his expression. “If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have found you in time. I saw you being forced into the limo,” he gently drags his index finger across the sore spot on my temple, “and even though I ran after you like a maniac, I wasn’t quick enough to see what floor you got off on. Ash was on her way to stop Frank when she found me. It was her idea to stand between me and him. She thought it would help me get you out of there without him taking a shot at us. It

never occurred to either of us that he would— *Fuck*. I didn't even try to save her.”

I kiss the bunched skin on his forehead and his frown lines, repeating the pattern until they soften. “There was nothing you could have done and I think she knew that. After Frank... After *it* happened, she looked at me and told me to run. She wanted you to live. We're alive because of her.”

“Fucking Frank.” Colton sighs, leaning back into his pillow. “But you're wrong, we're alive because of *you*.”

Resuming my previous position, I rest my arms on his upper chest, holding myself up so I can still see his face. I might have been the one to finish Frank, but I never would have made it off that roof without Colton. He has to know that, but now isn't the time to hash out who saved who. All that matters is that we made it.

Right now, I just want to get him healthy and take him home.

“What's that look for? What are you thinking about?” He drags his thumb down my jaw and across my lower lip.

“I was thinking that someone promised me I'd get to stay in bed for a month when this was over.” I nip playfully at his finger. “And then I was thinking about how I don't want to leave Eden ever again. Maybe I can just sit behind a computer next time we have to do this?”

Colton barks out a laugh, the deep sound causing butterflies to explode in a flurry inside my stomach. “Sounds like a plan to me. Speaking of home...” He reaches down to palm the necklace dangling between my breasts. “Are you going to let me finish what I was trying to say up on that roof and back at the hotel before that?”

Rolling my eyes, I let out a long-suffering sigh. “If you insist.”

That earns me a quick smile before he says, “I want four kids.”

I sit up so abruptly I nearly fall off the bed. “You *what*?”

Colton drags me back over to him until my torso is flush with his side. “You asked me what future I saw for myself. That’s what I see, you and me in a house full of three rambunctious boys with one doe-eyed, redheaded little girl to keep them all in line.”

He runs a hand along my open jaw, before threading it through my hair to cup my neck. “I see us building a life together and raising good human beings to be stewards of the better world we’re creating. I want to work from home so I never miss a first word or first anything. I want to make you come three times a day and cook you dinner every single night. I want our family over on Sundays, and I want to hear that beautiful laugh of yours every fucking day for the rest of my life.”

My lungs squeeze as a beautiful image of the future he’s describing forms in my head.

He hovers his lips over mine. “Does that sound like a good plan?”

I nod, trying to contain the bright light blossoming in my chest. “It sounds like the *best* plan.”

“Good,” he says through a smile.

“What if I want plantains for dinner every night?”

His dimple is back. “Whatever you want, it’s yours. All you need to do is tell me and I’ll make it happen.” He rolls his eyes. “Even if that means I have to make you goddamn plantains a hundred times a day.”

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I fight back my tears. “I want everything you said and more. I want it all.”

Three sets of footsteps sound from the hallway, Minho’s sharp peal of laughter penetrating through the door first, followed shortly by Danny’s low chuckle and Alex’s musical timber.

Colton leans in to steal a kiss, and then another. “Let’s go home, Tiger.”

EPILOGUE

RYLEE



Early June

Eight Months Later

THE CHEVY'S windows are down, and my hair whips against my neck, lashing at my cheeks while my hand soars up and down in the early summer breeze.

I can't see anything except the faint light filtering in through the worn fabric of my scratchy blindfold, but I'd almost swear Colton is driving us around in circles.

"Can you please take this damn thing off me?"

No answer, but my entire body bounces when we hit another pothole.

"Seriously, Alex is turning into a bit of a groomzilla. I don't understand why I have to wear a blindfold to get my hair and makeup done for a rehearsal din—"

A rough hand lands on my upper thigh, the initials on Colton's fingers and half his rose tattoo barely visible through the gap between the blindfold and my nose.

