



The
**DECISION
MAKER**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C. HALLMAN

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www.bleedingheartpress.com

Cover design by Dark Heart Designs

Editing by Kelly Allenby

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BLURB

I'm supposed to be confident in the decisions I make.
Everyone counts on me to be sure of myself, never to waiver.
How can I do my job when I feel so lost and confused, trapped
between what I know is wrong...
and yet feels so right?

GRIFFIN

I glanced at the empty chair where Natalie usually sits. I'm not sure what I'm more upset about, missing proof of her not betraying us, or not knowing where she is now.

Loyalty means everything to me, but Natalie's situation is off. I just can't believe she betrayed us. Someone framed her, I'm sure of it. Probably her mother or someone involved with her. I just can't wrap my mind around Natalie going against her brother and the hotel. She has been nothing but dedicated to us.

"Just find her," Mason orders, rapping his pen against the table. "Find them both."

He has been back to his grumpy self ever since he found out his sister was possibly compromised two weeks ago. Especially after a family member already betrayed him. I think the only reason he hasn't completely gone off the rails is his relationship with Teagan. What started as a tremendous pain in our ass turned out to be our saving grace.

"We'll find her." Teagan's voice calms Mason immediately. Tank, Dallas, and I all nod in agreement.

Mason's shoulders relax, and he sighs. "I know, but it's taking too long."

"How about I go out looking for her?" I offer. "The old-fashioned way." For the last ten years or so, tracking has been done almost exclusively virtually. With technology evolving, surveillance cameras and us being able to tap into almost

every electronic device in the world, it's made going out physically seem useless.

"I agree." Dallas slaps his palm onto the table. "The old-fashioned way is going to be our only chance. Natalie is smart and knows too much to get caught any other way. But I should be the one going."

Before I can object, Mason lifts his hand. "I'm sorry, Griffin, but Dallas is right. He should go. I need you here, and he has more experience with that kind of tracking."

"So he gets to go because he's old as dirt?"

"Yes," Dallas answers, unimpressed by my jab at his age.

"Kindergarten kids stay here," he adds under his breath, so only I can hear.

Asshole.

"I'm going to check her apartment again. Do a full sweep, looking for anything we might have missed the first time." I can't stand the way he folds his arms and looks around like his word is law and nobody had better say otherwise.

What I hate more is the feeling that my hands are tied. I can't step aside and let him look for Natalie on his own. If this were anyone else, in any other situation, things might be different. I'm sure he knows what he's doing. He's had enough experience.

This is Natalie. Not some random target. And she's more than Mason's sister—at least, she is to me. But what do I do? Announce that? Sure, and get my balls cut off. It would be beyond stupid and selfish to admit there was more to us than a strictly professional relationship. Not that we were ever serious—and it's because we were never serious that it's not worth bringing it up and complicating things. It doesn't matter how close Mason and I work together. He might trust me with his life and his secrets, but his sister? That's another story.

"I'll go with you. Two sets of eyes will make the work go by quicker." And I'm not waiting for him to give me the okay, either. I'm not asking for permission.

We exchange a glance, and I lift an eyebrow. Go ahead. Keep fighting with me. I almost wish he would, but he says nothing, only giving his head the smallest shake before shrugging. “Whatever you say. Time is of the essence. I can’t waste any more of it dealing with temper tantrums.”

“Careful,” I warn. “Much more of that, and I might knock the dentures out of your mouth.”

“Enough.” Mason’s angry stare lands on me, then on Dallas. “This bullshit isn’t helping. Get it together. Find her.”

If only it were that easy.

I follow Dallas out of the room and into the hall. Natalie’s suite is on the seventeenth floor. We take the stairs from Mason’s, neither of us saying a word. It’s safer that way.

A cursory search was done of Natalie’s apartment when she vanished. At the time, there was a little more panic—after everything Mason went through to get Teagan back, the fear that their psychotic mother had also targeted Natalie was real. As far as we know, she was just as much in the dark about her mother being alive as Mason was before Beverly showed her face for the first time in years. Mason was terrified his sister had been taken, that somehow their mother’s twisted psyche had resulted in more violence and cruelty.

Right away, that theory died when it became clear Natalie took precautions before leaving. This was not a woman who was kidnapped in the dead of night. Her CIA training told her not to leave anything behind that would lead us to her, but also not to take anything that could be easily traced. Finding she had destroyed her electronic devices and wiped her hard drives drove the point home.

She was on her own and did not want to be found.

Dallas uses the pass key to access her suit. Only Mason and Nat have a whole floor to themselves since there are the two who usually stay at the Hotel all the time. Their jobs as the manager and the decision maker demand all of their time. We step into her apartment, and right away, the familiar scent of Natalie’s perfume overwhelms me. Vanilla with notes of

orange, cinnamon, and sandalwood. It's subtle, something I've smelled a million times and never consciously connected to her. Smelling it now sets off a bitter pang deep in my gut. Loss. Regret.

Could I have stopped this from happening somehow?

Big surprise, no such emotions burden Dallas. I'm fairly sure he swore off genuine human emotion before I was born. "Let's split up. I'll take the bedroom, bathroom, and office. You can have the rest." As usual, his word is law, and he marches off to the bedroom without missing a beat.

Fine. I would rather work without him hovering over me, anyway. I start by searching under furniture, tipping the sofa and chairs backward in case there's something taped beneath them. Anything—an extra device, a notebook, a flash drive. I go through the kitchen cabinets, taking the drawers out, searching for false bottoms. She's not some innocent rookie. She knows her shit. She knows how to cover her tracks.

I would normally appreciate that—it might even have turned me on in the past. How capable and shrewd she is. Right now, though, it's a pain in the ass.

"How's it going?" Dallas asks from where he is going through the bathroom vanity by the sounds of it. I have to bite my tongue rather than announce I totally cracked the case, and simply didn't feel like filling him in before now. He irks the shit out of me with his superior attitude, but Natalie could be in trouble. She needs us. I can swallow my pride and let this old man think he's top dog for a little while.

"She's not lazy. She's too disciplined to leave anything behind that we could use."

"You never know," he insists. "There's got to be something around here. She was in a hurry when she left—she couldn't have thought of everything."

If that's what he needs to tell himself. "I thought you figured she had Beverly coaching her through all of this. Pulling the strings and all that shit. She would've prepared for possibly having to run."

He's quiet for a long time. We don't agree on what we think her motive was for running. He thinks her twisted-as-fuck mother somehow roped her in. I think she was completely in the dark, and Beverly framed her to distract us from what she's doing behind the scenes. Why she would throw her own daughter under the bus is a mystery, but it's a mystery why she would try to kill Mason, too. Some things can't be explained. It's a waste of time trying.

I look up when Dallas exits the bathroom, standing between it and the kitchen. "Let's get one thing straight. I wouldn't put it past Beverly to use Natalie if she is dead set on hurting Mason. It would not only give her insight into Mason's daily life and how to best get to him, but it would be fucking with him up here." He taps the side of his head, looking grim. "That doesn't mean I think Natalie's guilty. Parent shit... there's no black-and-white when it comes to that."

I find it hard to believe Natalie could know her mother was alive and not tell Mason, but I'll keep that to myself. He can't know her the way I do if he is willing to entertain that theory.

It's fucking wrong and unprofessional to let my personal feelings color my interpretation of this, but some things can't be denied. Nothing matters more to her than family. After losing both parents and their older brother, all Mason and Nat had was each other. Unless Beverly managed to get in her head and poison her, I can't believe Natalie would do anything to hurt him. I can't force my imagination to entertain that possibility.

I stare at the backsplash behind the stove, silently going back and forth. Telling myself I need to be objective, but unable to let go of the image of who I believe Natalie to be.

As I stare, I see something I've never noticed before. I never had a reason to. *Who fucked this up?* I ask myself, reaching out and running a hand over a section of slate gray and black tile that's slightly out of alignment with the surrounding tiles. Everything else about this suite is perfect—they spared no expense in upgrading, retrofitting, and making certain that even someone with the most discerning taste

couldn't possibly have anything to complain about. Yet this tile was left all sloppy and off-center?

“Holy shit.” A slight touch and, like magic, the entire section of the wall lifts out. I have to catch it before it slides between the wall and the back of the stove. “Dallas!” I bark, placing the tile and the sheet rock it was attached to on the stove before plucking a small notebook from inside the hollow space behind it.

“Good work.” He steps up beside me, peering at the small, neat handwriting. I would know it anywhere. She's so precise.

Though it doesn't make a damn bit of sense to me. “What is this?” I murmur, flipping through the pages. It's gibberish, words strung together at random.

“Give it here, young buck.” Dallas plucks the notebook from my grip before I have the chance to comply. “It's code. CIA code.”

“And you can read it?”

“I absolutely can.” He looks as grim as he sounds. “These are coordinates.”

“Locations?”

“It would appear that way.”

And she was hiding it. Using code to keep outsiders like me from being able to find out where she might be headed. A list of safe houses? It's possible, but whose? And why would she know about them?

A glance at Dallas tells me he's as perplexed as I am—and as concerned. “This might sound like it's coming from the wrong place,” he murmurs, tapping the vinyl-covered book against his open palm while staring out the window at a gray, drizzly day. “But I think this should stay between the two of us.”

He pauses for a beat, then looks my way over his shoulder. “Do you read me?”

I do, and I'm surprised we were thinking along the same lines. Mason does not need to know about this until we

understand what we're looking at. I don't know yet whether we would be protecting him or protecting Natalie. I only know if he were to go chasing after her as conflicted and nearly frantic as he is, it could ruin everything.

Not to mention the fact that his mother could be behind all of it and could be expecting him to fall so easily for the bait she left. There's just no way of knowing.

"I read you," I tell him, and though we've been on the same team from the beginning, now it feels real.

And if we fuck this up, it's both of our necks on the chopping block.

DALLAS

“*W*here are we going first?” Griffin questions, jogging beside me as I head for the parking garage on the basement level. The closest set of coordinates will take an hour’s drive—while I doubt Natalie would only flee that far. There could be a clue pointing us toward her current location. At the very least, I’d like to know what these locations represent.

His question steers me away from my train of thought. “We? Got a rat in your pocket?”

“I know you’re up in age, but I don’t think you rate dad jokes until you’re an actual dad.”

“How do you know I don’t have a kid?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Wait, do you?” Griffin scratches his head.

“No. Not that I know of.”

“Then my statement remains.” Griffin shrugs when we reach the garage, angling his body in front of the metal door and preventing me from exiting the stairwell. “Now, tell me where we are going first.”

“You can go wherever you want to, but I’m going by myself.” I can’t let Griffin know that I have a soft spot for Natalie any more than I can explain why it matters so much that I do this on my own.

“And how are you going to explain it to Mason?”

That is not such an easy question to answer, and it brings me up short. Mason isn't the kind of guy who wants to be coddled. I don't know many men who do.

It isn't coddling him to keep this information to ourselves for now. He's already too intimately involved in this mission. There are too many conflicting emotions, all of which would only serve to muddy the waters and make the job infinitely more challenging. We can't afford it.

That doesn't mean I want to lie to his face. He's already been through so much, going back well before this most recent situation. There he was all this time, believing both of his parents died in that wreck. Now he knows it was only his father who lost his life—and rather than be happy his mother is still alive, he discovered how twisted and determined she's become to destroy him. Why? That's anybody's guess.

“Well?”

Standing before me, Griffin folds his arms, wearing a smirk. The arrogant little prick. He was shitting his diapers while I was on the other side of the world,

making it possible for him and his family to sleep soundly at night.

“I'll tell him I have a lead, and that's it. He doesn't need to know anything else yet.” I push him aside and open the door to the garage, growling but unsurprised when he follows.

“I'm sure that will go very well for you.”

“What's the alternative? Are you trying to tell me you have a better way?” I look him up and down, snickering when he falls in step beside me.

His eyes narrow to slits. “I'm telling you, I can sell it better than you can. You've got that whole concerned dad thing going on, and it's not working at a time like this.”

Again with the dad bullshit. “Your shtick is getting old.”

“It's not shtick if it's the truth, which it is.” His jaw tightens when our eyes meet, and I know I'm backed into a corner before he opens his mouth. “I can call him and give an

excuse he'll buy, or I can go to him and tell him you're visiting these locations so he can have you tracked. Either or. It's up to you."

"What do you get out of this?"

"It matters to me that she's brought back safe."

"And you don't trust me to make sure that happens?"

I know he wants to make another old man joke. I can practically hear the gears turning in his head. Something stops him, and he clears his throat. "It has nothing to do with trust. But... I know her. And on the off chance she's truly fucked in the head thanks to whatever Beverly planted in her brain. It might be smarter to have me there than to have me stay here. I might be able to get through to her."

A strange heat blooms in my chest. What is he implying? Are they closer than I suspected? He wouldn't do anything as stupid as that, would he? He has to know Mason would flip his shit.

Though Natalie is a grown woman with a mind of her own. A mind I happen to be fascinated by.

"Fine. Call him but make it quick. Don't tell him anything he doesn't need to know."

"I sure am glad you're here to tell me what to do. Maybe you can help me wipe my ass later. I've been having some difficulty with it." The arrogant little prick sets my teeth on edge, but I brush off the irritation in favor of climbing into my truck while he places the call.

"No, it's just a possible location," Griffin insists as he joins me. "It makes a lot more sense for us to go and check it out than for you to possibly waste time. You've got other shit going on, God knows. Let us handle this."

He puts Mason on speaker so I can hear him growl loud enough for the sound to fill the cab. "I want updates. Regular ones."

"You've got it," Griffin promises.

“And if you find her...” He goes silent for a moment, and I can practically feel his conflicting emotions. “Just bring her back, okay? We’ll deal with what happens after that when the time comes.”

Griffin promises we will before ending the call and turning to me, wearing a smirk while I start the truck’s engine. “See? Piece of cake.”

“Pardon me if I don’t applaud.” Still, I can at least admit to myself that he handled the situation efficiently.

Now, if I could only put a finger on why it seems to matter so damn much that he comes along with me. They didn’t have anything going on between them, did they? I would’ve seen it, for sure.

But would I have? It isn’t like I spend all my time at the hotel—the way they do. They are together all the time. They’re both young, both healthy, normal people. It wouldn’t be too far a stretch for them to fumble their way into a physical situation.

And here I am, old enough to be her father. The gray running through my hair and the lines at the corners of my eyes catch my attention in my reflection when I check out the rearview mirror. It’s not Griffin’s fault he’s closer to her age than I am.

I can’t hold that against him any more than I can hold her poor taste against

her—a smart girl like her could do a hell of a lot better.

She could also do a hell of a lot better than me.

* * *

“YOU’RE SURE ABOUT THIS?” Griffin looks behind us, side to side, before staring at the structure indicated by the coordinates Natalie provided.

I see why he’s got his doubts. The cute little craftsman set far back behind a neatly trimmed lawn looks nearly identical to the homes up and down the block. “She’d want to blend in.”

He snorts, then side-eyes me. “Who are you talking about? Beverly or Natalie?”

That’s the thing. I don’t know.

By the time night falls, we’ve sat and watched the house for more than an hour. The absence of a vehicle in the driveway doesn’t mean anything. Someone could be lying in wait.

Yet even though I’ve stared at the windows and the curtains behind them until my eyes begin to burn, there hasn’t been a shift of the thin, white fabric to tell me someone moved behind it.

“Looks empty,” I decide after another hour of tense silence. “Watch for motion sensors.”

“Anything else I need to know?” He checks his Glock, shaking his head. “It’s amazing I’ve lived a day without your advice.”

Once we secure Natalie, I can teach this child some manners. For now, we exit the truck silently and approach the dark house. At this point, I doubt we’ll find anything inside but dust, but it might take us one step closer to understanding why Natalie ran. If there’s evidence of Beverly being here, I might believe this was a list of locations where Natalie thought she could find her mother rather than a list of safe houses for Natalie to hide out in. Does that mean she fled to Beverly for help?

Or was she only trying to track down the woman she thought she’d buried years ago?

We exchange a glance when the front door opens easily. Is it a trap? Something meant to get our guard down? There’s a small planter on the porch with nothing but dead weeds inside. I place it on the threshold and kick it across the front room in case anyone had any ideas about motion sensors or tripwires. The only thing that results is a mess when the planter tips over and spills its contents across a worn hardwood floor.

“Wow. That was fun.” Griffin slides past me into the house, testing the light switch by the door. I’m surprised when

the lights go on—the fact that there’s power running to the house tells me it might have been inhabited recently.

It’s sparsely furnished the way a safe house would typically be. No need to waste time with the bells and whistles and comforts of home when you don’t expect to be around for long. My gaze moves over a simple sofa and chair, a TV that must be at least ten years old, and a few magazines scattered on the coffee table.

“Six months old,” Griffin murmurs, looking down at the covers.

A clue? A hint? I was here, and you had no idea. “Beverly?” I suggest, continuing my search.

Beyond the front room is a dining room with nothing but a table, then a large, open kitchen that leads into what might have been a family room in better days. A large fireplace sits against the back wall and features a long, deep mantle, which holds a single framed photo. It’s the only decoration I’ve seen so far and naturally grabs my attention.

I’m still halfway across the room when I recognize one of the faces beaming behind the glass. “Look at this.” I wave Griffin over so he can get a look at Natalie back in her teenage years. She still had braces, and what are now faint freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose were more abundant back then. Beverly stands behind her, and aside from the lighter shade of her hair, the resemblance is breathtaking. They could be twins born decades apart.

“Tell me you’re as creeped out as I am.” Griffin leans in to examine the damage done to the photo. Aside from Beverly and Natalie, there are three men. One of them I recognize, and the recognition strikes at the core of me. He was a good-looking kid, full of confidence.

“Jonathan,” I murmur.

“Mason’s brother.” Griffin touches a finger to the glass, dumbfounded by the scratched-out faces of the other two men who must be Mason and his father. It’s like something out of a horror movie, creepy enough to send a chill down my spine.

Now there's no doubt in my mind. "This must be Beverly. She must have been hiding out here."

"And she left this behind to make sure somebody would know." Our gazes meet and there's no need to ask what he's thinking. Natalie would have found this if she ended up here the way we have. I hate to think what seeing it might have done to her.

"I think we can tell Mason about this," I decide. "And he deserves to know."

"I'll take care of it." Griffin pulls out his phone and sends a text while I do one more sweep of the house. Once I'm confident we haven't missed anything, we retreat to the truck. One location down, many more to go.

I don't know about Griffin, but I have no intention of giving up until we find our target.

No matter how long it takes.

GRIFFIN

One thought keeps running through my head every time I lift my foot to take another treacherous step: she better fucking be here.

Recent satellite footage shows smoke coming from the chimney of this cabin, yet another one of the locations from that little notebook. The damn notebook. We've been on a wild fucking goose chase for days, and it's a miracle Dallas and I haven't killed each other yet. I'm not sure how much longer that will be the case, either.

But this is the worst. This tops them all. We parked a half mile from the location, knowing Natalie would be watching for trespassers, and started out on foot when there was nothing worse than a thin, cold mist falling from the sky and clinging to our jackets, shoes, our hair, and the surrounding trees. It couldn't have been more than five minutes before the mist turned to a steady, icy rain. The sort of rain that works its way into your bones and threatens to freeze your muscles and joints. The wind is fierce, blowing almost straight in our faces. At least Dallas's constant insistence that he take the lead works in my favor this time around. He's sort of a windbreak, making it possible for me to hike without it feeling like my face is turning to ice.

No way could she make it out here for long. There's no electricity, not a hint of a cell signal. This could only ever be a temporary resting point.

When Dallas comes to a sudden stop, I slam into his back. "The fuck?" I bark over the wind, but there's no need for him

to answer. Not once I look up ahead and identify a faint glow in the darkness. That glow gives me strength, makes it easier to move my feet and push against the unforgiving wind. The cabin is just ahead, and there's a light inside. Someone is here. Hope blooms in my chest that we've finally found her, and it will mean getting out of this godforsaken rain.

There's a small porch, and even the roof over our heads is a welcome change once we stumble up the steps. I peer through a grimy window beside the front door, and what I find inside melts the ice that's built up around my heart as day after day of searching has left us with nothing but frustration. Natalie is crouched in front of the fireplace wearing oversized sweats, poking at the logs inside without much success. They don't seem to want to catch. Maybe the wood is wet.

But she's here. She's shivering and cursing, but she's here.

And when Dallas opens the door with no warning, she pivots, grabbing for the gun on the mantle and aiming for him before recognition takes hold. She goes from glaring murderously to sighing once I enter and close the door against the weather.

I don't know what I imagined would be the first thing out of her mouth after all this time. Did I think she'd recoil in surprise? Break down in tears? I should've known better.

"Took you long enough." She doesn't replace the gun right away, I notice, but eventually returns it to its spot on the mantle before folding her arms and pretending not to be as cold as she clearly is.

I can't get over it. In the glow from the lantern on the coffee table, she could be ten years younger. I've gotten so used to the polished façade she wears in her daily life—hair and makeup always done perfectly, designer clothes at all times of the day. Now, her long hair hangs loose and her bare face makes her look more like a kid than the woman I know. Someone in need of protection.

She notices me staring, and when our eyes meet, she arches an eyebrow in a silent challenge. I wish it didn't stir something in me, something hot and familiar and potentially

dangerous. This isn't the time to remember how easy it is for her to turn me on.

“Looks like you're having trouble with that fire.” Dallas strips off his wet jacket and hangs it from the doorknob before assisting without being asked. Natalie steps aside—obviously, pride doesn't mean much when you're half-frozen and the temperature is only getting colder all the time.

“Which one of you found the notebook?” Her gaze swings back and forth between us. Dallas only grunts, throwing me a look over his shoulder. Even now, the competitive prick wishes he could be the one to take credit. And I'm the one who's a child? It's baffling.

“I found it,” I tell her proudly. “Nice hiding place.”

“Thanks.” She snickers and looks away, watching as flames leap to life. It doesn't take long for the cabin to warm up and loosen my muscles, while the light from the fire gives me a better idea of what we're dealing with here. For a remote cabin, it's fairly well appointed, with stuffed bookshelves lining the wall on either side of the fireplace. At the far end of the large room is the kitchen, and a round wooden table with four chairs serves to separate the two spaces.

From what I can see where I'm standing, the bathroom features a deep clawfoot tub, and the bedroom beside it holds a queen size bed, at least. The cheerful quilt spread across it is a nice touch. It's almost homey.

“Do you guys need anything to eat? There's a bunch of soup in the cabinets.” She nods in that direction. Is this happening? Are we ignoring the elephant in the room and discussing such unimportant things as soup?

“Maybe later,” Dallas decides in a firm voice. For once, he's got the right idea. For once, I can appreciate his directness. “You realize we're not here to stay, right? We'll stick around for the night since the weather is shit, and it's so late, anyway. But endgame? We're taking you back to the hotel.”

She doesn't look thrilled by this announcement, but she doesn't look surprised, either. I wouldn't dream of insulting her intelligence by imagining she hasn't already gone through every possible scenario in her head from the moment we walked through the door. "And I get no say in this?"

"Do you have anything to say?" Dallas turns to her, running a hand over his head, shaking what's left of the rain out of his hair. "I know I would love to hear it."

"That makes two of us," I mutter, leaning my back against the door. Not that I think she would make a run for it in these conditions, but she needs to be reminded it won't be so easy to get away this time around.

She shoots me a glare and draws her lips together in a line so tight I can barely see them. "Maybe another time."

"So you're not going to bother telling us why you ran off?" Dallas looks about as unsurprised as I am. Nothing about this has been easy. Why start now?

"Now you're getting the idea."

When he draws a breath like he's ready to press the subject, she only tightens her jaw. I wonder if she knows how much she and Mason have in common. How annoyingly similar they can be when they're feeling stubborn.

"That's fine," I assure her with a faint grin. "We have all the time in the world to listen to anything you have to say. We can talk about it in the morning, on the way back to the hotel."

"You are determined to do this, aren't you?" she whispers.

"We didn't come all this way to say hi and move along." I make it a point to hold her gaze, silently pleading for more than this frigid attitude. Aren't we better than this? Haven't we been through enough together?

I sound like a lovesick kid, even to myself. And it's fairly clear she doesn't feel the same.

"I'm fucking exhausted," I announce. "How about we get some sleep before morning?"

“That depends.” Dallas peers into the bedroom before sliding his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and giving Natalie a narrow-eyed look.

“Depends on what?” she asks suspiciously.

“On whether we can trust you to stick around. You’re not going to run off again, are you?”

She eyes the window. “Like you said, the weather is a disaster. I’d be a real idiot to go out on a night like this.”

Maybe I know her too well, or maybe she’s a little rusty when it comes to telling a believable lie. Either way, it’s clear she doesn’t mean a word of what she’s saying.

Dallas and I have a silent conversation over the top of her head. It’s clear what we have to do. I don’t much love the idea of sharing a king size bed with him, but it does look like a comfortable bed, and there seems to be plenty of room. I shrug. He shrugs.

“I’m not tired,” she announces.

“I don’t remember asking if you were.” I’m sick of the kid glove treatment. If she is going to be a hardass, refusing to give an inch, I am not going to baby her. She gives up the fight quickly, shaking her head as she turns toward the bedroom and marches to the bed.

Sharing a bed with Dallas. There’s something I never wanted to experience. Yet here we are, climbing in on either side of the woman we’ve practically moved heaven and earth to find. No matter how I tell myself to stay awake, that we should sleep in shifts to watch over her, there’s no fighting the overwhelming fatigue that soon closes my eyes and wraps darkness around me.

DALLAS

It isn't Griffin's snoring that wakes me. It's not Natalie's presence beside me, either. All night, I couldn't manage anything beyond light, dreamless sleep. I was too aware of her presence at my side. Wondering whether she was sleeping, or if she was trying to sneak away. She weighed far too heavily on my mind to let me fall into a deep sleep.

Until recently, at least. I must eventually have sunk deeper since somewhere in the past hour or so between darkness and dawn, she crept out of bed without either of us noticing.

I'm not going to jump to conclusions. She could be in the bathroom for all I know. I roll out of bed as gently as possible—though the way Griffin is snoring, I could probably march a brass band through the room, and he wouldn't stir. I want so much to find her brushing her teeth or washing her face, yet there's no great surprise involved in finding the bathroom empty. Along with the rest of the cabin.

She left something behind, though. A note waits on the mantle, and I grab for it before returning to the bedroom and kicking Griffin's leg. "She's gone." I thrust the note at him, a folded slip of paper containing a single word. *Sorry*.

"Motherfucker." He bolts upright, instantly alert, while I go to the window to look out at the morning. The storm has passed, and I'm thankful for that because a day spent trudging through the woods in the middle of a cold rain isn't high on the list of activities I'd like to try out.

“Where the hell did she go this time?” It’s a rhetorical question, one to which I have no answer.

All I can do is grunt as we leave the room, grabbing our coats and shoving our feet into our boots. “Let’s hope she didn’t find the car,” I offer.

“I still have the keys,” he points out before groaning. “I’m sure she could hot-wire it.”

I shudder to think of her leaving us here, though I’m sure she figures we could make it back between the two of us and our experience.

Sorry, she says. If only I could imagine she means it.

“She can’t have gotten far,” I decide as we step outside and into a bitterly cold day. The storm might have cleared out, but it brought along with it frigid temperatures and the sort of wind that can tear its way straight through a man’s clothes and seemingly into his very marrow. Oh, I would like to make her pay for putting us through this.

Once that flash of irritation passes, I remind myself she must have a reason for all of this. I doubt she feels like being out here in this frozen hellscape any more than I do.

“What makes you say that?” Griffin asks as he searches for prints to give us a sense of the direction she started out in.

“Because I barely slept all night. The light outside the window was starting to turn gray when I finally dropped off for good, and she was there then.”

“That’s still, what? An hour or so?” He looks up at the sky, studying the angle of the sun.

“Something like that.” But in surroundings like this, I doubt she’s moving very fast. No matter how desperate she is to get away.

Dammit, if I only knew why. I might have been able to get through to her and avoid this bullshit.

“Here.” Griffin’s excited grunt snaps me out of my pointless self-questioning, and I look to find a pair of small boot prints in the earth a handful of yards from the cabin. It’s

cold as fuck, but the ground hasn't frozen yet. All that rain last night left a lot of mud.

Griffin is already moving before I have a chance to speak, following the prints, while part of me wonders if this isn't a trap or a means of leading us in the wrong direction. Would she go to that trouble? Would she do it if her mother told her to?

"Colder than a witch's tit," Griffin observes, leaving a fog of vapor hanging around him with every word. "What a shame she couldn't do this in the summer."

"Who knows? Maybe we lost her and this will drag on until summer."

"Don't even joke about that," he warns in a dark voice. "I'd rather jump in the river." Now that he mentions it, I hear it somewhere nearby.

"I'm sure you meant no offense by that," I mutter, following him while scanning the area for any signs of her blue coat.

"For once, no. I didn't have you in mind when I said that. But now you mention it..." He smirks over his shoulder, but doesn't say another word.

A question that's been on my mind for days bubbles to the surface, and while I've managed to leave it unspoken until now, I saw the way he looked at her last night. I heard the intimacy in his voice. He must have hid it pretty well before—I suppose being at the hotel around Mason was motivation to hide how he felt. There's no such motivation now.

"What's going on with you two?" I ask.

He stumbles slightly, a gesture which would have gone unnoticed if I wasn't watching him closely. "What do you mean?"

Pretty pitiful. "Can we not play games? I'm too fucking cold and I've gone too long without a full night's sleep in a decent bed to play games. I asked you a question, and I would appreciate an answer."

“I’m just wondering. Whoever said there was anything going on between us?”

“Nobody had to. No judgment here, either,” I insist. “But if you have a personal relationship, it might benefit our mission if I knew about it.”

“Fair enough.” Still, he hesitates before answering my question. “We sort of had a fling a while back. Nothing serious.”

“And I’m assuming Mason never found out, since your balls are still attached to your body.”

He stifles a burst of laughter. “Correct, and I would prefer they stay that way, if it’s all the same to you.”

I’m glad he can’t see the irritation I’m sure is written across my face. I would hardly consider myself burning with jealousy, though. They’re both young, attractive people who work closely together and find themselves in close proximity all the time. It’s chemistry, pure and simple.

Not everybody can have something deeper than that. Something based on thought and feeling. Trust. Respect.

“The details are none of my business,” I assure him as we continue our hike. Her prints fade from time to time, but always reappear. The terrain is getting rough, and the rushing river is closer and louder with every step we take. “Though if you ask me, you’re a fucking idiot for ending it. She’s a quality girl.”

“She ended it, not me.”

I’m happier than ever his back is to me, since I doubt I could conceal my broad grin if I tried. “Smart girl. He walked right into that one.”

He snorts, throwing a smirk over his shoulder. “How about you?”

“Excuse me?” I challenge. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What, you think I didn’t notice how you totally changed around her when we showed up? All this time you’ve been

miserable and sour and a pain in the ass.”

“I’m sure it couldn’t have had anything to do with being relieved that we tracked her down,” I mutter as we climb over a fallen tree in our path. There are bits of bark littering the ground on the other side, like someone scrambled over the surface recently.

“Are you sure that’s all it was?” he asks once we clear the obstacle.

All at once, my chest goes tight. “Still acting like a child.”

“That’s fine. Play it that way if you want to.”

It’s safer to bite my tongue, so I do, brooding silently. No, my relationship with Natalie wasn’t anything as common as a fling, the way he described theirs. The only reason I don’t take him down right now is the certainty that what Natalie and I share goes beyond basic biological needs. We understand each other. There’s a connection I neither sought nor encouraged. It simply exists. He may have known her body in the past, but he doesn’t know her heart. Not the way I do.

A flash of blue in the trees ahead makes my heart stutter. “There!” I breathe, taking hold of Griffin’s shoulder to stop him before pointing.

“Gotcha.” He drops to one knee, and I do the same, leaving us hidden in the shadow of a towering pine. She’s not moving, but it’s her. She’s crouched behind a row of rocks up ahead, maybe taking a breather while she considers her next steps. She must have left after thinking things through all night, but there’s a difference between going through a journey in your head and experiencing it for real. The cold is enough to make my face burn like it’s on fire, and I can only imagine she’s feeling the effects as well. Small puffs of vapor rise from her hiding spot, a sign of her rapid breathing. Does she know we’re here? Does she know she’s been spotted? Or is she simply catching her breath?

All at once her head pops up, moving from side to side as she scans the area. I hold my breath and so does Griffin, both of us trying to conceal our presence in any way possible.

When she takes off toward the river, we follow, moving quickly but quietly through the terrain. I guess she's planning on following the river east, though why she would travel on foot is anybody's guess. She is that determined to get away. Why? What is compelling her?

"Shit!" With Griffin in front of me, there's no way of seeing what made him drop into a crouch seemingly out of nowhere. Once my view is clear, I understand.

She turned around to look behind her and spotted him—and now she stares straight at me, standing here like a smacked ass. I may as well be wearing a clown wig. That's how it feels, anyway.

"Natalie, stop this!" Needless to say, she pays no heed to my pleas, giving us no choice but to run when she takes off. We crash through the brush, stumbling over exposed roots. I'm now the lead, and I thrust my right arm outward to signal for Griffin to take that route while I veer left, intending to pin her between us and the river ahead. It's so close now, the roar is deafening. She can only run so far.

I see her head up there, bouncing as she runs. Suddenly, she stops, and I take advantage, quickly catching up to her while Griffin does the same. She whirls around and scowls at the sight of me, then turns to find Griffin blocking her in the opposite direction.

"There's nowhere to go," I point out, eyeing the cliff at her back. She kicks a few stones down the cliff face when she shifts her weight, eyeing the two of us warily while calculating her next move. "Let's not make this more difficult than it has to be, okay? You know you have to come back with us. This is only delaying the inevitable."

I hate watching her fight with herself the way she clearly is now, hate knowing there's a reason for her to stay away and wishing I knew what that was. I open my mouth, prepared to offer help, when all at once the ground shifts behind her.

I see it all unfolding before it happens. The skittering, sliding rocks. The way her boots slip as the ground gives way.

The river rushes in my ears and would drown out the sound of her scream if she had time to make a sound.

There is no time. Her eyes go round and her mouth opens, but nothing comes out. I lunge forward, my hand outstretched to take hold of her, but it's too late. She's gone.

NATALIE

Every single fiber in my body hurts. From the crown of my head all the way down to my pinky toe, everything is in tremendous pain. Every tiny movement is a struggle. My clothes pulling me down deeper into the dark river. I force my limbs to push on, to push past the thousand needles sticking in my skin.

Another wave of freezing water pulls me under. I hold my breath and paddle back to the surface as fast as I can. I have to get to the shore. Now. I won't be able to do this much longer. I have to push past the pain, the fear, the shock, and swim my ass back to land.

When my lungs finally fill with air again, my chest hurts so badly I can barely suck in enough oxygen that I desperately need.

Fight, Natalie, fight!

Every muscle in my body aches, but I push through, fighting my way to the shore. My vision starts to go black. I fight against that too. Using the very last strength I can muster up, I paddle to the edge of the river until I finally feel gravel beneath my feet. I'm so exhausted. All I want to do is go to sleep. My mind is already halfway there, dancing on the edge of unconsciousness.

My eyes close as I drag my heavy body onto a rock. My fingers dig into the mud, and my mind goes numb. I'm barely aware of the water rushing past me, the wind howling around

my ears, and two male voices screaming my name in the distance.

“Natalie!” Griffin sounds worried, almost frantic and heavy footsteps follow his voice. My whole body shakes, and my teeth are rattling together painfully.

“Nat!” Dallas yells. I think they’re closer now or maybe further away. Hell, I don’t know anything other than I’m about to pass out.

“Nat!” Someone touches my limp arms and starts pulling me out of the freezing water.

I want to open my eyes, but the ten-pound weights on my eyelids refuse to budge. More hands tug on me, pulling on my clothes and feeling around my neck.

“She’s breathing, but we need to get her somewhere warm,” Griffin’s voice meets my ear, his warm hands are on me as if to check for injuries. I want to tell him I’m fine, but honestly, I don’t know what I am. Not that it matters since I’m still shaking so badly I can’t talk.

“First, we need to get this off her,” Dallas’s stern voice booms through the air before my boots and jacket come off. My jeans and sweater go next, leaving me in only my underwear. I don’t stay that way for long because the next thing I know, they force my arms into a warm and dry jacket and drape something else over my bare legs.

“I’ll carry her. You lead the way back to the cabin,” Griffin says, his voice a little calmer now.

“We need to head up that way,” Dallas orders.

Griffin lifts me up, cradling me against his chest, while icy water drips from my skin and hair.

The journey back to the cabin drags on forever. We stop a few times. Dallas and Griffin take turns carrying me while I remain useless and in and out of consciousness. By the time I’m finally able to pry my eyes open, my body has gone numb. That scares me more than the pain.

“She’s coming to,” Dallas tells Griffin before giving me his full attention—his steel-gray eyes inspecting my face. “We’re almost back at the cabin. Hang in there. We’ll get you warm soon.”

“I can walk the rest,” I croak, not sure if I actually can.

“We left your boots by the river,” Griffin points out. I glance over at his sweater, wet from carrying me, and realize he wrapped his jacket around my legs.

“Don’t worry. We’ve got you,” Dallas coos, the gentleness of his voice calming me instantly.

A few minutes later, we finally arrive back at the cabin. Dallas places me on the soft carpet in front of the fireplace and grabs blankets. I immediately curl up into a fetal position, trying to keep warm as much as I can, while Griffin lights the fire before running out to get more firewood.

“Can you sit up?” Dallas asks. “We need to get your wet underwear off.” I nod, and Dallas holds up the blanket so I can quickly get undressed. The icy fabric sticks on my skin. I peel off the jackets, now wet from absorbing the water from my body, and discard them along with the soaked underwear on the floor next to me. Dallas helps me wrap up with a wool plaid blanket around my torso while laying a second one around my shoulders.

When Griffin gets back, he has a weird look on his face, almost like he’s disappointed about missing me getting undressed.

“Don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything. Dallas was a gentleman and didn’t look.”

“Who said I didn’t look?” Dallas winks at me, and if I wasn’t still half frozen, I’m sure my cheeks would heat up. Instead, I play it off cool and shrug my shoulders as if I don’t care.

Griffin adds more wood to the fire, and the flames roar up to a comfortable heat. I hold out my slightly blue fingers. Slowly, the feeling in my limbs returns, and my lungs fill with

air more deeply again. My hair is still wet, but the blanket around my shoulders acts like a barrier.

As if Griffin could hear my thoughts, he disappears into the bathroom to return with a towel for my head. “Thank you.” I take the towel and wrap it around my hair, wringing the last bit of cold water out.

Dallas does something in the kitchen. Pots rattling together while he curses something about a can under his breath. A few moments later, he returns with a pot of soup, which he places at the edge of the fire to warm up.

“You need to eat something, and after, you are going to tell us why are you running.”

“Can I get some clean clothes?”

“Why, so you can take off again?” Dallas snaps. “The blankets are fine for now.”

“Sorry, the old man is in a mood,” Griffin jokes. My lips pull into a tiny grin, but it’s not genuine. I don’t feel like joking around.

We wait for the soup to heat in silence, and I take those moments to gather my thoughts. What the hell am I going to say that won’t make them drag me back to the hotel to face my brother?

Once the soup is warm, Dallas wraps the hot pot in a towel and sits it on my lap. Griffin brings me a spoon from the kitchen, and I start to eat slowly, buying as much time as I can. The savory flavors of the vegetable soup hits my tongue, making me realize how hungry I was. I let the delicious dish warm me from the inside, one spoonful at a time until there is nothing but a puddle left.

After I scrape the last bit of soup out of the pot, I place it next to me on the floor and tighten the blanket around my shoulders. Unable to look at either of them, I watch the flames in the fireplace while I start explaining. “I knew my mother was alive. And I knew she blamed Mason for our brother’s death, but I didn’t know how far she was willing to take it. I

didn't know she planned on killing Mason, and I had no idea about her kidnapping Teagan."

A few minutes of uncomfortable silence settles over us. I don't dare look at Dallas or Griffin.

"Why didn't you tell anybody?" Dallas asks after a while, his voice flat, void of emotion. He has gone into interrogation mode.

"Because I wanted to figure stuff out myself first." It's not a lie, but not the whole truth, either.

"Are you saying you think Mason had something to do with your brother's death?" Griffin takes a seat on the couch, leaning his elbows on his knees.

"I wasn't sure at first. When my mom first approached me, she didn't act crazy. Or maybe that was just my wishful thinking. I don't know." I haven't known what's right and wrong for a few months now and that's the real problem.

I'm supposed to know these things. As the decision maker of the hotel it's literally my job to figure out who is good and bad, what case do we take and which do we turn down. Who deserves to live and who must die. How can I do my job when I've lost the ability to decide?