"*Hmm*," I purr, changing my tune and spreading my legs a little farther apart. "Okay. I guess the blindfold might not be so bad after all."

Colton snorts. "You are insatiable. On any other occasion I'd be happy to oblige, but we're here. You'll have to wait for *that* until later." He squeezes my thigh. "Hold tight while I come around to get your door."

My lips slip into a pout. Normally Colton is the one finding any excuse to partake in what he's been calling *physical therapy*. Claiming that getting me off with his right hand—at every available opportunity, no matter where we are or what time of day it is—is absolutely essential to the recovery of his shoulder.

The radio cuts out, and he grunts when he lifts himself out of the Chevy, a tiny jolt of pain stabbing through my chest at the second reminder of what happened back on that rooftop.

In the weeks after being shot, Colton's shoulder recovered remarkably well, but his leg has been...difficult. The initial operation in New York successfully stopped the bleeding and saved his life, but removing the bullet fragment, which was lodged in a rather tricky spot on his lower femur, had not been the priority at the time.

Two surgeries and a lot of excuses about a fake hunting accident later, Colton still has a slight limp, but is otherwise almost back to normal. No matter how well he's doing, there are some days, like today, when the pain returns. Under normal circumstances, we'd take it easy and stay in bed all day, but since our best friends are getting married tomorrow, that wasn't an option.

Colton opens my door and, with my hand in his and my blindfold still in place, guides me across a gravel road.

The air around us is crisp and clean, full of pine and laced with a light floral scent that intensifies when the wind picks up. I don't hear any cars or noise from passing pedestrians, so whatever salon Alex picked has to be on the quietest road in all of existence... Maybe even in a residential neighborhood?

“Be honest. There's no hair appointment, is there? You drove me out into the middle of nowhere to murder me, didn't you?”

He chuckles. “Why do you always think I'm taking you somewhere to kill you?” I still can't see, but I can feel him shaking his head, pretending like he's not amused.

“Then *please*”—I stomp impatiently—“can I take the blindfold off?”

For some reason, I have this horrible notion that Alex is going to cut my hair and dye it red and black to match his wedding colors.

Colton’s hand lands on my upper back, warm and steady. His breath rolls across the crest of my ear as he says, “I’ll take it off for you.”

I shiver while his hands work the blindfold free. Once it’s off, it’s so bright out that I have to squint, but even when my eyes adjust, the sight before me doesn’t make sense. It’s too perfect to be real. Disoriented, I blink to see if I’m imagining things, but the image remains unchanged.

Rolling hills in the distance, a flower-filled meadow in front of me...and a one-story craftsman with light-gray siding, dark-gray trim, and beautiful wooden beams and shutters straight out of my dreams stands before me.

There are planter boxes filled with bright-red-and-orange marigolds at the front and a path on the side of the house leading to a massive gated garden.

“What is this?”

Colton holds out his palm, and a silver house key glints in the sun. “It’s a graduation present.”

My head tilts to the side. “But I graduated two weeks ago.”

Colton lets loose a disbelieving laugh. “I built you a house and that’s what you say—that you graduated two weeks ago?”

“You didn’t build me a house?” I glance up and down the road, my eyebrows lifting into my hairline. “Colton, this is your parents’ property... Wait, I thought you said I couldn’t run here because the road washed out in a storm?”

He scrunches his nose. “Yeah, the road was fine, I just didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

Holy shit, he built me a house.

“It’s too much,” I whisper, shaking my head in disbelief.

How did he do this? And how did he remember every last detail, even though I only mentioned it once?

He grips my waist. “You gave me a home and a reason for living. Nothing is ever too much for you.” My pulse drums as he softly captures my lips with his before pulling away. “Plus, I think Danny is ready to have his place to himself.”

Warmth radiates throughout my entire body and I squeal. “It’s perfect. When can we move in?”