"That still doesn't explain why you ran. Why didn't you just tell Mason? He would have understood."

"Are you sure about that? After my mom took Teagan? After she almost killed him. Do you really think he would have just looked past me being involved?"

"What do you mean by being involved?" *Shit*. Of course, Dallas doesn't miss my little slip up.

"I'm tired. Can we not do this now?" I almost died a few hours ago.

"Whose cabin is this?" Griffin questions, changing the subject but not in a direction I would like.

"That's enough questions for the day," I snap. Pressing my lips into a tight line, I signal that I'm done talking. I've already

said too much, and if I don't watch my mouth, I'll be in even more trouble.

NATALIE

The day drags on as both Dallas and Griffin continue to ask me questions I don't want to answer. I remain huddled up in front of the fire until my entire body is back to feeling normal again, and my skin has returned to a soft rose color.

Dallas paces through the room, the old wood creaking every time he steps on a certain board. Their relentless questions about my mother never end, but neither does my patience. If my training with the CIA taught me anything, it is to keep calm in situations like this.

"How did you get up here? We didn't see a car on the road. Is there another way up the mountain?" Griffin asks a question he hasn't thought of before.

"Not that I know of." I keep my answer vague.

"So somebody dropped you off here," he concludes. "Your mother, maybe?"

"I have not seen or talked to her since she tried to kill Mason." If I had known she was going to try, I would have never let her back into my life. I would've stopped her.

"Who helped you, then? Someone on our team?" Dallas stops pacing a few feet away from me. "Who was it, Nat?"

"I'm tired of playing games." Griffin suddenly gets up from the couch. "Give us some answers or we're taking you back to the hotel now."

I can tell he is at the end of his patience, so I do the one thing I know will shut both of them up. Letting the first blanket fall off my shoulders, I unwrap the second before I get on my feet.

As I planned, Dallas and Griffin shut their mouths immediately. Their endless questions finally stop. I step out of the puddle of wool around my feet, completely in the nude.

I've always been comfortable with my body, so I have no shame in flaunting what I've got in front of these two, especially when it gets me exactly what I want. I need to use whatever tools I have to my advantage, and right now, I'm using my body.

"I'm going to find some dry clothes and get dressed. Any objections?" Placing my hands on my hips, I look between the two guys. Both Griffin and Dallas shake their heads, while their gazes wander my naked skin aimlessly.

Men. So easily distracted.

If I still wasn't so damn exhausted, I would make another run for it. Instead, I dig a pair of leggings and a sweater from the dresser to pull on. As I'm getting dressed, I catch my reflection in the mirror and notice I look like crap. My hair looks like something made a nest on my head. My face is still pale and there are small scratches on my cheek.

I find a brush in the bathroom to comb out my hair. The small act of self-care makes me feel a bit more human again.

"I half expected you to run again." Griffin's voice startles me. Lifting my eyes, I meet his icy gaze in the reflection of the mirror. He's leaning against the doorframe casually. His muscular arms folded over his chest, making him look even bigger than he already is.

"I thought about it," I admit. "But now I have something else in mind."

"And what might that be?" Dallas steps out of the hallway and into view.

"We're gonna stay here one more night, and in the morning, we'll go back home. I'll come with you. No more

games. No more hiding. I'm ready to face Mason... tomorrow."

"How do we know you're not gonna try to run again?" Griffin questions.

"I'll pass on a repeat of today. It's almost night again. By the time we'd get back to the hotel, it'd be two or three in the morning. Let's stay here another night. I won't give you any trouble. And in the morning, we'll track down to your car and head home."

Dallas and Griffin exchange glances before nodding at each other.

"Fine," Dallas agrees, "but if I even suspect you're doing something stupid again, I swear I'll tie you up and drag you back to the city."

"Don't threaten me with a good time." I laugh, trying to lighten the mood. Griffin cracks a smile, but Dallas remains stone-faced.

"I'm going to hike down to the car now and drive to town. I need something real to eat. I've had enough of this canned shit," Dallas says before looking at Griffin. "Keep an eye on her."

"Are you going to bring us something to eat?" I ask.

"Only if you behave," Dallas warns.

Spinning around, I hold up my hand. "I swear I'll be on my best behavior."

Dallas doesn't look too convinced when he gives me a slight nod. "I'll be back with food." He turns and walks away, mumbling something inaudible under his breath.

The sound of the door opening and closing echoes through the cabin, letting us know we are now alone in this place.

"I guess we'll just sit by the fire and wait?" I offer. It's not like there's anything else to do around here.

"I guess so." Griffin shrugs. Clearly, he's still pissed at me for taking off last night. And I don't blame him. He doesn't

know the whole story, so there's no way he would understand.

We make our way back to the living room, and I take my designated space in front of the fire, sans the blankets. Griffin walks over to the bookshelf to find a book he's interested in. He picks up a few, reading the back until he finds one he likes. I watch him sit back down on the couch to get comfortable before he flips open the book and starts reading the first page.

I am not much of a reader myself, and when I do read, I prefer to be on my Kindle. With nothing else to do, I turn my attention back to the fire so I can watch the flames dance. For a while, that's all the entertainment I need, but after twenty minutes or so, I get terribly bored.

"When do you think Dallas will be back?" I ask, breaking the long stretch of silence.

"A few more hours, I guess," Griffin answers, without looking up from his book.

I have to admit; I am a little annoyed that he is not paying me more attention. Apparently, the book he is reading is more interesting than I am. A little pout forms on my lips. He couldn't take his eyes off of me when I was naked.

Is that what a girl has to do around here?

That thought gives me an idea of how to pass the time. Grinning from ear to ear, I twist my body around to get on all fours. Slowly and seductively, I crawl the short distance to where Griffin is sitting.

His gaze lifts from his book, and his eyebrows shoot up, but the rest of his body remains still. He doesn't move the paperback, and besides the surprise in his eyes, his facial expression doesn't give anything away.

When I'm only inches from his knees, I lift myself off the floor and crawl into his lap, slapping the book from his hand in the process. He doesn't move as I straddle his legs and place my hands on his wide shoulders. His own hands remain by his side, while his muscles flex under my touch.

I suck in a deep breath, enjoying the manly scent of his aftershave. "Want to have some fun while we pass the time,

big guy?" I stare into his forest green eyes, waiting for an answer.

Seconds stretch on, feeling like an eternity as I wait for his response.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he finally says. He might as well have slapped me in the face. The sting of rejection feels that physical.

Embarrassment spreads through my veins, settling with a dreadful feeling in my chest. I'm not used to getting rejected, especially not from Griffin. We always had a good time, which makes his denial sting even more so. Maybe I was wrong, and he didn't enjoy being physical with me in the past. Is it because I'm not wearing any makeup and have my hair done, or is he still mad at me for running off this morning?

Without another word, I scurry off his lap and back to my spot in front of the fire. For a moment, I think he is going to say something, but he never does. The low sound of the page of his book turning is the only thing remaining for a long time.

GRIFFIN

I can't believe I turned her down. My dick is still mad at me, aching painfully in my pants. Rejecting her was a hard thing to go through with, but it had to be done. The only plus side is her sulking. She looks damn cute, pouting her plump lips like that.

Flipping another page, I keep pretending to read. After her little stunt, there is no way I can go back to this book.

We return to the uncomfortable silence. The crackling of the fire is the only sound filling the space until we hear a car approaching the cabin.

Dropping my book on the couch next to me, I speed walk to the window, where I swipe the curtains to the side. "It's Dallas," I announce when I see our black SUV pull up.

A moment later, he climbs out of the car, carrying two white bags with a dragon on the front of them. When he comes closer, I can read Dragon Palace under the logo.

"Looks like we're having Chinese for dinner."

"At this point, I don't care what we're having as long as it's food," Nat mumbles. At least she is still talking to me.

Dallas bursts through the door a second later. "Anyone hungry?"

"Starving," I answer.

Natalie gets up from her spot in front of the fire, and we all meet at the kitchen table. The smell of savory orange chicken fills the small space, making my stomach rumble loudly,

which makes Nat giggle. A sound I could listen to all the time. Fuck, I forgot about her cute giggle. Being here with her, having her so close, brings up all these feelings I buried when we ended things—when she ended things.

Shaking the thought away, I dig into the food, pulling out dish after dish. Dallas brought enough to feed six people, and I'm not mad at it in the slightest.

“What’s with the weird tension between you two all of a sudden?” Of course Dallas doesn’t miss a thing. The fucker has a sixth sense when it comes to vibe checking. “You didn’t fuck while I was gone, did you?” He questions all nonchalant.

I almost choke on my chicken.

Nat doesn’t skip a beat. “I tried, but he turned me down.”

“Interesting.” Dallas shrugs. “Just so we’re clear, I wouldn’t have turned you down.” He winks at Nat, and I feel like gagging.

Damnit, what if I fucked up my chances with Natalie now? Even worse, what if I drove her into Dallas’s arms by rejecting her? Fuck, I need to make this right. The question is, how?

We end up finishing almost all the food. My stomach is so full, I seriously worry about puking if I move around too much. Dallas and Nat look like they feel the same. We all lean back in our chairs, stomach round, looking at the huge mess we left on the table. Empty cartons and plates, used chopsticks, and napkins are all spread out before us.

“Do you know what I miss about the hotel?” Natalie asks.

“Someone cleaning up after us?”

“Exactly!” We all laugh, and slowly start to pick up the mess we made.

When we’ve finished cleaning, Nat excuses herself into the bathroom, giving Dallas and me a moment alone.

“Did you really turn her down?”

“I did,” I admit with a frown.

“Idiot.” Dallas shakes his head like he is disappointed in me.

“Do you really think sleeping with her after she almost drowned would’ve been a good idea?” I try defending myself, but of course, Dallas has a great comeback.

“We’re not talking about a random civilian here. You know Nat is used to shit like this. Almost dying is not going to shake her up.”

“Whatever,” I grit through my teeth, angry with myself and with him for pointing it out.

Natalie returns from the bathroom after a good bit. Her hair is braided, and her face looks shiny as if she put lotion on it.

We hang out in the living room for a little bit before deciding to head to bed, so we can leave bright and early. We lie down in the same spots we did yesterday. Natalie is in the middle while I’m on the right and Dallas is on the left. I’m only wearing a pair of boxers tonight, while Nat is in an oversized shirt and underwear.

I’m exhausted, but my mind isn’t tired. A million thoughts still race through my mind, every single one involving Natalie. It’s hard not to think about someone if they are lying half naked inches away from you. She is close enough I can feel her body heat, smell the flowery scent of her body lotion, and see the way her chest rises and falls with each breath.

I try to close my eyes, but that doesn’t help either. If anything, it makes it worse. Because now I’m thinking about how she was straddling me earlier. How she was rubbing her pussy over my cock, urging me to fuck her. Damn it. I’m such an idiot.

Turning on my back, I stare at the ceiling. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, the moon and the stars are bright enough to illuminate most of the room. I use that light to count the boards above me out of boredom.

It isn’t until I hear Dallas’s soft snoring that I get annoyed. Sighing to myself, I turn on my side, facing Natalie and find

her eyes wide open.

“Can’t sleep?” she whispers softly.

I shake my head.

“Are you staying up waiting for us to go to sleep so you can make a run for it again?”

Now it’s her turn to shake her head. “I gave you my word, and I’m not about to break a promise.”

“I’m sorry about earlier.”

She gives me a lopsided smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’s all right. No need to apologize.”

“Let me make it up to you,” I offer, scooting a little closer to her.

Nat draws her eyebrows together before mouthing the word “Now?”

Lifting my hand, I place my index finger in front of my lips, making a hush sound. I let my other hand drop below Natalie’s blanket to find her leg. Grabbing the back of her thigh, I drape it over mine.

She lets out a little gasp, but doesn’t make a move to stop me or pull her leg back. I take the small grin on her lips as an invitation.

Dallas is still snoring up a storm while I drag my fingertips over her thigh until I make it to the edge of her panties. Sliding the thin fabric to the side, I run two fingers through her surprisingly wet folds. I know Nat gets waxed regularly, so I’m not surprised at her bare pussy.

She closes her eyes and sucks her bottom lip between her teeth as I draw small circles over her clit. I continue putting pressure on the small bundle of nerves until Nat’s breathing changes and her pussy gets even wetter.

Her smooth skin meets my rough palm, and my cock is hard enough to break through ice.

Having Dallas in the same bed with us only seems to add to the allure of the situation. Her thighs quiver against my legs,

and her breathing becomes erratic. She grabs my wrist, moving my hand how she wants it until she throws her head back. With a soft moan, she falls apart on my fingers.

One final shudder runs through her body, and I know she's coming down from her high. When I pull my hand from her panties, her eyes flutter open. She has a beautiful smile on her face that makes my chest expand with pride.

"I can't believe we did that," she whispers.

"I can." Bringing my hand up to her mouth, I hold my fingers to her slightly parted lips. "Taste yourself," I order.

Natalie's eyes flare with newfound lust as she takes my soaked fingers into her mouth. She closes her lips, sucking the wetness off my fingers while lapping her tongue around them. Once they're all clean, I pull my fingers from her hot mouth.

"I think I can go to sleep now," she tells me with a yawn. "Goodnight." She closes her eyes, and the room goes eerily silent, too quiet.

I notice Dallas is not snoring anymore, and I wonder if he's awake. I can't help but smile mischievously at the thought. I'm going to rub this in his face tomorrow either way. He's going to be so mad, and I am going to love every second of it, just like I loved every second of making Natalie come.

DALLAS

I can't believe he fingerfucked Nat while I was sleeping next to them. That bastard.

When her soft moans woke me up, I figured she was just dreaming. But their little conversation after made it very clear what they did.

The sun has just come up when I open the front door and walk out into the frost covered yard. The icy grass crunches under my boots as I make my way to the car. I unlock the door and grab the bag of breakfast items I picked up yesterday.

When I get back into the cabin, Natalie is standing in the middle of the living room. "I was wondering where you went," she announces.

Now she's wondering what I'm doing.

I let my gaze shamelessly wander down her half-dressed body.

"See something you like?" She flirts, grabbing the hem of her shirt. She rides it up her thigh until I get a glimpse of her pink panties.

"I do, but unlike you, I'd prefer not to have an audience, and Griffin could walk in here any moment."

Her cheeks actually turn a shade of pink. Her embarrassment surprises me.

"I didn't know you were awake."

I can't help but laugh. "So that makes it better?"

“Of course it does. I didn’t think you would’ve noticed.”

“You didn’t think I would have noticed somebody coming while getting finger-fucked in the bed next to me?”

Her embarrassment is completely gone now and has been replaced with hearty laughter. She throws her head back and wraps her arms around her torso as to rein in the laughs from her chest.

Shaking my head, I set the bags of groceries on the kitchen table and pull out the assortment of pastries.

“Oooh, bear claws, my favorite.” Opening the plastic box, she grabs one of the sugary pastries, taking a big bite off the corner.

“I know. I remembered.”

“You did? I told you that one time, years ago.” She giggles. Her tongue darts out to lick some sugar from her bottom lip, making me suppress a groan. How can such a small act be so sexy?

“I have a good memory.” *Especially when it comes to you,* I think to myself.

She closes her eyes, enjoying the sugary treat like she’s having another orgasm. Fuck me.

“Those are delicious. I’m glad you kept them hidden in the car because I definitely would’ve eaten them last night.” She giggles some more. Her bell-like laughter igniting something deep in my chest. Warmth I only feel when I’m near her.

“I called Mason while I was in town last night.”

She keeps slowly chewing the pastry, but the euphoric expression on her face has now dimmed. “I figured you would,” she says after swallowing. “How mad is he?”

“I think he’s more confused than mad,” I tell her honestly. “Teagan and Mason were also relieved that you are okay. Why do you think he would be mad above all?”

“Just a feeling, I guess.”

“Are you going to give us any more trouble today, or will you keep your word and come with us peacefully?”

“I’m ready to go back. I needed some time to gather my thoughts and come to terms with what I’ve done by not telling Mason about our mom. I made a wrong decision, and that haunts me.”

I nod slowly. It’s the first reason she admits to that I actually believe, but I still don’t understand why she didn’t just stay and tell us. We could’ve helped her through this instead of her going out on her own and worrying everybody. Running only made her look guilty. She must’ve known that.

“Plus, I have to go back. I need to get my nails and hair done,” she jokes. “I don’t even feel like myself without my fake lashes, makeup, and designer clothes. Leggings are comfortable, but they’re really not my style.”

“Why do you feel the need to do all of this? Your nails, your hair, and makeup? You know you don’t need any of that shit.”

She shrugs. “I want to love myself. I want to love what I see in the mirror.” She explains, like she rehearsed the statement. Is that what she tells herself?

“For someone so smart you can be a bit stupid sometimes,” I say, despite knowing I’m about to offend her.

Her eyebrows furrow together. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“The way you look has nothing to do with loving yourself. It’s about the way you feel,” I explain, looking for the right words. “Just imagine each day you’re a new person. Imagine all the days before, a different version of you existed. And now pick one of those versions. Maybe the person you were yesterday or the one last week. Think about who you were. Imagine her in front of you. You know all her thoughts, all her hardships and all the decisions she made. Now, do you love that person? If you don’t, then find out why and fix it. That’s how you love yourself. You become a person today, that future you can love tomorrow.”

She stares at me, dumbfounded. Her eyes unfocused, and her lip slightly parted as she processes what I've just said. She seems surprised. I'm just unclear if she is surprised by the words or that I am the one saying them.

I never get an answer because Griffin waltzes into the room, interrupting our moment. "What are you two up to? Wait, is that more food? Did you get breakfast without me?"

Nat's mouth snaps shut, and she turns to Griffin with a warning. "Bear claws are all mine. Do. Not. Touch."

Griffin raises his hands, showing his palms, like you would to calm a wild animal. "Got it. Not eating any of your bear claws."

"I am glad we're clear on the subject." Nat shoves another bite of pastry into her mouth.

Griffin takes the seat next to me, grabbing a glazed donut out of the bag. He takes a huge bite, making almost a third of the donut disappear. He takes another bite before swallowing the first completely.

"Marine Boot Camp is over," I remind him. "You don't have to cram down your food in five minutes anymore."

He shrugs. "Old habit." A moment later, he adds, "Not as old as you, though."

We eat as much as we can, but there are still pastries left when we're done. I place them back in the packaging and start packing up the rest of our stuff as well. Nat and Griffin do the same, gathering all of their things before tidying up this place.

"Ready?" Natalie questions, with a suitcase in each hand.

"Yes." I nod and head for the door. Griffin and Nat follow close behind as we exit the cabin and load up the car with her stuff. She still hasn't shared with us how she got here in the first place or whose cabin this is. She left her car at the hotel so we knew she didn't take it.

Who helped her? Something tells me Mason is going to find out soon.

I get into the driver's seat while Griffin rides shotgun and Nat gets comfortable in the back seat. I turn the key and the engine roars to life.

As I pull away from the cabin, an odd feeling overcomes me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and my pulse picks up just enough to make me notice.

"Something is off," I announce. Both Nat and Griffin tense up immediately. I slow down the car, scanning the road and surrounding area carefully.

"There, watch out," Griffin warns at the same moment I catch sight of the large branch laying across the road.

"Fuck," I curse under my breath. The branch is small enough to be drug on the road by a person but too large to run over without risking getting stuck.

I put the car in park and unbuckle. Reaching for my belt holster, I wrap my hand around the grip of my gun. My thumb slides over the safety, undoing it swiftly.

Griffin pulls his gun out as he opens the passenger door and gets out of the car. I open my door and follow him, careful not to make any unnecessary sounds. My eyes bounce from the ground in front of me to the edge of the tree line, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

I glance over at Griffin. He is crouching down next to the branch. Wrapping his hand around it, he picks it up and starts dragging it off to the side. I keep my gun pointed at the edge of the road where the gravel meets the trees.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement to my left. Spinning around, I raise my gun at the moving figure. I fire off a shot, but the man dressed in black is already hidden by the trunk of a large oak tree.

The shot still echoes around the open space when the man behind the tree yells out, "Damn, Dallas, that wasn't even close! You need some glasses, old man?"

Immediately, I lower my gun. "What the fuck are you doing here, Trent?"

Trent steps out from behind the tree. Hands shoved in his pockets, he leans casually against the trunk. “Funny, I was about to ask you the same. Is there a reason you visited my cabin unannounced?”

“That’s my fault,” Natalie chimes in, as she gets out of the car. “Hey, Trent!” She greets our friend like we just ran into him at a coffee shop.

“So that’s your cabin, and I’m guessing you were the one who helped Natalie up here.”

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.” Trent shrugs. The harsh wind runs through his unruly hair, making him look more like a teenager than the cold-hearted assassin he is. Trent’s always looked much younger than he is, which makes him one of the best hitmen we have. He is thirty-two, but he could easily pass for early to mid twenties. People are much less likely to assume you’re going to kill them when you look like a college frat boy.

“Since you’re already out here and involved, you could help us find Beverly.”

“I have been on her, but she seems to be very good at hiding. Whoever is helping her is a major player.” We knew that much already, but hearing that even Trent can’t track her down only drives home the point. “I don’t have another job right now, so I’m gonna stay on it. You guys get back to the hotel. I’ll stay in touch.”

“Talk soon, Lone wolf,” Griffin calls Trent by his nickname.

Like Natalie, Trent used to work for the CIA, but he has never been much of a team player. He prefers to not only work alone, but to do everything alone. And I mean, everything.

NATALIE

I'm home. It's not exactly the way I planned on returning, but then there really wasn't much of a plan, was there? This has been one of those one-day-at-a-time situations. Not much room for thinking about tomorrow when you're trying to get through today.

Now here I am, with no choice but to enter the hotel I fled from in the dead of night. It's not so much walking back into the lobby that gets my heart pounding and my stomach churning. It's what I know will be waiting. And how pissed I know he has to be.

It isn't my brother who I first see. It's Teagan, rushing to meet me with her arms outstretched, wearing a bright smile. "I am so glad you're back." Her hug is tight and fierce, like she's trying to prove she means it by breaking my ribs. I can't pretend it isn't nice to know somebody cared.

"Sorry if I worried you," I offer in a whisper so the guys won't hear.

"I get it. I mean, I don't really get it, but I sort of do." She shakes her head and waves her hands back and forth, chuckling. "Don't listen to me."

She then looks back and forth between my two captors and wrinkles her nose. "You both need to get cleaned up."

"Hello to you, too," Griffin offers with a grin, but Dallas only flashes a tight smile. Always stoic.

Teagan leans in a little, murmuring into my ear. "He's waiting for you in his apartment. Go to him. You have a lot to

talk about.”

That’s the thing. We have plenty to talk about, but it will not be any easier for me to explain myself than it would have been before. I can’t avoid it any longer, though, so I get on the elevator and try to ignore the way Dallas and Griffin follow close behind me. What, are they afraid I’ll find a way to run? All I can do is grit my teeth and put up with it, counting the floors as the car rises until a soft pinging announces our arrival. They don’t follow me out, I notice, only waiting for me to exit before the doors close. *Congratulations, boys. You delivered the package.*

There’s no time to absorb my familiar surroundings before a sharp voice rings out from somewhere in the apartment. “It’s about time. Come, sit down.” I follow the voice, my heart pounding with every step I take. I’ve been through much more dangerous situations, where there were much higher stakes hanging in the balance, but there’s something uniquely panic-inducing about a situation like this. Where history is involved. Blood.

Mason is waiting for me at his kitchen table, his hands folded on the surface in a parody of calm and restraint. Anybody looking at him right now would think he was waiting for some bland, everyday sort of meeting to begin. I know better. The man is barely containing himself. I see it in the way his jaw ticks, in the narrow set of his eyes, and the flaring of his nostrils.

Rather than say a word, I take a seat across from him and fold my hands the way he has. I take a deep breath and release it slowly. He does the same. Silence stretches out between us, silence so profound and full of blame it might as well be ear-splitting screams.

It doesn’t take long before I can’t stand it any longer. “Here I am. Let me have it.”

He doesn’t move a muscle beyond his mouth. “Let you have what?”

So this is the game we’re playing. “Tell me everything you want to say. You’ve had enough time to come up with plenty.

You deserve the chance to let it out. Here I am. Let me have it.”

His head tips to the side, a familiar gesture. “Do you think that’s what this is about? Do you think I’m going to scold you? Maybe I’ll bitch you out for the inconvenience?”

“For starters. I would expect nothing less.”

He blinks rapidly before shaking his head, while his jaw somehow tightens even further. He’ll break it before much longer if he isn’t careful. “I won’t waste time complaining about the inconvenience you’ve put us all through. You know this is deeper than that. Don’t insult me and don’t waste my time. I want answers—real answers.”

“And all you have to do is ask,” I whisper.

“Very well. How long have you known our mother is alive?”

“For a while.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Yes, it is.”

He slams back against the chair, the muscles of his face twitching while his eyes dart over me. He’s looking for answers. I wish I could offer them. “Did you forget who you’re talking to?”

“Have you forgotten who you’re speaking to?” I counter. “You’re not Dad. Don’t talk to me that way.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he snaps. “I’m your brother. I know you. We’ve worked side-by-side all these years. Don’t give me some bullshit act where you’re going to sit and give me the defiant attitude. I know you better than this. So why don’t we start again?”

“We can go through this as much as you want,” I tell him with a shrug. “But you’re not going to be satisfied. I knew Mom was alive. I knew she didn’t want you to know.”

“So you chose her. You chose to shield her from me.”

“That’s not at all what happened.”

“Goddamnit, tell me what did happen. Why are you being so cryptic? Can’t you come out and tell the truth?” His eyes narrow to a pair of slits. “Or are you still shielding her? Is that what this is about?”

“No. I promise you, that’s not it.”

“Then what is it? You’re making it impossible for me to trust you.”

“I am so sorry for that,” I tell him, and I mean it with all my heart. He’ll never understand how sorry I am. “It doesn’t change anything. I did what I thought I had to do.”

He barks out a flat, bitter laugh. “And how many times have I heard that? It never ends well.”

“It will this time.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But I feel it. I need you to trust me, that’s all.”

“You’re asking for the impossible. Why not request the moon while you’re at it?”

Sudden heat rises in my chest, and a ringing noise fills my ears. There is nothing in this world as frustrating as my brother when he gets a hair up his ass. If he’s trying to piss me off and force me to lose my temper, he’s doing a damn good job of it. “That’s all I can say. I did what I felt was best.”

He takes a deep breath that’s probably supposed to calm him down the way I fought to calm myself. “Very well,” he murmurs in a deceptively soft tone that makes the hair on the back of my neck rise. “You did what you felt was best, which is exactly what I have to do now.”

I knew it. There had to be more. “Meaning?”

“Meaning I’m not sure what to believe, so you’ve left me with no choice but to assign a guardian.”

“What?” I shouldn’t react so strongly, but there’s no pretending to go along with this idea. I throw my hands into

the air with a weary sigh. “Come on. I’m here. In the hotel. You’re aware of everything I do here.”

“No, I’m not,” he reminds me with a bitter snarl. “You made sure of that. If you think I’m stupid, you’d better rid yourself of the idea and now. I can’t trust you. It’s as simple as that.”

“I won’t try to run away.”

“And I should trust you, why? If you can’t trust me enough to open up so we can work this out together, I can’t trust you to stay put. And I’m a little too busy to spend my days watching your every move. So, somebody will do it for me.”

“Who did you have in mind?” Not like I don’t know the answer. I understand the way his brain works. There are only a few people he’d really trust, and he sent two of them to fetch me and bring me back. No doubt he’s chosen one or another to babysit me.

Sure enough, he replies, “Dallas. I need Griffin for a mission, but Dallas is more than happy to hang around and make sure you’re a good girl and do as you’re told.”

See, I would’ve been pissed off without him adding that extra bit, and of course, he knows it. Siblings understand how to get under each other’s skin better than anybody else. As much as I hate admitting he’s been successful, I can’t help but slap my palms against the table in frustration. “I don’t need him hovering over me. I don’t need anybody to do that.”

“And that’s your final say?”

“Damn right, it is.”

“Very well.” He pushes his chair back and stands, and the snide grin he wears tells me I haven’t won this battle before he opens his mouth to confirm it. “Then you can make yourself at home in the holding cells.”

Surprise leaves me sputtering. “You’re joking.”

“Do I joke? Am I known for my sense of humor?”

“I’m not going to the cells!”

“That’s your opinion. In my opinion, you are, or you’re more than welcome to stay in your apartment and be as comfortable as you wish. But you will not be there alone. End of story. This is not a negotiation.”

I could claw his eyes out for looking at me that way, for sounding so smug and sure of himself. “You’re not being fair.”

“Oh? Because you were so fair by running off the way you did? Do you have the first idea of the impact it had? Do you know how worried we all were? Yet you sit here,” he sneers, waving his hand at me, “acting like you are the one who’s been through the wringer. Never mind the people who care about you. Never mind your own brother. I’m not going through that again. I can tell you that much.”

“Nobody asked you to,” I snap.

He rocks back on his heels but accepts this quietly. “Nobody had to,” he finally points out with a sigh. “You’re free to go back to your apartment now. Dallas should be waiting for you.”

What I hate most of all as I sit here, having my life decided for me, is how certain he sounds. So sure of himself. So convinced he’s doing the right thing. He doesn’t have the first clue.

And is that his fault? The question rings out in my head as I push my chair back and stand with my chin lifted and my shoulders thrown back. I can at least show a little dignity, even if I’m being pushed around.

Inside, though? That’s another story. My blood is boiling, and I can barely see straight for the helpless rage clawing me to pieces inside. I won’t let him see it. I will not lower myself that way.

Once I’m alone, it’s a different story. My nails dig into my palms, and I’m practically vibrating with impotent fury as the elevator takes me down to my place. Assigning a babysitter to me like I’m a child who can’t be trusted. And there I was, relieved that I wouldn’t have to live under Dallas’s scrutiny for a little while. That I could relax when I was alone, that I

wouldn't have to avoid pointed questions or provide explanations. I should know better by now. Mason always has a plan up his sleeve.

A plan that takes the form of a freshly showered Dallas, who is already seated in my living room and going through the choices on TV. "Hey, there," he says with an easy grin when I enter the apartment and glare at him with my hands on my hips. "Looks like we're going to be spending some more time together." When all I can do is stare daggers at his skull, his smile widens.

It's a smile I can't wait to wipe from his face.

DALLAS

I didn't expect her to throw a party over this, but her reaction is on the verge of being insulting. I can't take it personally, and I don't, watching her fume and glare at me. In another minute, she'll stomp her foot or threaten to hold her breath until I leave. That's the level of maturity I'm dealing with.

It isn't easy to keep from grinning at her obvious anger. What can I say? She's even more appealing when she's like this, all flushed and energized and ready to rip somebody's head off.

"Come on," I urge in a playful tone, patting the sofa cushion next to me. "Sit down, take a load off, and relax for a while."

Her brow furrows. "This is absurd."

"We can agree on that much," I admit. I can think of a few other words that apply. Dangerous is one of them, though that's my problem to deal with. Not hers. "All right, so we agree the situation is laughable. Now that we have that out of the way, we can move forward."

"Because it's that easy?"

"It doesn't have to be hard. What's the use of getting all bent out of shape and resentful? That only makes things worse."

When all she does is deepen her scowl, I have to laugh. "Look around," I implore, waving an arm over the room. "You could do a hell of a lot worse than being locked up in what's

essentially a palace compared to that tiny cabin. Tell me the truth. Have you been in worse situations than this? More uncomfortable situations?”

“You know I have,” she mutters.

“There you go,” I murmur. No matter how she fusses and fights, I need to be the bigger person, which means maintaining a sense of calm. “You’ve been through much worse. So have I, for that matter. This is nothing. You have an excuse to sit back, kick your feet up, and rest after so much running.”

She’s softening before my eyes. Some of the anger begins to melt away, but not all of it. She’s too stubborn to give in that easily. “I need a shower.”

“I won’t argue with you on that.” She rolls her eyes before turning away, and I’m barely able to stifle a snicker. I’m also barely able to keep myself from staring at her ass as she retreats. I’m only human.

I need to stay strong. There’s no room for me to forget why I’m here, what’s at stake. I can’t let my feelings for her overwrite what I know needs to be done. Whatever is compelling her hasn’t subsided. She is still secretive and guarded. What she needs now is to know she’s safe.

What I need is to keep my hands to myself. We’ll see how successful I am.

At least there’s one good part of this: I don’t have to compete with Griffin. I hate using the word even in my mind, but it’s the only word that fits. There’s no competition for her attention now, no trying to prove she prefers one of us over the other. Watching him watching her, asking myself if he’s imagining himself in her bed. And this is a hell of a lot more comfortable than any cabin in the woods. As far as I’m concerned, things are looking up.

By the time she’s out of the shower, my stomach is growling. That’s nothing compared to the hunger that stirs low in my core when she emerges from her room. She’s dressed in a slightly more relaxed version of her normal gear, having

foregone the chic suit and stilettos for a pair of gray slacks and a pale blue silk blouse. The fabric glides over her skin as she moves, shimmering softly in the light streaming through the windows. She's pulled her hair back into a low ponytail. A far cry from the wild mess it was when we first found her at the cabin.

My hands twitch when I imagine burying them in that soft, thick hair. There's a longing in me, deep and throbbing. I need to get a hold of myself before I make a stupid mistake that at the moment doesn't seem like it would be that stupid at all.

She notices me staring, of course, and smirks before giving me a slow turn. "Ta-da."

"Very nice," I manage to croak now that my mouth and throat have gone bone dry. "Feel better?"

She bats her lashes, which are now darker thanks to the makeup she's applied. "I feel more like myself."

"That's good. See? This doesn't have to be torture."

"You don't have to lay it on so thick." I can't help but laugh at myself because she's right. I am laying it on pretty thick. She grins before turning away, going to the kitchen. "I'm starving."

"And I am convinced you're reading my mind. I've been sitting here listening to my stomach growl."

"You didn't need to wait for me. You're more than welcome to help yourself around here." She eyes me warily over her shoulder. "You've already made yourself pretty comfortable, by the looks of it."

I remove my feet from the coffee table with the distinct feeling I've been put in my place. "What do you have around here?" I ask on my way to join her.

"Not sure." She opens the fridge, and I watch a look of sly understanding touch her features. "I should've known. He got the fridge stocked for me."

"Because he wants you to have what you need."

“Because he was so confident you would bring me back.” Our eyes meet over the top of the refrigerator door, and all I can do is shrug.

“He knew we would get the job done once we told him we’d located you. That’s why he sent us, because he trusts us. And we know our shit.”

“All right, don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back.” She digs around and pulls out a couple of blocks of cheese, some bacon, and tomatoes. “These do not belong in the fridge,” she grumbles, leaving the bagged tomatoes on the counter.

“What are you planning to make?” I ask, since now she’s piqued my interest.

“You know what I’ve craved?” She sets everything out, then pulls a pan from beneath the counter. “A good grilled cheese sandwich. Not some processed cheese bullshit, either.”

“That sounds great. Can I help?”

She lifts a delicate eyebrow. “Can you fry bacon without ruining it?”

“That, I can do. The trick is not using very high heat and pulling it a minute before you’re satisfied. It continues crisping up as it cools off.”

“I feel like I’m watching a cooking show,” she quips.

“I’ve got plenty of other tips, if you’re interested.” Do I ever. I could show her a thing or two no younger man could ever manage.

“For now, I’d settle for some crispy bacon to put on my sandwich.”

“Fair enough. Don’t come begging for my wisdom later on.” The sound of her soft laughter does something to me it shouldn’t, but there’s no helping it. The way I light up inside, the way she warms up all the parts of me that were once cold and dark.

“Don’t go getting any ideas,” she warns while digging around in the cabinets. “Just because we are making lunch

together doesn't mean I approve of this situation."

"Don't go getting the wrong ideas," I counter. "Just because we're working together like this doesn't mean you have a say in whether or not I stick around."

"Ouch."

I turn her way after placing the bacon in the hot pan. "All I'm saying is, fighting this is a waste of time and energy. You know as well as I do this is how it has to be."

"And you know as well as I do, I'm not going to sit back and accept that. I did what I thought I had to do."

"Just like Mason is now," I remind her in a gentle voice. I had intended to calm her a little, but the lines etched across her forehead only deepen. "Sometimes, it's best to go with the path of least resistance. It's the tree that bends in a fierce wind that survives without breaking. It gets stronger, too. That's who you need to be now. You have to be willing to bend."

"I don't bend for anybody unless I want to."

"And I would expect no less." I look her way again and find her thoughtfully chewing her lip and staring down at the counter instead of grating the cheese. "But it might make things easier on you if you focus on adjusting to the way things are for now rather than fighting against it."

"Are you offering this advice as my brother's mouthpiece, or is it coming from you?"

"Don't insult me," I murmur as I flip the bacon. "I thought we were better than that."

"You're right." That alone is practically enough to warrant a celebration. It's not often she admits someone else is right. I'll take my victories where I can get them.

And this is why I was the better choice to stay with her. I understand her. I know what she'll listen to. I'm not going to wave my cock around and hope to distract her long enough to avoid trouble. Even if the appendage in question twitches almost painfully when she comes near, reaching past me for the butter dish. Her freshly washed hair is fragrant, compelling

me to bury my nose in it and take a deep breath. For the first time in my life, I'm grateful to be splattered by a drop of bacon grease, since it focuses me before I can make a mistake.

Once the sandwiches are grilled, layered with cheese, bacon, and tomato, we don't bother sitting at the table to eat. "I'm freaking starving, and it smells amazing," she declares before taking a hearty bite. I watch as her eyes roll back and a look of bliss touches her face. "Oh, my god," she moans as she chews.

Now I'm hungry for something that has nothing to do with food, hungrier than I've ever been for her. The act of watching her enjoy herself is insanely erotic. I have to clear my throat before speaking, and even then, my voice is raspy, almost shaking with desire. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone enjoying a sandwich as much as you are now."

"It's a pretty good sandwich." Her eyes open and a smile tugs the corners of her mouth. I need to eat or else I'll have to kiss her. She's not wrong, the sandwich is exceptional. But it's still nothing compared to what I would rather do with my mouth.

With her back to the counter across from where I stand, she takes another bite and groans happily. "All right," she finally admits after swallowing. "Maybe there's something to be said for being home."

"See? It's not all bad."

"I can't imagine it's any fun for you, though."

I study her between bites, searching for a clue to whether she means it, or if she's trying to get under my skin. She seems sincere enough, maybe even regretful. "I don't know," I say. "This is pretty nice. I could do a lot worse."

"What does it take to shake you up?" She wipes her mouth on a napkin, which she balls up and tosses into the can from a distance. Perfect shot. A woman of many talents.

"No way," I reply with a chuckle. "I'm not going to reveal my secrets, so you can use them against me."

She bats her lashes, all innocence. "Who said I would?"

“I never said you would, but you could.” This time, I don’t bother holding back my knowing laughter.

Still, it seems she has a few tricks up her sleeve once she narrows her eyes and pins me in place without putting a hand on me. “What would I be able to use against you?” she ponders in a soft voice, inching closer to me.

“No comment.” My pants are getting much too tight for my own good. I set down my empty plate with a trembling hand and wish one more time for strength to do the right thing and not mix business with pleasure.

She stops only when there’s barely an inch between us. Her big, blue eyes stare straight into mine, and I would swear she’s looking through me, into my soul. She’s always had that power, and now the sensation is more intense than it’s ever been.

She parts her lips while her gaze drifts down to my mouth, and fuck it, that’s all it takes for what little is left of my resolve to crumble. For my hands to take hold of her face and pull her in until I can crush her lips beneath mine.

Her breath catches and a tiny whimper stirs in her throat that only heightens the explosive heat that’s now burst to life. I can’t drag it out, can’t tease her when it’s taking everything I have to restrain myself from devouring her here and now. I settle for tasting her, sweeping my tongue over her lips before sliding it against hers until we both groan until her hands claw their way up my back and her nails dig into my shoulders. It unlocks something deep and primal, something that demands I claim this fascinating woman. This woman whose passion matches my own, who presses her body to mine before reaching up to thread her fingers through my hair and pulls me down, demanding, holding me in place as the kiss deepens further.

I push her back against the opposite counter, thrusting my hips, grinding my aching dick against her and shuddering at the contact. She melts in my arms, moaning into my mouth, and the sound sends a sizzle of current through me from head to toe. She wants this. Wants me. And there’s no one stopping

us. When she presses her tits against me, I can't help touching one, fondling the full, heavy globe, teasing her nipple with my thumb until it stands out beneath the silk and what feels like a lacy bra underneath.

She throws her head back with a gasp, and I allow my lips to travel down the slim column of her throat, licking and nipping, letting her needy groans direct me. I'm hard as steel and there's only one thing that will satisfy this deep, painful ache. She rolls her hips, grinding against my rigid length, and my knees go weak. That's the power she has over me.