His hands slide down my back to my ass and he squeezes. “Whenever you want. With you finishing up school and Minho’s wedding, I told them we weren’t in a rush, but as of yesterday everything is done. I had Jack’s old stuff put inside until we can get our own. Actually, we should probably offer to let Holly, Mac, and JJ stay here when they get into town tonight.”

I lift a brow. “Do you think they’ll need one or two rooms this time?” I usually let Colton think I’m oblivious to the fact that he and Mac text every week, but not today. I know he has insider information Holly hasn’t shared with me.

He smirks. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

I clutch the key to my chest, jumping up and down before flinging myself into his arms. “Fine. Can we go inside?”

His eyes glint. “Of course we can. There’s something in the primary room’s closet I think you’re really going to like.”

No fucking way...

“My secret office?”

“Go in and find out.”

I grab his hand and pull him two steps down the driveway before stopping. “Wait, I have something for you, too.” I lead him back to the Chevy and dig through the glove box to where I hid it yesterday.

There it is.

Not wanting to steal Minho and Alex’s thunder, I’d planned on waiting until after the wedding festivities were

over to give him this, but now seems like too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Colton lifts a single brow when I hand him the thin manila envelope, but I'm too excited to wait until he opens it.

"It's the deed to the land." I gesture wildly around us. "The forest, the old mill, the pond where you fished with Jeremy, those hills over there—all of the original Archer land belongs to you again."

"What? How?" he croaks.

I bounce and wiggle my shoulders with excitement. "Vic. I've been helping them with Eastmann Incorporated's new reparations initiative, and they signed these over to me as payment. Not just here either, I have the deeds for the whole county. We can give it all back."

Colton stares at the deed without blinking. When he finally looks back up at me, his lower lids are water lined.

Next thing I know, I'm back in his arms and he's spinning me.

"You." *Kiss.*

"Perfect." *Kiss.*

"Crazy." *Kiss.*

"Little shit."

We stop spinning, and he smiles against my lips. "I know I've said it before, but I could live a thousand years and never deserve you. You've given me more than I ever could have hoped for, and even though I'll never be able to repay that debt, I'm sure as fuck going to spend the rest of my life showing you how grateful I am."

Kissing me, his arms snake down my back to pick me up by my ass. My legs wrap around his waist as he starts walking, our lips and tongues dancing every step of the way until the hood of the Chevelle pops when I'm set atop it.

"But there is still one thing you owe *me*," he growls, voice low and full of gravel. "And I think it's about time I collect."

The menacing octave of his words already has my heart racing when he recaptures my lips, delving his tongue into my mouth and stoking the fire between us. With my back flat against the sun-warmed metal, we devour each other, basking in the glow of the life we're creating. I once wondered if being with Colton would always feel so all-consuming, or if anyone would ever place me first. Now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I have my answers.

I take his lower lip between my teeth, and he groans, heat curling in my belly at the delicious feel of his erection pressed against me through my shorts. His mouth moves to my neck, his hands momentarily leaving my ass as he nibbles and trails kisses across my chest and down my belly to lick my inner thigh.

My eyes fly open at the quick *click* of a pocketknife being extended. "Colton Archer, don't you dare. These are my favorite shorts."

"Come on. What if I promise to buy you a new pair?"

I shake my head and scoot a few inches up the hood. "Nope. Not happening."

With a devilish smirk, he brings his pointer finger and the knife to his chin. "Listen, Tiger. We're putting that dent back in the hood. You have exactly three seconds before I cut these shorts off, so I suggest you shimmy out of them as quickly as possible."

"You wouldn't." Even as I say it, I can tell by the mischievous glint in his eyes that he would, and he's going to.

My hands dive to my zipper and I squeal.

Colton's lip quirks up as he steps forward. "One. Two..."

THE END

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Gratefully yours,

Emmerson

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Emmerson Hoyt lives in Central Texas with her husband and a small horde of animals. When she's not writing, she's getting floral tattoos or playing video games.

Check out her website for the latest news!

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