When I lift my head and look down into her lust-filled eyes, I know without asking where this is heading. Where it's been heading all along.

Which is precisely the moment the elevator pings, signaling the arrival of a guest.

NATALIE

Any other time, I would be delighted to see Teagan. I told her she was always welcome here, day and night, and I meant it when I said it. But right now, my vagina is very mad at her for interrupting my make-out session with Dallas. Ugh, that man can kiss up a storm. So sensual and the connection... I didn't know where my body ended and his began.

"Mason was just worried about you. Whatever he told you earlier, he probably didn't mean it," Teagan explains, trying her best to mend the relationship I broke.

"You don't have to worry about my brother and me. We've had our fair share of fights in our lives, and we've always worked it out." I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince her or myself. Yes, we have been through a lot together, but nothing like this. I'm honestly not sure if it will ever be like it was before.

She sighs. "I knew everything would work out. And I knew there had to be an explanation for you leaving. Anyway, I'm glad you are back. I missed you."

"I missed you too." I'm surprised by the honesty in those words. I rarely get attached to people unless they've been in my life for many years. Teagan is different. There is such a light about her that draws you in and won't let you go. "I'm glad Mason has you."

"Oh, I know," Teagan quips. "If it wasn't for me, he'd shrivel up and die." We both have a good laugh, knowing that

it's funny because it's true. "Well, I'll leave you alone to get some rest."

I don't actually want to rest, but I do want to be alone with Dallas, so I simply agree with her. We say our goodbyes, and Teagan leaves, taking the elevator back up to their apartment.

I hoped once we were alone that we could continue where we left off, but the moment has passed, and the mood between us has changed. The sizzling heat has died down and left us with an awkward silence.

"Want to go to the range and blow off some steam?" Dallas asks.

"That actually sounds like an amazing idea. Aren't you glad I already put makeup on? Now you don't have to wait on me." I wave my hand from my head to my feet. "See? I'm ready to go."

"I would have no issue taking you to the gun range in your pajamas," Dallas scoffs. "You are the only one who thinks you need all of this." Now it's his turn to wave his hand at me, pointing out my tailored slacks, pressed blouse, and dark leather booties.

I recall our talk in the cabin, and what he told me about feeling good about yourself. "I'm not saying you are wrong, but I can't change in a drop of a hat. Makeup and clothes feel like a security blanket to me." I don't think I've ever admitted that, even to myself. Dallas has a way of drawing things out of me.

We make our way to the elevator, and I type in the code that takes us straight to the gun range. The elevator door opens with a bing, and I'm met by the familiar smell of gunpowder and the sound of rounds being fired. Music to my ears.

I glance over at Dallas. His shoulders are relaxed, his face content. He looks just as happy in this environment as I feel. It's funny what kind of stuff calms us compared to normal people.

"Welcome back, Ms. Grant," Pete, the range master, greets before turning to Dallas. "Mr. Adler, long time, no see."

“Hey, Pete. We want to blow off some steam, so get us big guns and lots of ammo.”

“Big guns, and a shitload of ammo coming right up.”

I give Pete a megawatt smile, excited about being here and having some fun. That smile fades when Ginger—Pete’s assistant—speed walks over to us. She is known to flirt with anything with a set of balls and seeing the way she is ogling Dallas on her way over here lets me know today is no different.

“Well, hello there,” she says seductively, never tearing her gaze away from Dallas. “I haven’t seen you here in forever.” She draws out the last word like a teenager, batting her eyes at Dallas like she is trying to blow out a fire with her lashes.

I don’t even know why it bothers me so much. I have no claim on Dallas. So what we made out earlier. That meant nothing. Or at least that’s what I’m trying to tell myself. We’re just having fun. Fooling around a bit. Same with Griffin. No strings attached. Always.

Yet, when Ginger places her flimsy hand on Dallas’s forearm while she laughs at something he says; I want nothing more than to chop her stupid fingers off with a meat cleaver.

Okay, maybe I’m overreacting a bit.

Or maybe not.

“Are we here to shoot some guns or for endless small talk?” I snap, making Ginger giggle, and Dallas lift one eyebrow at me.

“Go ahead and take booth eight,” Pete offers. “I’ll get you a good array of guns and ammo brought over momentarily.”

Dallas and I both nod and make our way to booth eight.

“What was that about?”

I shrug, as if it didn’t really bother me that much. “I just don’t like how handsy she gets with everybody. It’s unprofessional.”

“Are you sure that’s what it was about?” Ugh, why can’t he let this go?

“Let’s just shoot, okay?”

“We don’t have any guns yet.” He points out the obvious.

“Then let’s just not talk.” I fold my arms across my chest, signaling that I’m done talking.

Unfortunately, Dallas is not. “You know, my grandparents were married for sixty-five years and people always asked them ‘What’s your secret?’ My grandfather used to say, ‘You really start loving someone when you tell them something you are scared of sharing, and they react in a way that calms you. That’s when that person becomes a safe haven. And every time that happens, you love them a little more.’”

I stare at him, unprepared for his sudden deep words of wisdom. I’m not sure what to say. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and look around the room uncomfortably.

Luckily, Pete approaches us, pushing a metal cart packed full of different guns and ammo. Thank fuck.

“I brought you some rifles, and two handguns each, new armor-piercing bullets, and I’m going to set up some special exploding targets for fun.”

“Music to my ears,” I say, glad Pete interrupted the awkward silence.

Dallas shoots me a glance that says ‘we’re not done talking about this’ but luckily he lets it go for now. Sliding on my ear protection, I grab the Glock from the cart and load it quickly. I step up to the window and aim at the human-shaped target, aiming for the head. My finger slides over the trigger as I take a breath in. On my exhale, I pull it. The gun fires, ricocheting in my hand as I fire again and again until all fourteen bullets of the extended magazine have ripped through the center of the target.

“Remind me to never get on your bad side,” Dallas mumbles next to me, making me laugh. He could say the same about most people here, but I’ll take the compliment.

When it's Dallas's turn to shoot, I enjoy watching his muscles flex under his dark shirt, and I catch myself fantasizing about taking it off later and running my fingers over every ridge.

We spend the next two hours shooting every gun Pete brings us, trying out different types of ammo and interactive targets. Then we do the same with an array of rifles, and just for extra fun, we try out a crossbow.

"Are you relaxed yet?" Dallas asks after I slip my ear protection off.

"Thoroughly. I could use some dinner soon." I rub my palm over my growling stomach.

"Let's order something and have them bring it to your place," he suggests.

"That sounds amazing." I wave Pete over, letting him know we are done. He and Ginger come over and start cleaning up after us as we leave.

We use the elevator to go up to the third floor where the restaurant is located and order our food at the front and tell them to bring it up to my apartment.

As soon as we are back in the elevator, Dallas asks the question I'm sure has been burning on his tongue. "Are you ready to tell me why you snapped at Ginger earlier?"

"I told you, it's unprofessional—"

"Cut the crap, Nat," Dallas shoots. "Tell me the truth. Were you a little jealous?"

Ugh! "No," I lie, jealousy still lingering in my chest as I think about Ginger's dainty fingers on Dallas's arm. "Fine, maybe a little bit. Only because we'd literally just kissed, and I was confused."

"Confused?" Dallas lifts his hand, touching his chest above his heart as if I just hurt his feelings. He scrunches up his face into a pained expression to drive home the point.

"Can we just skip this and move to the part where you kiss me again?" The elevator stops and the door slides open into

my apartment. As I wait for a response, we step inside, heading for the living room.

“Who says I was going to kiss you again?”

I stop. Turning to him, I copy his expression from just a minute ago, and hold my palm over my heart as if he hurt my feelings. The only difference is, he really did hurt mine.

DALLAS

She doesn't look me in my eyes, her gaze is set to something just behind me. Clearly, something is bothering her, and I know exactly what it is. She can tell me all day long that I don't mean anything to her, that we were just fooling around, and she is staying completely unattached. What a load of bullshit.

We clearly have a connection beyond physically. Now I only have to figure out what the problem is. Is it because I'm so much older than her? Or is she worried about what Mason is going to say? Of course there is Griffin too. She probably has unresolved feelings for him. Hell, it could be all three combined or something completely different. She has built her walls higher and thicker than Fort Knox. Getting to the core is going to be a hard task, but one I'm very much up for.

"Would you like a drink?" Nat asks. "I could use a glass of wine."

"I'd prefer a beer," I answer, as I get comfortable in the living room. Since her apartment is an open floor plan, I can still watch her in the kitchen.

"Coming right up."

"How old are you again? Thirty-one?" I question, knowing damn well she is a few years older than that.

"Nice try. Thirty-six," she yells over her shoulder while her head is in the refrigerator. The sound of glass bottles clinking together as she searches for our drinks.

“I’m fifty-two. I’m only sixteen years older than you. Not a terrible age gap.”

She closes the fridge and walks over to the counter where she places a bottle of Yuengling and a tall bottle of wine. She pops the cork out of the wine and pours herself a healthy glass. “I wouldn’t care if you were sixty-two,” she says, looking me straight in the eyes. Her large baby blues never waver as she walks over to where I’m sitting on the couch. She isn’t lying. I mentally cross my age gap theory off my list.

She hands me my beer, and I twist the top open before taking a swig. Natalie takes a sip of her red wine and sets it on the coffee table before kicking off her boots and lying down beside me. She props her head onto a large couch pillow and her legs over my lap. Her eyes twinkle mischievously as her calves rub purposely over my crotch.

“Are you worried about what Mason will think if he ever finds out that you fool around with Griffin or me?”

“Not really,” she answers, unbothered by the question. “I don’t care what he thinks. It’s none of his business what I do in my off time.”

Another checkmark off my list.

“What about Griffin? Do you have feelings for him?”

“Can we please not talk about another guy right now?” She moves her legs up, rubbing the sole of her foot over my hardened cock. “At the cabin, you said you wouldn’t turn me down if I came onto you.”

“What gives you the impression that I’m turning you down?”

“You talk too much.” She giggles before twisting her body to get on her knees next to me. She moves to straddle me, and I grab her hips to position her right where I want her. Her heated core is pressed against my now aching cock, and I use my hold on her hips to pull her closer.

Her eyes dilate, turning her light blues dark and dangerous. She smirks, grinding herself shamelessly against my bulge. “You are a naughty girl, Natalie Grant.” Me calling her by her

full name does something to her. Or maybe it was the naughty part. Nat's breathing hitches and her lips turn to a full-blown smirk.

"I'd like to think of myself as a good girl."

"Is that what you want me to call you? My good girl." At my words, she closes her eyes and hums a soft moan.

Her hips circle while her hands find my shoulders. She digs her manicured nails into my skin. Ever through my button up shirt, I can feel the sharp bite.

"I want this off you," she whines, tugging on the collar of my shirt.

"Take it off then," I challenge.

Her grin widens as she unbuttons it slowly. So painfully slow, I almost slap her hands away and rip my shirt open. When she finally finishes with the last button, the white fabric slides off my shoulders.

"You definitely don't look fifty-two," Nat whispers as she runs her fingertips over the ridges of my muscular pecs and down my defined abs.

I grin, enjoying her touch. I'm grateful that I spend many hours a week in the gym to keep my body in shape. Her fingers smooth lower until they reach the waistband of my slacks. She doesn't take her time here, unfasting my pants quickly. She slides back a few inches to get better access as she reaches her small hand into my pants and frees my very hard cock.

Nat brings each of her hands to her mouth, licking the palms before wrapping them around my throbbing rod, squeezing gently as she moves up and down.

"Fuck," I groan, throwing my head back onto the couch cushion.

Her wicked fingers work me up and down until pre-cum drips from my dick, and I have to think about something else so I won't come like a fucking teenager.

I'm surprised when Natalie suddenly gets off my lap, only to kneel in front of me. I open my eyes and watch her in awe as she takes the base of my cock with her dainty hand to guide the tip between her smiling, plump lips.

Her hands feel amazing, but the second her hot tongue meets my aching skin, I almost shoot a load into her mouth.

"You feel so good." I can barely talk, overcome with lust. I dig my fingers into her thick hair. Holding her head, but letting her set her own pace. Her head bobs up and down as she tries to take me deeper with every thrust. Even with her hand around my base and the tip tapping against the back of her throat, she can't manage to take all of me. That doesn't stop her from trying. I can't help but grin. This is so typical for Natalie. What an overachiever. Even when it comes to blow jobs.

"If you don't want me to come in your mouth, you better stop and get back up here."

Her blue eyes meet my gray ones through her thick black lashes. The same unhinged lust I'm feeling swirling around inside my chest reflects back at me. Without breaking eye contact, she pops my dick out of her mouth and runs her tongue over her upper lip seductively. *Christ. This woman is going to be the end of me.*

She rises to her feet, reaching for the buttons of her blouse. She starts undoing them one by one. She lets the blouse fall to the ground, the soft fabric slides off her silky skin with ease. The pink lace bra—only a few hues pinker than her skin—matches the panties she reveals a moment later when she pushes down her slacks without unbuttoning them. She slides them down her long legs slowly, bending down at the waist until she reaches her ankles. Once she steps out of the fabric gathered at her feet, she dips her fingers into the waistband of her panties, and repeats the motion.

My cock has never been so hard. She straightens back up, and I use that moment to take her in to memorize every curve of her exquisite body. Her pussy is shaved and bare, her stomach flat, and her tits are just the right size to fill my hands.

Her nipples are light pink and begging to be sucked on. I saw her naked in the cabin, but this is different. At the cabin, she did it to shock us. This is sensual. There is a connection between us now. An invisible electric bond tethering between us.

As if she could hear me beckoning her to me, she climbs onto my lap and positions herself over my cock. I take her face between my hands and bring her mouth to mine just as she lowers herself onto me. Our lips seal in a passionate kiss while her tight cunt sheathes my aching cock. I fantasized about her pussy wrapped around me so many times this almost feels surreal.

She impales herself all the way down. I'm impressed she can take me in this position. Most women can't. Once again, Natalie surprises me. She doesn't take long to adjust to my size before moving her hips, circling them at first, while her tongue mimics her movement in my mouth. She tastes like sin and smells like a forbidden fruit.

She breaks the kiss, and I wrap my arms around her torso, pulling her closer, until there is no physical space between us. She mirrors me, wrapping her arms around my neck, and burying her face in the crook of my neck. We can't be any closer, yet it feels like there is still something between us. I can't explain it, like an invisible wall I need to break down. It's in the subtle way her movements are restricted, like she is still holding back.

Part of me wants to ask what's going on, but the other, more prominent part doesn't want her to stop bouncing up and down on my dick.

Sex now, talking later, I decide.

Nat rides me for a few more minutes before the tingling in the bottom of my spine becomes too much. I need to come, and I want it to be inside of her. "Are you on the pill?"

"Yes," she moans into my ear.

I groan. The thought of blowing a load inside of her has my balls tightening. But first, I need to make her come.

Lowering my hand between us, I find her clit and start rubbing small circles over it with the rough pad of my thumb. It doesn't take long before her thighs quiver, and she throws her head back with her release. I keep pressure on the bundle of nerves until it completely stops pulsing and Nat goes limp in my arms.

Grabbing her hips once more, I pump into her deeply three more times before I explode myself. My orgasm seems to go on forever. Ropes of come paint the inside of her tight channel as Natalie peppers soft kisses over my neck.

Wow, this was intense.

It takes us both a few minutes to come down from our release. Natalie covers my body like a blanket, running her fingers up and down my abs while I keep her in a tight embrace.

“Want to take a shower with me?” She offers a split second before both of our phones go off. “Never mind, I guess.”

She giggles and sits up with me still inside of her. My cock roars back to life, twitching with newfound vigor while Nat reaches for her phone.

“It's Griffin,” she announces. Her eyebrows drawn together in confusion. “He is downstairs.”

Of course, it's Griffin. That prick probably planned this somehow. Natalie gets up, my dick sliding out of her as she goes. I immediately miss her warmth and the connection to her. Tucking my still semi hard dick back into my pants, I reach for my own phone to unlock it.

Griffin: Come meet me in the parking garage. Now.

Ominous, but okay. Seems important.

I begrudgingly put my shirt back on while watching Natalie pick her clothes up to pull them on.

“Please don't brush your hair,” I beg. “You look thoroughly fucked like this.” She looks so fucking sexy. I'm going to punch Griffin in the throat for interrupting this. I

could have easily gone a second round in the shower. Standing up against the wall, bent over...

NATALIE

I feel it as soon as the elevator doors open onto the quiet underground garage. I couldn't put my finger on it if I tried and couldn't describe it to Dallas if he asked why I hesitate to step out of the elevator car. I'm probably too jumpy, practically seeing ghosts where there aren't any.

Natalie, get it together.

There is absolutely no reason for the chill that has suddenly raced its way up my arms and left goosebumps behind. Dallas doesn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary, stepping off the elevator and looking around for Griffin. "Well?" he mutters as he turns in a slow circle; his eyes narrowed as he surveys the area. "Where the hell is he?"

The hair on the back of my neck is standing straight up by the time I step out into the concrete space, the soft whoosh behind me signaling the doors closing. "Something's wrong here," I whisper, but I don't think he hears me.

He's scowling, annoyed and muttering to himself over what a pain in the ass this is.

"Listen to me," I urge, and finally he looks my way. "I don't like this. Why would he have us meet? Why would he not come up?"

"Maybe he sent the text by accident to both of us," he mutters, but I sense the apprehension now heavy in his voice. "Or it could be—"

Whatever he had in mind is lost when, out of nowhere, a black van screams its way toward us, the headlights bright

enough that I squint and turn my head away. I don't have time to do anything more than jam my finger against the button, calling the elevator back. We only just got off it. It should be waiting, but the button doesn't light up, no matter how frantically I push it. Stark horror engulfs me when I understand it's been shut down. There's no power going to it.

We've been set up.

"Get back!" Dallas barks, placing himself in front of me, his Glock drawn. I'm unarmed. A sitting duck. Completely at the mercy of whoever's coming—not that I have to wonder. Not that I don't already know in my heart what this is all about. *Mom, what are you doing this time?*

Dallas manages to get off a few shots, which only ricochet off the van, before taking hold of me and pulling me along with him behind one of the SUVs Mason uses, sitting close to the elevator. "Get back upstairs!" he shouts to me over the squeal of tires and brakes that seem much louder thanks to the unforgiving concrete. "I'll give you cover. But make it fast!"

"Negative—elevator's down," I bark. "I don't know if I can make it to the stairs!"

"I'll cover you!" he insists, throwing himself over me at the sound of gunfire ringing through the space, loud enough to make my ears ring.

Can I make it? Peering through the windows, I see half a dozen black-clad men pour from the van once the door slides open. Two of them carry pistols, and I can't imagine the others are unarmed. I can't leave him like this.

"I said move!" Dallas is crouched close to the rear passenger side of the SUV, taking a few shots before ducking again. "You need to go!"

I know he's right, and that knowledge is what gets me moving, sprinting for the metal door leading to the stairwell.

Someone must have thought of that already because a pair of bulky men cut me off, one of them throwing himself in front of me while the other takes hold of me from behind, hands wrapped around my arms and pinning them to my sides.

Panic blooms in my chest, but so does anger. No, stronger than that, more intense. “No!” I scream in rage, raising my right foot and delivering a solid kick to the sternum of the man in front of me. He staggers back, gasping for air, which only tightens the grip of the man still holding me. I twist my head around to gauge his height, then snap my head back, connecting with his mouth.

“Fuck!” he shouts, his grip loosening just enough for me to free myself and spin around, my fist connecting with his nose. Now there’s blood pouring from two spots on his face, and he raises the ski mask over his face to cover his wounds with one hand. Like that will do anything.

I’m ready to make a run for it again, but there are more of them running at me, backing me against the wall. “Dallas!” I scream before one of them lunges forward. A hand clamps over my mouth, and I’m lifted off my feet, an arm wrapped around my midsection.

“Stop fighting!” the man growls in my ear as I twist and thrash. His urging somehow filters through the haze of panic in my head, and I know my instincts were right. This is all a set-up. I want nothing to do with it.

Twisting my body, I kick off the wall as hard as I can, knocking my captor on his ass and rolling away from him once we hit the floor. He grabs hold of my wrist at the last second, and I can’t hold back a cry of pain as electric heat sizzles up my arm. The pain only sharpens me, focuses my energy. I kick out blindly and make contact with something that snaps under my foot. Like magic, I’m free, while Dallas continues his gunfight with the pair of men waiting by the van. They aren’t here to kill anybody. They’re only a distraction, a way of splitting us apart, so I’m more easily captured and taken. It’s not going to happen. Not so long as I’m conscious and able to fight.

The stairwell door flies open, and there’s never been a sweeter sight than the hotel security team pouring out and fanning over the area. My attackers shout to each other before fleeing to their van, but the one I most recently kicked is slow moving, staggering to his feet with a hand pressed to his side.

There's too much shouting, too much confusion, and soon he's surrounded by our men with their guns drawn. The rest of the attackers jump into the van, which starts moving before they've all climbed in. The door is still open as it careens away, and Dallas takes a few shots before it disappears.

"Hands!" the men on the security team bark as they circle their wounded prey. "Show your hands!"

All I can see thanks to the ski mask is his eyes darting around. He knows it's over; he has to. He's surrounded. He'll be questioned at best, tortured at worst. And I doubt Mason will take it easy on him.

Nor would my mother, since he failed his mission.

He knows it. That's why he reaches for the pistol in his waistband, raises it to the side of his head, and pulls the trigger before anybody has the chance to put a hand on him. I watch in silent horror as he hits the ground.

"Are you all right?" Dallas takes my face in his hands and turns my head until I'm gazing up into his eyes. Eyes that are now wide, almost frantic as he searches me for injuries.

"Fine," I grunt, though the throbbing in my wrist tells another story. "Asshole twisted my wrist. It might be sprained—I don't think it's a break." There's something else, something I'm only now realizing. When the now dead man grabbed my wrist, he forced something into my clenched fist. Something my hand is still closed around, gripping tight.

"I'll take you to medical, get you checked out." Dallas glances around, surveying the aftermath, and I use his distraction as an opportunity to pull what I now see is a folded slip of paper from my fist and shove it into the back pocket of my ruined slacks. He shows no sign of having noticed once he's turned back to me, his steely gaze softening with concern once he finds me wincing. "They'll give you something for the pain."

"I fucking hope so," I grit out. It seems the elevator is still out of commission, but the medical wing is only on the first floor, above the lobby. We take the stairs, neither of us saying

anything about what we went through down there. How sudden it was. How easily we were duped.

He finally brings it up once we reach the first floor landing, and he opens the door to usher me through. “How the fuck did they make it look like the messages came from Griffin?”

“I have no idea.” And I don’t. I don’t have a clue. I’ve come to understand the depth and breadth of my mother’s ability to deceive even the most experienced veterans, people trained to see through the sort of deception she’s so skilled at. That doesn’t mean I know how she does it.

“It could mean he’s been captured, out there doing whatever it is he’s doing,” Dallas continues once we’ve passed through the double doors leading into the medical ward. He drops the subject, waving to the attending nurse. “She’s injured and needs an x-ray.”

“I doubt that,” I offer. “It’s just a sprain. I can still move it.”

“We can’t be too sure,” he insists, hovering over me once I take a seat on one of the handful of beds lined up along the wall. I’d be touched and even flattered if there wasn’t so much going on in my head. So many questions.

“I’ve broken bones before.” It’s almost enough to make me want to shove him away when he opens his mouth like he’s ready to argue. “This isn’t my first fight, soldier. I can handle it.”

“Fine. Have it your way.” He huffs and grumbles but doesn’t leave, sitting in a chair too small for his large body while the nurse conducts an exam. I grit my teeth to bear the pain of being poked and prodded, but in the end, I know I got off lucky.

They were here to kidnap me. I know it. My brother will know it, too, once he’s got the facts of the situation straight. And here I am, with a slip of paper practically burning a hole in my pocket. What does it say? Is it a message from her? Was

that the fallback plan in case the extraction didn't go as they hoped?

Thinking it all over is a distraction from the pain, anyway. I'm going to need to defend myself to my brother—I'm not a fool, I know he'll be suspicious. Did they plan on infiltrating the entire hotel once they got to me? I can only imagine that was the idea. All Mason has to do is look at my wrist and the scrapes on my knees to know I fought. I didn't go along with them. That has to count for something, right?

“Yes, this looks like a sprain.” The nurse is soft-spoken, sympathetic. “We'll get a brace on it, and I'll give you a bottle of pills for the pain if it gets to be too much, especially overnight.”

“Thank you.” I'm glad to know I won't lose any sleep over this. There's already so much for me to lose sleep over as it is.

DALLAS

As soon as they release Natalie from medical, we head upstairs to Mason's office, where everyone is gathering. Mason, Teagan, and surprisingly, Trent are sitting around the conference table. Griffin is still absent, sent on some mission by Mason.

"What are you doing here?" I question as soon as we walk in.

"Mason asked for all hands on deck," Trent explains, "so here I am." He leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his chest. He clearly hates being here. I don't remember the last time he actually came in to work with us.

"Griffin is on his way back as well," Teagan chimes in. "Like Trent said, we need everyone here." There is an odd tone in her normally cheerful voice, something that sounds a lot like anger. But why is Teagan angry, or should I say with whom?

Mason clears his throat. "The hotel has never been infiltrated like this before, and we are still not sure how it happened. My best guess is it was an inside job." I don't miss the way his eyes flutter over at Natalie for a split second. My hands curl into fists. He still thinks Nat is involved. I take a deep breath, forcing my fingers to uncurl. I need to stop letting my emotions get the better of me and look at the facts.

Nat seems to notice as well; her jaw is clenched, and her nostrils are flared. The tension in the room is thick. For the first time since I can remember, trust isn't at a hundred percent

between us. She is upset, but the more I think about it, I can't help but agree with Mason's assumption. This had to be an inside job. Who else would be able to hack into the security system and send a text from Griffin's phone?

But just because there is a mole doesn't mean it's Natalie. Although, the people who came didn't try to hurt her, it seemed like they were trying to kidnap her... or maybe rescue her? Could it be possible that this was an extraction mission? I let everything run through my mind again. Natalie fought them. Or did she? Fuck, everything happened so fast.

"Until we are sure what's happening, I'm canceling all outside missions," Mason announces. "Everyone stays inside the hotel, and I want security tripled. I don't care if everyone has to pull double shifts."

We all nod in agreement.

"I want all communications monitored as well until we know how they made it look like the message came from Griffin's phone. We need to be extra careful," Mason continues. "We need to find the threat and eliminate it immediately."

"We already know who the threat is. Let's draw her out," Trent offers. "It looks like they came for Nat, so why not use that to our advantage and—"

"No," Mason and I say at the same time. He raises an eyebrow at me, questioning without words why I was so quick to deny.

Feeling the need to explain, I do just that. "Natalie already got hurt today, plus we don't know if they want to hurt her or not. They tried to take her, yes, but we have no idea for what."

Surprisingly, Natalie stays quiet. Knowing her, I expect her to jump in, to volunteer to go, but she doesn't. She only stares at her hands folded in her lap.

"Obviously we wouldn't send her in without backup," Trent huffs, annoyed. "What is going on with you guys? You're all acting weird as fuck."

“How would you know what we act like? You’re never here,” I snap.

“Christ.” Mason runs his hand through his unruly hair. “None of this is productive.”

“Why don’t we all take a breather,” Teagan intervenes. “Let’s sleep on it and come back here in the morning when Griffin is back. I highly doubt someone’s going to try something else today.

“Teagan is right,” I agree, before the room settles into an uncomfortable silence. “We should all take a breather and continue this tomorrow.”

“Great. Are we done here?” Natalie finally asks, “I’m ready to take more pain meds and go to bed.”

“We’re done,” Mason announces. His gaze meets mine before bouncing back to Natalie. He gives me a stern look, telling me without words to keep an eye on her. I nod in agreement and follow Natalie as she gets up from her chair and walks out the door without another word.

“I know you are angry—”

“I’m not angry,” she snaps. “I’m tired, and I want to go to sleep without talking.”

I hate how suspicious her outburst makes me. Why is she so closed off right now? She has every right to be angry with her brother, unless she actually is hiding something.

We step into the elevator, and Natalie punches in her code. Only when she hits enter, the elevator doesn’t move. Instead, a red light flickers on the bottom of the panel.

“What the fuck?” She types her code a second time just to get the same red blinking light in response. “That asshole revoked my access code.”

“Maybe there is just a malfunction.” I try to calm her down. I type in my code and push for floor seventeen, Natalie’s suite. The elevator slides shut and starts moving one level down.

“Told you,” Nat spits. Crossing her arm over her chest, she leans against the elevator wall until we make it to her apartment.

“Why don’t we take that shower we talked about earlier?” I ask when we walk into her place. “Maybe that will help relax you a bit.”

“I’d rather be alone right now,” she huffs, heading to her bedroom.

I stop in the center of her hallway. “You know I can’t leave.”

“Yeah, I know you are on babysitting duty, but I doubt Mason would be okay with you taking me to the bathroom and tucking me into bed.”

I sigh at her lashing out. I’m not sure what brought all of this animosity on, but I do wish Griffin was back already. Maybe he could help me make sense of what’s going on with her.

NATALIE

I hate this—all of it. Hate the way my brother spoke to me, how Teagan looked at me, and above all, the way Dallas hovers over me. I also don't appreciate how Griffin is not here. It feels like something is missing when he is absent, and part of me hates that, too. I can't get attached to him, or anyone. I need to stay focused.

For the first time today, I'm alone, but I don't trust Dallas not to burst into the bathroom. So I wait another few minutes before I pull the folded up paper the intruder pressed in my hand from my back pocket. I unfold it quickly, nervous about what I might find. I'm not sure what I expected, a heartfelt note by my mother? It's definitely not what I get. All I find is a string of numbers with a single word **OVERWRITE** written on the small piece of paper. It doesn't take me long to realize what this is. The hotel's security system overwrite code. She must think I'm a prisoner here, and I guess in some ways I am. Mason has people watching me twenty-four-seven, and my access code doesn't work anymore.

The only question is, why would I leave here now? What does she want from me? I've tried to convince her over and over again that Mason had nothing to do with Jonathan's death. But the people she is with have brainwashed her so much that I can't get to her. Still, I can't just let it go. I can't give up on her like Mason has. She is still our mom, no matter what.

Placing my uninjured hand on the side of the sink for support, I take in my reflection in the mirror. I look terrible. At

first glance, I'm well put together; only people who know me well would notice the tiredness in my eyes, the slight puffiness beneath them.

Knock. Knock.

Ugh. "What?"

"Just checking on you." Dallas's muffled voice comes through the door. He still sounds as calm and collected as always, and I feel bad for being such a brat to him. He doesn't deserve this, but pushing people away is my default setting, and I don't know how to change that. Especially not now.

"I'm fine." I try to keep the sass out of my voice but fail pretty miserably. I'm just so annoyed with the world right now.

"She sounds like she needs a spanking," Griffin's voice meets my ear and excitement fills my veins. I'm both surprised and relieved by his presence.

Quickly, I fold the paper and stick it in my tampon box under the sink. Looking at the packaging and counting out the days in my head makes me realize I should be getting my period any day now, which explains why I've been extra salty. Taking a deep, calming breath, I run my palms down my slacks before unlocking the bathroom door and stepping out.

Dallas is leaning against the doorframe while Griffin is standing a few feet away, his hands stuffed in his pockets. I didn't realize how much I missed his presence until now. Having him here calms me immediately, like some part of me was missing.

"Good to have you back." I turn to Dallas, feeling the need to apologize. "I'm sorry I've been a bitch all day. You just tried to protect me, and I've been a huge brat."

His features soften, and he gives me a tiny smile. "Don't worry about it."

"Are you saying you agree with me?" Griffin presses on. "You need a spanking?"

“I’m already injured.” I hold up my sprained wrist. “I don’t need a sore ass on top of that.”

“So, spanking after your wrist is healed?”

I roll my eyes at him dramatically. “Sure, but only if I get to spank you back,” I joke. I’m not actually into that at all, but the shocked look on his face is worth me mentioning it.

We sit down on the couch and fill Griffin in with everything that happened while he was gone, minus the sex. I’m sure Dallas is burning up to tell him, but after almost getting kidnapped today, the time to talk about riding his cock on the same couch we are sitting on doesn’t seem appropriate.

Apparently, Dallas doesn’t agree. “Just so you know, we fucked while you were gone,” he says bluntly.

“I figured,” Griffin answers unfazed. “I’m surprised you can still get it up at your age.”

“No problem here. Thanks for your concern. Matter of fact, we were going for round two when we got the text. But hey, if that’s something you are concerned about, I heard they make little blue pills to help you perform better.”

I lean back into the couch cushion, smiling, feeling like everything is right in the world again. Even though I know it’s not. Dallas and Griffin being here has me calm and relaxed. Their bickering is like a soothing blanket that makes me feel protected. I don’t feel whole unless both are with me.

“You look happy right now,” Dallas points out.

“I am. I was just thinking how I like having both of you here. Something was missing when you were gone,” I tell Griffin. Kicking off my boots, I prop my feet up on the coffee table and stretch my arms out above my head. My wrist screams at the movement, a sharp pain shoots through my arm, and I hiss at the discomfort.

“Where are your pain meds?”

“They make me loopy,” I explain, knowing from past injuries how they make me feel. “I want to take a shower

first.” I’m about to ask the guys if they want to join when Griffin’s phone goes off.

He looks at the screen and sighs. “It’s Mason. He wants me back up in his office.”

“Well, you have fun with that.” I get up from my seat. “I’m taking a shower. Would you like to join?” I ask Dallas. “I might need some help.” I hold up my injured arm and give him a helpless look.

“Actually, I wanted a word with Dallas real quick, if you don’t mind,” Griffin asks.

“I don’t mind at all,” I lie a tiny bit, “word away.”

Hiding my pout, I make my way back to my bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I check my phone before I get undressed. I’m surprised when I find an unread message.

Unknown Number: Did you get the code?

I stare at the message for a minute, remembering Mason is monitoring all communication. Careful what to say, I type out my response.

Me: Who is this? I’ve got a pretty good idea, of course, but if Mason is reading to this, I need to keep up the charade.

Unknown Number: Don’t worry, Mason can’t see these messages. -Mom

I huff out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Why is she texting me? What’s her end game and can she really hide this from my brother? Seeing how she was able to hack into the system and somehow get the overwrite code, I don’t doubt it.

Me: Where are you?

I know I should tell Mason about this. He is already suspicious as hell, but I feel the need to do this myself. This is partly my fault, and I’m the one who can fix this.

Unknown Number: I’ll tell you my location when you are out of the hotel.

My gaze falls to the cabinet under the sink, holding the security overwrite code.

Me: I have eyes on me right now. I'll come as soon as I can.

I quickly delete the messages before tucking my phone away and start to undress.

As I step into the shower, I wish Dallas would have come with me, really I want both to be here. I guess I can't always get what I want.

GRIFFIN

Dallas eyes me warily once we're alone. "So? What's so important? You should probably check in with Mason now that you're back. Don't let him wait on you."

"I missed the hell out of you, too," I retort, narrowing my eyes at him. "Can't wait to get rid of me, can you? What, thinking about taking her up on that offer and getting in the shower?"

"If I didn't know better, I would think you were afraid to leave me alone with her." He folds his arms and gives me a smirk that immediately tightens my chest. "Or maybe you're afraid to go talk to Mason? Are you avoiding him?"

"Aren't you the one always calling me a child? You're acting pretty fucking childish yourself."

His brows pull together before he snorts. "What's on your mind?"

To think I was going to be delicate with this—at least, as delicate as I'm capable of being, which might not say much. But I was going to try. Now? Fuck it. "I want you to back off of her."

"Pardon?" He even blurts out a short laugh. "What are you saying?"

"I want you to back off of Natalie."

"Huh. That's what I thought you said," he mutters. "Why would I do that?"

“Because I saw how happy she was to see me. So did you,” I add when he rolls his eyes. “You can’t pretend you didn’t notice. Her face lit up. She looked like a kid on Christmas morning.”

“You have much too high an opinion of yourself. Sure, she was glad to see you, the way she would be glad to see a friend.” He emphasizes the word a little too much, no big surprise.

“Is that what you need to tell yourself? Listen,” I tell him when he grumbles like he wants to argue. “Let’s drop the bullshit. Bottom line: while I was away, I realized how much I care about her. Not that I didn’t know it before, but it’s clearer now. Being with her, then being without her, put a lot of things in perspective.” It’s the simplest way I can think to describe it.

I watch as he processes this. “This seems pretty convenient,” he decides. Big surprise.

“What the hell does that mean?”

His shit-eating grin makes my skin crawl. “It means now that you know I’ve been with her, you want what you can’t have.”

I bark out a laugh, shaking my head. To think I was going to be kind to the old fuck. “You know that says more about the way your brain works than it does mine, right? No, that’s not what this is about.”

“So, all of a sudden, your fling meant something more?” Snorting, he looks me up and down—then snickers. “Like I said, it’s convenient. And it doesn’t mean shit,” he continues. “You don’t get to mark your territory and call dibs. That’s not how any of this works.”

“Thanks for the education.”

“You’re welcome. Seems like you needed it.”

Natalie’s going to come out of that shower to find him dead on the floor. I mean, there’s only so much of this bullshit I can take before I have to shut him up for good. “You want me to beg? That’s not gonna happen. But I’m not gonna back

down, either. She's what I want. And I think we could have a real shot, so long as we're able to give it a chance."

"Is this the part where I break down crying for you guys?"

"I'm trying real hard here," I tell him, grinding my teeth. This is all a big joke to him. What, now that he's been in her pussy, he thinks he's top dog? Like there's anything so special about that. "I'm trying to be decent."

"This is your idea of decency? Telling me to step aside and expecting me to go along with it because you had a big change of heart while you were on some mission? Get real, kid. It doesn't work like that."

"Oh, wise one, tell me how it does work. Educate me."

"We don't have enough time for me to teach you everything you have yet to learn." He laughs at what must be anger on my face. "You think you two can have something deeper than just a fling? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Is it not what I already said? Time to get your ears checked, gramps."

"I'm only confirming. Let me tell you something." He slides his hands into his pockets, and now he's not smirking anymore. "I don't think that's what she's interested in at the moment. Maybe not ever."

I raise an eyebrow. He sounds pretty damn confident. "Oh, you know her so well now?"

"I already did," he counters. "And I'm telling you. She's not going to make a choice between us. But if she does decide, she'll choose herself first."

Is he right? Or is he saying it to discourage me? "I'll just have to make sure she chooses me then," I decide with a grin before my phone rings and distracts me.

Seeing Mason's name on the screen reminds me of what I'm supposed to be doing now—and how he wouldn't hesitate to slice off my sack if he knew I was busy arguing about who gets to fuck his sister.

“Where are you?” he grunts. “Come up to the apartment. I’ve been waiting to talk to you.”

“Right. Give me a couple.” I end the call and give Dallas an icy stare. “To be continued.”

“If you say so.” It takes everything I have to ignore his snide chuckling as I get on the elevator to climb one more floor. The asshole. Okay, so he fucked her. Now that I’m back, she’ll remember what it means to have a man closer to her age.

Mason’s pacing like a caged tiger when I arrive. “Finally. The hell took you so long after you got here?” he growls. Of course, he knows everything that goes on at the hotel. “You knew I wanted you to check in with me.”

“I got sidetracked. I heard about what went down in the garage.” Eyeing him warily, I ask, “What’s up? Fill me in. What are you thinking?”

“She’s hiding something. I know she is.”

I don’t have to ask who he means, but I do have to almost bite my tongue to keep from blurting out that she isn’t, that she wouldn’t. I mean, how would I know? I’m not supposed to know her any better than surface level shit. Working together, that kind of thing. We’re not supposed to have a personal relationship, a history. “What makes you think that?”

“Let’s start with the so-called injury.”

“So-called? I saw it myself. She’s bruised, and a little swollen. She was injured.”

“Was she?” he snaps. “If she was, it could’ve been a way of throwing me off track. Nothing but a sprained wrist when there were bullets flying? Don’t look at me like that,” he growls when he catches sight of me and what must be doubt on my face.

“Do you really think she would go that far? Honestly?”

“Hasn’t she already?” he counters, shaking his head, clenching and relaxing his fists in time with his steps while I watch from the other side of the room. “Hell yeah, she would

go that far if somebody told her to or convinced her it was the right thing to do. Beverly is behind it. She has to be.”

“I believe she was behind the breach,” I murmur. It’s important to stay calm, even if it infuriates him. I’m not going to match his energy. That will only exacerbate things.

“You know what I meant,” he growls. “She was behind it, and she coached Natalie on what to do and say. They probably did it to prove they could and maybe weaken us by taking some of our guys out. It didn’t have to be about kidnapping Nat.”

Before I can begin unraveling that, he adds, “And she’s still being secretive. She wouldn’t come out and tell me why she ran. She only wants me to trust her. Can you believe that shit? Like she’s given me any reason to trust her.”

“What about before all of this?” I remind him. “You trusted her then.”

“What a fucking joke that was,” he fires back. “When she knew all the goddamn time that our mother is alive. Do you understand how that makes me feel? I have to go back through everything, every goddamn encounter, every conversation, everything we’ve been through in all these years. Learning something like that has a way of making everything look different.”

“I can understand that,” I assure him with a sigh. That’s not a lie, it’s not meant to placate him. The fact is, I’m glad I don’t have to go through something like this because it’s too complicated. Family shit is always the most difficult to navigate.

I don’t even want to think about what he’d do if he knew we’re closer than he imagines.

“So you spoke to her when she first got back?” He nods. “Since then, there was the attack. She might feel differently now. Ready to talk.”

He narrows his eyes, finally coming to a stop. “So she can tell me more lies?”

“Give her a chance,” I urge. It’s not easy, trying to sound neutral. “For what it’s worth, I don’t believe she was working with Beverly. It seems to me she’d be torn between her mother and you. You’re both still her family.”

“You mean she chose Beverly over me,” he mutters, glaring at me and making me wish I’d never came up here. He’s as stubborn as his sister when he wants to be.

“I’m sure she doesn’t see it that way. Why don’t you talk to her again? It can’t hurt anything. She’s downstairs now. Come on. This is driving you crazy,” I point out. “What are you going to do? Pace for the rest of the day? Or will you go downstairs and try to talk to her again?”

He’s fighting with himself, the stubborn prick. He doesn’t like admitting I might have a point. What else is new?

“Fine,” he grumbles, wasting no time marching my way and almost punching the button to open the elevator doors. I follow him in and hope I wasn’t talking out of my ass just now. I wouldn’t deliberately lead Mason in the wrong direction, ever. In my gut, I know I have to be right about her. I need to be, or else she has me fooled.

The elevator doors open after our short descent, and nothing could’ve prepared me for what they open onto.

Natalie scrambles out of Dallas’s lap. She’s dressed in nothing but a short robe that barely covers her ass, and she tugs on it like that’s going to do anything to make it longer. “Hey,” she offers, brushing wet hair away from her face.

Dallas stands, and it’s pretty obvious he’s hard. Not that he needs to be. We both saw what they were doing. “Mason, let me—”

“Get the fuck out!” Mason barks before he can finish. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing? I trusted you!”

“And I’ve done nothing to break that trust.” Dallas stays calm in the face of Mason’s rage. “Nothing happened here. Nothing serious.”

Clearly, Natalie doesn’t agree. “Where do you get off?” Natalie demands. Her face goes red along with the rest of her,

and she folds her arms. “You won’t be happy until you dictate every second of my life, will you? And everybody else around you while you’re at it. I’m a grown woman.”

“I can’t even look at you,” Mason snarls. He even turns partly away, staring at the floor like he’s trying to prove his point. “Dallas, I want you out of here, and I mean it. Nat, we’ll deal with this.”

“I’m not some child for you to deal with, dammit!” she shouts, throwing her hands into the air and turning away.

“That’s enough.” Dallas lifts his chin, staring at Mason without blinking. “I’ll go. For now. I didn’t mean to blow things up.” As soon as he’s past Mason, his lips twitch like he’s trying to keep from laughing.

Mason’s not laughing. And neither is Natalie, who’s staring daggers at him over her shoulder. “That was not your business,” she hisses once Dallas is gone.

“That’s where you’re wrong. But it seems like you’re wrong about a lot of things lately, doesn’t it?”

“You ought to know. You’re the king of walking around with your head up your ass, completely clueless.”

When Mason turns like he’s ready to leave, I grab his arm. “Hang on. Remember what you came down here for.”

“You know what?” He pulls his arm away. “I’m not wasting my time or my breath. I would never get a straight answer out of her, anyway.” He shakes his head in disgust, his back turned to his sister like hers is turned to him. When the doors open, he gets into the elevator without another word, wearing the same stony expression as the doors slide shut.

So much for that. I turn, shrugging, only now Natalie is glaring at me. “If you think I don’t know what you just did,” she whispers, “you’re wrong. I know exactly what that was all about.”

NATALIE

Griffin has the nerve to look surprised. He even lets his mouth fall open. It might be funny if I didn't want to rip his head off. "What do you mean? What did I do?"

"Please." I march to my bedroom and peel off my robe, throw it onto the bed, and march to my dresser for pajamas. I feel like stomping.

He comes to a stop behind me in the doorway. "What did I do?" he demands.

Catching his reflection in the mirror over the dresser, I scowl. "You brought him down here because you knew you would catch us like that, and you wanted to get in the way."

"Get the hell out of here," he says, and he even laughs a little. "You think I'm a child? That was not my intention, not at all."

"Why did you bring him down here, then?" After pulling on a shirt and shorts, I spin on my heel and glare at him. "Because it sure as hell seemed a lot like you were bringing daddy down here to tattle on us." Grabbing for my hairbrush, I drag it through my hair while grinding my molars. The fucking nerve of both of them.

"Would you relax?"

I hold the brush in the air, and my eyes narrow as I turn to face him. He's lucky I don't throw it at him. "Has nobody ever told you to never, ever tell a woman to relax? Like, in no circumstances whatsoever?"

“You’re right. You’re right.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly before continuing. “I brought him down here to talk. I wanted him to try to work things out with you. I wanted him to listen to you, finally. That’s all. No ulterior motive.”

“Do me a favor?” I plop down on the bed, groaning as I continue brushing. “Don’t do me any favors. I can handle this myself.”

“You’ve been doing a great job so far.”

Throwing the brush is starting to look better and better. “Did I ask for sarcasm? I don’t think I did.” The fact is, I’m exhausted, in pain, and a little embarrassed. I mean, my brother walked in on me grinding in Dallas’s lap. That’s a little embarrassing. Especially when he already thinks so little of me.

“It’ll be fine. He’ll get over it.” He slowly crosses the room and sits beside me on the bed. As annoyed as I still am, I appreciate his nearness.

“Have you ever met my brother?” I ask with a snort, setting the brush down. “He’s hell-bent on being miserable and bitchy. He’s not about to listen to reason, so it would’ve been a waste of time to talk to him now, anyway. He won’t believe anything but what he wants to believe.” And I could strangle him for it. Mason has no idea the position he puts me in every time he acts like an asshole.

“I was only trying to help.” Griffin finds my hand on the bed and closes his fingers around it. It’s incredible how comforting his touch is. It’s like he has the key to loosening tension I didn’t even know was there. The tightness dissolves from my neck and shoulders like magic.

“I know,” I murmur, because I do.

“I would never do anything that would hurt you. I need you to understand that. Even when we were tracking you down, I only wanted to make sure you were safe.”

The sincerity in his voice loosens me up some more, and now my insides feel warmer, too. I can’t stay mad when it

comes to him. “I understand that.”

“And I’m here for whatever you need. I mean, whatever you need.” I look his way from the corner of my eye and see he’s smirking. “Sorry. I had to.”

I would tell him off, but a yawn gets in the way.

“I’m pretty tired, too,” he says. “Fucking beat, actually.”

“Since you’re here, and I obviously need a babysitter anyway, according to certain people, stay with me.” It’s not a question. It’s not exactly a demand, either. I don’t have to demand. He’ll give me what I want because he wants to stay.

It’s not the same as having both of them with me, but crawling into bed with Griffin once he’s stripped down to his boxer briefs and looking sexy as hell isn’t exactly anything to be sad about. My body fits against his, my head on his shoulder, his arms around me. I belong here, in his arms.

“You know,” he murmurs in the darkness, “if that had been me out there instead of Dallas, Mason would’ve given me the same treatment. He’s not going to approve of either of us being with you.”

“Ask me if I care,” I mutters. Already sleep is catching up to me, even with my wrist throbbing with every heartbeat. It’s easy to ignore it when I feel so good otherwise.

“I’ve done a lot of thinking about us while I was away,” Griffin continues. I’m too sleepy to ask what he means. All at once, nothing matters more in the whole world than closing my eyes and drifting away.

* * *

IT’S the aroma of coffee that wakes me in the morning.

I stretch and smile before burrowing a little deeper under the blankets. Griffin was quiet enough when he got out of bed that I had no idea he left. Now I hear him in the kitchen, whistling softly, mixing something before pulling a pan out. He’s making breakfast for me. Life has been worse.

What a shame all of this couldn’t have happened at a better time. My eyes open, and I stare out the window, partially

covered by a lowered shade. It looks like a bright, sunny morning. Funny how the rest of the world can keep carrying on like normal when everything in my life seems to be falling apart.

Which one would I choose if I had to? If somebody put a gun to my head and forced me to pick between Dallas and Griffin, what would I say? I search my feelings, looking for an answer, but the only one that comes to mind is the one I know is the most challenging. Both. I don't want to choose between them. It's like there's something missing in me, and the two of them put together are what completes me. They balance each other out. They balance me out. I would spend the rest of my life feeling like something was missing if I had to go without either of them.

But it's ridiculous. There's no way they would both go for it. They're typical men, full of their own egos, pride, all of that. Add on top of that their backgrounds, how fierce and tough they are, and what would have been uncomfortable on a good day turns into a disaster. I wouldn't want to spend the rest of my life with them in a constant competition to see who could make me happier.

Though maybe it wouldn't be so bad in bed, giving them a little competition to keep them on their toes. The idea leaves me biting my lip. Okay, so there are upsides to the arrangement.

What am I thinking? I have no business thinking about either of them that way when the fact is, I'm keeping secrets from them. There's something between us even bigger and more powerful than my brother. The timing is all wrong, plain and simple. One of life's little jokes.

Getting up from the bed I move to the bathroom. Catching my reflection in the mirror, I frown. I don't know what I was thinking last night, going to sleep with wet hair. It's an absolute mess this morning. But I was tired, and holding a brush and a hairdryer at the same time probably wouldn't be possible right now with my wrist like it is. I have to settle for brushing it and pulling it into a ponytail before heading out to the kitchen.

“Good morning.” Griffin pulled on his jeans this morning but stopped there. I can’t say I’m upset. I don’t think he’s ever been sexier than he is now, cooking with his waistband hanging low on his hips, teasing me whenever I get a glimpse of his happy trail. Like when he turns my way, gesturing to the coffeemaker. “There’s coffee for you if you want.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.” I pour a cup, and the aroma instantly perks me up before I’ve taken a sip.

“I figured I’d make omelets.” There are vegetables sautéing in the frying pan, and I watch as he pours eggs on top. “How did you sleep?”

“Like the dead.”

“Same here.” It’s only another minute or two before he carries two plates to the table. Mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, plus a generous sprinkling of cheddar cheese on top.

“If you ever decide to change careers, you should think about becoming a personal chef.” I look him up and down, smirking before cutting off another bite of the omelet. “You should always work shirtless. Make a lot more money.”

“It’s not even eight in the morning, and I’m getting sexually harassed.”

“You don’t have to be here.” He only inclines his head like he gets the point. We share a smile before going back to our food. It really is delicious.

It’s a good thing he got up as early as he did and took the initiative, since we’ve barely finished our last bites when our phones vibrate in unison.

“Great. I was really hoping I could see my brother first thing this morning.” I lean back in my chair, groaning at Mason’s group text. “I’m sure he’ll be in a great mood.”

“It’ll be fine,” Griffin assures me as he picks up the plates. “I’ll be there.”

It does make me feel better hearing him say that, but I’m not naïve enough to think it will solve everything. Mason is still Mason, and he’s still a pain in the ass. I go through the

motions of getting changed. I'm not about to dress up in my full glory for his sake, and by the time I'm finished, Griffin is fully dressed again.

"Ready?" he asks.

I can only roll my eyes before we head up to Mason's apartment together. I have to pretend it doesn't irk the hell out of me that he has to use his code since mine doesn't work.

"I've got you," Griffin murmurs before the doors slide open. He puts another few inches between us, waiting for me to exit before he does. Can't be too close to me. Wouldn't want anybody to know he spent the night in my bed. It's fucking absurd.

I can't worry about that right now, anyway. Why is Mason calling this meeting out of nowhere? Does he know about the texts I got yesterday? Would he wait this long to tell me if he had? Of course not. He can be a bitchy drama queen when he feels like it, but he wouldn't be able to hold off this long.

"Hi," I offer to Teagan when we reach the conference room. Trent is already sitting at the table, as is Mason. I feel like we just interrupted a conversation.

"Hi," she murmurs before quickly looking away. Somehow, that hurts worse of all. After all I did to try to help her feel welcome here, I thought we were better than this. Obviously, my brother has influenced her.

"Where is Dallas?" I ask, if only because it's obviously driving Mason up the wall, hearing my voice. He keeps flinching like he's in pain, and his jaw ticks like there's a lot he wants to say, but he's holding it back. I would call him a coward if I didn't suspect it had to do with Teagan, wanting to keep her out of it. I get the feeling it's a little late for that.

Mason's eyes meet mine before narrowing into slits. "It's nothing you need to worry about."

"Keeping him away from me?" I ask in a sweet voice before taking a seat. I shouldn't antagonize him, but dammit, when he gets that know-it-all tone in his voice, there's only so much I can do to control myself.

Maybe it's easier to screw around with his head than it is to reflect on my next steps. He's never going to believe I was never against him unless I find a way to make him believe me. I need to prove somehow that I was doing the right thing.

I could report that Mom reached out to me. That might buy me a little trust.

No, on second thought. That would be the easy way out, and it might only end up blowing up in my face, anyway. It might end up getting somebody hurt badly, or worse.

It's up to me to fix things with Mom. I have to find a way. I have to convince her Mason isn't the reason Jonathan died. That she's been twisted up by people with ulterior motives. Tricked into believing what they wanted her to believe.

Otherwise, this will never end.

As Mason drones on about something or other I can't be bothered to pay attention to, I make up my mind. The first chance I get, I'm out of here thanks to that overwrite code. And once I make things right with Mom, I'll come back.

NATALIE

I really do try not to pout, but it's pretty much impossible with the situation we're in. We're no closer to finding my mom. Mason treats me like a child. Teagan looks at me as if she doesn't trust me anymore. Griffin is babysitting me, and Dallas was sent to the suite he usually stays in when at the hotel and ordered to keep away from me.

"You are kind of cute when you're pouting," Griffin tells me with a smile.

We are cuddled up on my couch. I'm already in my pajamas, but I don't feel cozy. All I can think about is that Dallas is not here. It feels off. I've barely finished my thought when the elevator chime announces someone is coming. I'm almost certain it's my brother checking in on me again. I try to move away from Griffin, keeping a distance between us, but his arms tighten around me, not letting me move.

"What's wrong with you? It could be my brother."

"It's not Mason. It's your surprise."

I twist my head so I can look over my shoulder at the elevator. The door slides open, and Dallas casually walks into my place. Immediately, a smile spreads across my face and warmth fills my chest.

"Dallas! What are you doing here?"

"I don't care what Mason thinks or says. He can't keep me away. What's he going to do, yell at me? We're grown ass adults. He can suck it." His little outburst makes me giggle. It's not like Dallas to take shit from anyone, but I also know he

respects Mason tremendously. So, him going against Mason in my favor makes me feel wanted and cherished.

Dallas walks into the living room, peeling off his suit jacket. He hangs it over one of the kitchen chairs before flopping down on the couch across from us. “What have you been up to?”

“Just cuddling,” I explain. “Wanna join us?” I wiggle my eyebrows, tempting him to come over here.

“Mhh, I think I’m good.” Dallas’s voice sounds just as unsure as his face appears. “I get you can’t decide between the both of us yet, but that doesn’t mean you can have both of us together.”

His statement hits me like a ton of bricks. I didn’t think that they would want me to decide between the two of them. I don’t know why I didn’t think about it since that would be the most common solution. If you like two guys you choose between them. Or at least that’s what society tells us.

“Why not?” I challenge. “Would you really not have a threesome with me?”

He dips his index finger into his collar and pulls it down as if he is nervous or simply getting hot. “With you, yeah, but with him?” Dallas points at Griffin. “I don’t know.”

“So it’s not a no,” I point out. “It’s just that you are not sure.”

Dallas and Griffin look at each other. Both of them have a bewildered look in their eyes. Griffin shrugs. “I’d be fine with it,” he says, but there is a clear hesitation in his voice.

“Why don’t we put that conversation on the back burner and have a drink for now?”

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Dallas’s shoulders relax with a sigh. Griffin seems just as relieved to be done with this conversation.

I get up from my seat and walk into the kitchen barefoot. Taking out three glasses and a bottle of whiskey from my freezer, I fill each with a healthy amount of booze and one ice

cube. I take them over to where the guys are sitting and hand each of them a glass, keeping the third for myself.

Taking a small sip, I let the alcohol burn down my throat and land in my stomach with an exploding warmth. Dallas finishes his whole glass like a shot before slamming the glass down on the coffee table with a grunt. Griffin doesn't finish the whole glass, but he might as well. After he took his swig, there was only a tiny amount left in the bottom.

We all lean back in our seats and fall into an uncomfortable silence.

“Hey, I have an idea.” I break the silence. “Wanna play some poker? I have some cards lying around here somewhere.”

“Poker?” Griffin questions with one eyebrow raised. “I guess if you wanna get your ass handed to you.”

“Please,” Dallas huffs. “I’ve been playing poker since you were still in diapers. I’ll kick your ass any day.”

“Bring it on,” Griffin challenges.

It doesn't take me long to find the cards buried in some junk in my kitchen drawer.

A few minutes later, we are sitting around my dining room table, and Dallas is shuffling the deck of cards. “What are we playing? Texas Hold'em?”

“Sure,” I answer.

Griffin nods in agreement.

Dallas deals the cards, handing me two of them face down. I take a peek at my cards, keeping a straight face as I see the two aces. Not bad for a first hand.

“Wait,” I blurt out. “I don't have any chips. What are we betting?”

“We don't have to bet anything,” Dallas says, looking at his cards.

“Or we can bet our clothes,” I suggest with a smile.

“Strip Poker?” Griffin chuckles. “I’m down. Especially with these cards,” he suggests he has a good hand, but that could just be a bluff. I know both of them well, but I’ve never played poker with them, so it’s going to take me a minute to pinpoint their tells.

Dallas deals the first three cards face up in the center of the table. It’s a three, a queen, and a king. Not exactly what I was hoping for, but I can still win with my two aces.

“Are we all in betting one clothing item?” I ask into the round.

“I’m in.” Dallas nods.

“Me too,” Griffin says.

“Same,” I agree.

Dallas turns over the next card. It’s a six of hearts. We are all still in when Dallas turns over the fifth and final card. Of course, I was hoping for an ace. Disappointment fills my veins when I see the ten of spades on the table.

“I raise,” Dallas calls. “Two clothing items.”

“I call,” I say without hesitation. Either he has a better hand, or he’s bluffing. Realistically, I get what I want both ways because I don’t care who is getting naked first as long as we all end up in bed together.

“I’m out.” Griffin folds.

“Just you and me then,” I tease. Grinning from ear to ear, I flip over my two cards and show them to Dallas. “Pair of aces.”

His full lips turn into a satisfying grin, and I know he’s beat me even before he shows me his two queens.

“Three of a kind.” He chuckles. “Pay up, buttercup. Two items,” he reminds me.

They probably expect me to start with my socks, but I already know the best way to distract them is my tits. So instead of starting small, I pull off my pajama shirt and tank

top to hand to Dallas. “Here you go,” I say sweetly. “My turn to shuffle.”

I take the deck and start shuffling, purposely sticking out my chest and making my moves choppy, causing my breasts to bounce freely with every movement. As expected, both Dallas and Griffin stare at my boobs like teenage boys.

I deal the cards and lay the first three face up on the table. Two eights and a Jack. The guys don’t even look at their cards at first, too busy ogling my body.

“Raise,” I blurt out a little too fast when I see the eight and queen in my hand.

Dallas snaps out of his trance first. He clears his throat and peeks at his cards. “I call.”

“Me too,” Griffin says without even glancing at his hand.

The next card is a ten. I raise one more time and both of the guys call. I flip over the final card. It’s another queen, which means I have a full house. Excitement fills my veins. “All in,” I announce.

“I’m in,” Griffin calls right away.

Dallas thinks about it for a few seconds. “Hell, I’m in too. Let’s see what you’ve got.” He throws his card on the table. An eight and an ace. “Three of a kind.”

“I’ve got nothing.” Griffin laughs, throwing his five and queen on the table.

I grin so hard my face hurts. “Full house!” I flip over my cards to show them before repeating what Dallas said a few minutes ago, “Pay up, buttercup... or should I say, buttercups?”

“This was probably the shortest game of strip poker ever played.” Griffin gets up from his seat, pushing the chair back a little with his calves, and grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head.

His ripped upper body comes into view, and my mouth starts to water. I take in every well-defined ridge and dip of his body as his hands move to his pants and he unzips them. Not

wasting any time, he pushed down his pants and boxers together until they're nothing but a pile of fabric around his ankles.

Surprisingly, Dallas is a little more timid; his shirt and undershirt come off one by one. Where Griffin carelessly threw his stuff on the ground, Dallas hangs his over the back of his chair. He does the same with his pants and black underwear. What's not different is his stellar physique. He is just as muscular if not more so than Griffin. If it wasn't for the gray in Dallas's hair and beard, he would not look any older than Griffin.

"I won the game," I point out the obvious, "do I get a prize other than seeing you both naked?"

"What do you want?" Griffin asks.

"I want you both in my bed," I say honestly, already filled with excitement at the thought. My core tightens, and I can feel moisture gathering between my legs.

They both stare at me for a second before their heads turn to each other. The silent conversation passes between them while I'm left standing there half naked and half crazy with anticipation.

Dallas crosses his arms over his chest, raising an eyebrow while Griffin shrugs and nods.

"All right, let's get this party started," Griffin finally exclaims. He grabs his glass from the table and finishes the little bit left in it. His cock is already semi-hard, swinging left and right as he moves around.

I walk over to Dallas, get up on my toes, and place a quick kiss on his lips as I grab his hand and start to pull him toward my bedroom. "Come on, boys," I call out, making sure Griffin follows.

Once I'm in my room, I point to my bed. "Dallas, you sit at the end, with your back against the headboard. Griffin, I want you over here." I point to the foot of the bed as I peel off my pants and panties quickly.

"Yes, ma'am," Griffin blurts out.

Dallas doesn't say anything, but he follows my orders and sits where I told him to.

Before I get on the mattress, I take a moment to admire the two handsome men in my bed. How did I get so lucky? When I'm done ogling them like they are carved out of stone, I follow them onto the mattress, settling on all fours in between them. Since I can't put any weight on my sprained wrist, I prop two pillows under my chest so I can hold myself up with my elbows.

I spread my legs and arch my back as I settle between Dallas's legs, giving Griffin a full view of my pussy. Just like I did the other day, I take Dallas's cock between my lips, enjoying the softness of his skin and the heat radiating from it.

"Do I need to send out a formal invitation?" I ask when I don't feel Griffin behind me right away.

He grunts in response, and a moment later, I feel his thick fingers between my wet folds, sliding through with ease. The sensual touch lights my whole body on fire. I arch my back even further, pushing my pussy back into his hand, making him chuckle. I don't really give a fuck right now. I'm so horny, I don't care if he's full on laughing as long as he will help me get off.

Dallas grabs my face between his palms, demanding my attention. I smile before I take him into my mouth once more. He guides my head down, gently, showing me how he wants me to suck him off. A moment ago, I wasn't a hundred percent sure if he was into this, but now, looking at his lustful eyes, there's no doubt.

I take his cock as deep as I can until the tip pushes against the back of my throat. I close my eyes, concentrating on relaxing my mouth and not gagging. My determination to please him must turn him on because his fingers tighten in my hair and a hiss passes between his lips.

Meanwhile, Griffin's fingers leave my pussy and are quickly replaced with his seriously hard dick. He pushes inside me slowly, but all the way to the hilt, making me moan around Dallas's cock.

I've never actually had a threesome before, and I'm surprised at how hard it is to multitask. There are so many sensations all at once, it's overwhelming. I keep sucking Dallas off, bobbing my head up and down while Griffin pounds me from behind.

It doesn't take long before the butterflies in my stomach turn into something more. Everything about the situation is so hot. Two men wanting me. One fucking my face while the other fucks me from behind.

My first orgasm slams into me unexpectedly. I couldn't have held out if I wanted to.

"Fuck," Griffin grunts. He must feel my pussy pulsing, and my thighs quiver as he speeds up and comes inside me a moment later, filling me up with his come.

"You want me to come in your mouth?" Dallas questions, his voice laced with unhinged lust.

I nod as much as I can with his dick in my mouth.

Griffin pulls out of me, and I immediately miss his touch. Either he feels the same, or he can read my mind because, a moment later, his hands are back on me, two of his fingers inside my cunt, and his thumb pressed firmly on my still hypersensitive clit. I hum around Dallas's cock; the vibration nudging him closer to his own release. He thrusts into my mouth a few more times before his cock starts throbbing, and he empties himself inside my throat with a guttural groan.

"Turn around," Griffin orders when I release Dallas.

I'm more than happy to oblige. Spinning around, I lie down on my back against Dallas. His arms immediately come around to cup my tits. He takes my nipples between his thumbs and index fingers, squeezing them gently.

"Are you going to come for us again?" Griffin asks, his skilled finger on my clit once more.

"Yes," I moan. "I want to."

"Good," his eyes gleam mischievously, "cause we're just getting started."

* * *

MY EYES FLUTTER SHUT, but I force them back open. I'm so tired, but I need to get back up. I have to get out of here and now might be my only chance. I hate that I have to leave them, even more that they might never forgive me for this. Still, the need to save my mom is too great. I've already lost my dad and one of my brothers, and I'm on the verge of losing the other one. I'm not losing her too.

I get up slowly, careful not to wake either of them. I tiptoe around the bed and grab some clothes from my closet. Grabbing my flat boots, I hold them in my hand until I get to the hallway. At the bedroom door, I turn around one more time to look at the two men in my bed, hoping with all of me that it's not the last time we will all be together.

DALLAS

“Son of a bitch.”

My eyes fly open when Griffin’s irritated growl comes from the doorway. It doesn’t come as a surprise when I find the bed suspiciously devoid of the woman who was in it with us only hours ago.

“You’ve got to be fucking me.” Griffin hurries through, pulling on his clothes, muttering and cursing. “You know it’s our asses on the line for this. You realize that, right? If she doesn’t care about herself, could she at least care about what we are going to end up dealing with because of her shit?”

“Obviously not,” I point out, sitting up and groaning. I feel like I keep waking up to the same situation. Like that old Bill Murray movie. “Whatever her reasons, they’re important to her.”

“I hope they’re important enough for her to handle Mason washing his hands of her. Because that’s what’s going to happen next.” I wish I could brush him off, tell him he’s overreacting, but the truth is, I’m not sure he’s going overboard at all.

He’s still ranting as he shoves his feet into his shoes. “You didn’t see the way he was up in his apartment when I first got back. Fucking beside himself, wouldn’t listen to a word I had to say. Refused to talk things out with her.”

I have to laugh. “In case you forgot, I got an earful of his shit, too.” I’m not afraid of Mason. I don’t particularly feel

like hearing his shit, though. I've been mentoring the kid for years, yet he has a way of conveniently forgetting that.

"There's no way around it." I get dressed quickly, feeling grim and frustrated. It's a shame I care so much about the girl because, it's times like this, I would love nothing more than to strangle her.

From the bathroom, he calls out, "She took some of her toiletries. She had it planned."

"She wouldn't go off half-cocked. That's not her style."

"I forgot. You know her so well."

"Obviously not because I didn't see this coming." Looking back, I have no idea why not. It's pretty fucking obvious. Whatever her mission was, the reason for running in the first place, we got in the way. Just because we brought her back doesn't mean her mission has ended.

Why the hell can't she tell anybody what it is? We're supposed to be better than this. And this is why I shouldn't have slept with her. She's gotten into my head and stirred my priorities around. All of a sudden, it's more important to figure out how she could cross me than how to find her.

"I must be a much deeper sleeper than I ever knew," Griffin mutters as we finish doing a quick check of the apartment for any notes or clues she may have left. Not ten minutes have passed since I woke up, but we are already on our way upstairs. It's barely 5:30 in the morning. I'm tired as hell and wasn't supposed to see Natalie in the first place. All of these factors come together in the way I grit my teeth as I punch in the code to reach Mason's floor.

How did she do it? The code she uses was deactivated. She shouldn't have been able to operate the elevator at all. She shouldn't have been able to leave the building.

The implications of this ring out loud and clear as we step into Mason's apartment. It's quiet and peaceful—for now. The prospect of waking Mason with bad news doesn't excite me, but we head for his bedroom in silence.

I knock on the door and ease it open. “Mason?” I murmur into the dark, quiet room. “Sorry to wake you. There’s been a development.” Once I hear the movement deeper inside the room, I close the door for the sake of Teagan’s privacy, waiting with Griffin outside the door.

Mason emerges dressed in nothing but a pair of sweatpants. “What is it?” I notice the withering look he gives me. He can’t let it go.

I exchange a glance with Griffin, who clears his throat. “She’s gone.”

“We both lost her,” I add. I’m not going to leave him swinging in the wind for this, no matter how Mason feels about it. “Some of her things are gone.”

“And you thought I should trust her?” Mason snarls at Griffin, pushing past both of us and marching to the kitchen. “I can’t trust either of you to do a goddamn thing right anymore. What the fuck has gotten into both of you? You had one job. One.”

“It’s a waste of time playing the blame game.” I watch as he brews himself a coffee in one of those single cup makers. It’s barely finished filling before he takes the mug and drinks deep of what has to be scalding hot coffee. He doesn’t register noticing it. He’s already boiling, I guess.

“Is that your informed opinion?” he asks, eyeing me rather nastily. “You know what she was doing, right? Coming on to you because she knew it would mean getting you to trust her. Congratulations. You walked right into it.”

All that keeps me from arguing is knowing it would waste time. For all I know, he’s right. She could have played us both. Fucked us, then fucked us over. It’s entirely possible.

But that’s not Natalie. She’s smart, and stubborn, but she doesn’t use people. It could be my pride demanding I believe that, but I’m not sure. I’ve never been one to shrink back from the truth of myself. I don’t go in for self delusion.

“This is on your heads, both of you. Whatever happens next, I’m not taking it out on her. I’m taking it out on you for

letting her do it.” He pulls his cell from his pocket and taps out a message, shaking his head the entire time. “I’m sending Trent after her. At least I know he’ll get the job done.”

“Negative,” Griffin immediately responds.

“Sorry, that wasn’t up for debate. It is what’s happening.”

“We’re going with him,” I announce, tipping my head to the side when he glares at me. “We’re not sending him on his own. We know her better than he does.”

A murderous look flashes over Mason’s face. “I don’t want to know what that means, so do yourself a favor and don’t tell me.”

“We’re going with him, end of story.”

“You know what?” he asks as he throws his hands into the air. “I don’t give a fuck. She can get herself killed for all I care now.” I know he feels like he means it, but he doesn’t. It would devastate him if anything happened to his sister. He would blame himself—if not right away, most definitely once the dust settled, and he was in his right mind. I would hate to see that happen. He’s already gone through enough blame. She’s the only sibling he has left.

That and so many other things weigh on my mind as we wait for Trent to join us. He doesn’t keep us waiting, arriving at the apartment within five minutes. Part of our training. We have to be prepared at the drop of a hat, the way firefighters are sometimes called to go from a dead sleep to getting on a truck.

“This is a three-man job?” Trent asks, wearing a smart-ass smirk. “Or are you boys afraid of her?”

“Enough with the fucking jokes,” Mason growls. “I want her found. Brought to me. Straight to me,” he adds, like there’s any question of that. He’s about ready to blow his stack. I can’t say I’m sorry to be leaving.

I’m glad to see Teagan emerge from the bedroom before we go. I doubt Mason will suddenly calm down thanks to her presence, but he does seem to lose a little of his murderous scowl when she approaches and touches a hand to his

shoulder. “I’ll make us something to eat,” she offers. “This is going to be okay. They’ll find her.”

I have no doubt that we will. I just wish I could be as confident when it comes to the ultimate outcome.

* * *

“THIS IS WHERE WE STARTED.” The house looks the same as it did before: empty. Unused and practically forgotten. Trent insisted on tracing our steps since, in his words, “If she knows you’ve already been there, it might seem like the safest bet. Why would you revisit someplace you already checked out?”

He has a point. I doubt he’s right, but he has a point. Natalie isn’t the type to retread old ground, and while she was never exactly forthcoming over what drove her to leave in the first place, I believe she was looking for her mother. Beverly could be here.

It doesn’t look like she is, though, since the house is just as dark and quiet as it was when Griffin and I first visited. “I think this is a waste of time,” Griffin mutters while Trent takes the lead, the three of us crossing the lawn in the last predawn moments of the morning. There are a handful of windows up and down the street that are now lit as people get ready for work and school. This is the only house with no signs of life inside.

Once we enter, Trent turns in a slow circle, looking things over. “How much did you explore?” he asks.

“Most of it. It was just as empty as it is now,” Griffin explains. He’s in the kitchen, his voice echoing off the hard surfaces.

“I’m just asking because...” Trent sniffs the air, his eyes narrowing. “Do you smell something? I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s an odor.”

Now that he’s mentioned it, I notice it, too. It’s nothing I can immediately identify, but it’s out of place. What’s more, it’s new. I didn’t notice it before.

Griffin joins us, walking slowly, sniffing the air. “Maybe an animal got in and died? Maybe it’s a mouse in the wall.”

“No, it’s too strong for that.” Trent jogs upstairs to search while I walk around the first floor, looking for whether there’s an area where the odor is more intense. As soon as I open the door leading down to the cellar, there’s no question about it. “It’s down here!” I call out. Though what I’m smelling is clearly dead, I get the sense I might be glad to have my Glock in hand.

The basement is as bare as the rest of the house, and as dark. I can’t find the source of the smell—there’s nothing immediately visible—but the further I walk, the stronger it becomes. “Here. Help me with this.” Griffin takes one end of a workbench, and I take the other, and once we move it back from the wall, I see what he noticed: a door. And now that I think about it, looking around, the basement doesn’t seem as large as the first floor. It’s not as deep.

I keep my gun trained on the door as Trent pries it open, and as soon as he does, the three of us stagger back. “Holy fuck,” Trent groans before gagging. “There’s gotta be a window in here that opens.” He forces open the one closest to us, then the one next to it. It’s not doing much to help. What could, considering the amount of carnage contained in that small, hidden room?

“Six, seven, eight.” I’ve never seen Griffin look green like this, but then none of us could have expected the sight of eight dead bodies piled up, all of them in various states of dismemberment and mutilation. They were tortured.

The buzzing of my phone startles me. I reach for it, transfixed by the gruesome sight in front of me. Missing body parts are heaped in one corner—fingers, toes, genitals, and what looks like it might be an eyeball. What the fuck are we dealing with here?

The number shows up on my ID as unknown. I answer the call. “Who is this?”

“The ghost of threesomes past,” Natalie replies.

“Where are you?” I bark, my heart hammering, and my blood running cold.

“Stop looking for me. Everything is under control.” Her voice is strong and clear. “I mean it. Go home.”

“Where are you?” I demand.

“I’m going to fix things with my mom.”

“That’s her?” Griffin pulls on my arm, tugging the phone away from my ear. “Nat. Listen to me—”

“I will come back, I swear,” she insists. “But I have to make things right.”

“But, Natalie, we found—”

I shake my head at Griffin. She’s already ended the call before we could tell her what we’ve found. I have no idea exactly what it means, but I doubt she has the first clue what she’s gotten herself into.

NATALIE

They'll understand. And even if they don't, it's not my problem. This is my journey. My mission. All I ask is that they stay the hell out of my way. It would be nice if they didn't end up getting themselves hurt somehow. Who knows what the people Mom is working with would think if they knew people were on my trail. I'd feel guilty if anything happened to them, of course, even if I never asked them to follow me. What a surprise, a couple of stubborn men refusing to listen to reason.

Once I've ended the call, I stare out the windshield where an abandoned power plant stretches halfway to the sky. They definitely built them differently back in the day. Everything was grander, almost unnecessarily opulent. Now, it may as well be a crumbling castle, abandoned for who knows how long. The area around it is pretty grim, empty, overgrown, and forgotten. It fits my mood: dark and uncertain. This is most definitely the location Mom sent me, but I'm starting to wonder if it was a wise decision coming here alone. What has she led me to? There could be anything out here, hiding in waist-high weeds, crouched in shadows cast by the imposing structure.

A structure that is guarded even now. That tells me this isn't merely an abandoned building. In front of the entrance—a gaping hole, thanks to the fact that the doors have been removed—are four black vans. Inside the building, there's nothing but darkness from where I sit. What's waiting? Or should I say, who?

Before I make another move, I take a photo with my phone and send it to Trent, Dallas, and Griffin. Between the three of them, they'll be able to find it even if I give them no other information. Sort of an insurance policy in case things go tits up.

And now there's nothing to do but what I came here for. My feet crunch loudly over broken glass as I approach, my eyes sweeping the area, searching for trouble. None has presented itself by the time I reach the entrance. I square my shoulders and remind myself Mom wouldn't have sent me this address if I'd be in danger, then step into the darkness.

Where I am immediately descended upon by three men dressed in black, men who immediately overpower me without saying a word or even breathing hard. I should've known. I fight as hard as I can, kicking, twisting, and trying to use my lower center of gravity to knock them off their feet, but it's no use. They have my number, making quick work of binding my hands behind my back and dragging me to what might have been an office at one point but is now nothing more than a dingy room with a floor whose tiles are half pried up and what looks like mold growing on the ceiling. Charming. And here I am, breathing it in.

At least they left my ankles unbound. Once I'm alone with the door locked, I work my way to my feet and pace the room dimensions. Eight by twelve. There's enough light coming in through a grimy window that I can search for something sharp to cut through the duct tape around my wrists, one of which throbs more painfully than ever thanks to the fight. There are a few random pieces of old furniture sitting around, including an old metal desk whose corners might do the trick. I should be able to cut the tape if I'm careful not to slice my wrists while I'm at it.

They didn't rough me up too badly, though I'm sure that could change. What I want to know most of all is why. What's it all about? Why bring me here if she knew I was only going to be thrown into what's basically a cell?

It doesn't take much time before I know. Before the lock clicks and the door opens, and I'm suddenly face-to-face with

my mother.

At first, I can't make sense of what I'm seeing. "Mom?" I whisper, squinting like that will do anything to change what's in front of me. Like that will erase her black eye or reduce the swelling to the rest of her face.

Her peaches-and-cream complexion has gone red, purple, and green. A patchwork of bruises in various stages of freshness. Somebody has beaten the hell out of her, and more than once.

"What happened to you?" I whisper as horror squeezes my heart and tightens my chest until I can barely breathe.

"Don't worry about it." She always did have a way of sounding cold and dismissive when she didn't want to discuss a certain topic. I don't think it's ever been this important, though. Did they do this to her? They're supposed to be working for her, aren't they? At least, that was always my belief.

She runs a hand over her limp blonde locks, taking a deep breath. "You came. I'm glad. I was hoping you would find a way."

"Why did you want me to come here?" I keep my voice at a whisper in case there's somebody listening outside.

"This is all part of the bigger plan."

"And what is the bigger plan? You've never told me. You keep hinting at it, but how am I supposed to be a part of anything if you won't tell me what you're going to do?"

Rather than answer, she takes a seat in a wheeled chair with cracked vinyl covering its seat. Something squeals horribly, even though she barely weighs as much as a bird. I don't think I've ever seen her look this thin. "I hope you never have to make the sort of decision that's been left to me. I hope you never know the sort of pain I've been through. It's not the sort of pain that comes with a broken bone or a wound. It goes much deeper than that when it comes at the hand of your own child."

Her eyes narrow, and her brows draw together. “It would’ve been bad enough, losing Jonathan. But the fact that your brother was behind it—”

“Mom, how many times do I have to tell you?” I blurt out before she can finish. “That’s just not true.”

She rubs her hands over her slacks, which I notice are dirty and wrinkled. “What did he say to you? What did it take for him to brainwash you the way he has?” she asks, sounding disappointed.

She’s one to talk about brainwashing. Her brain is practically squeaky clean at this point. “I know he had nothing to do with it, Mom. He was devastated. It wasn’t his fault. Remember when we used to play out in the yard?” I ask suddenly, trying to laugh when all I want to do is sob. “All I ever wanted was to be like them. They were always brave and confident. They weren’t afraid of anything.”

Her lips stir in the beginning of a smile. “They worried me half to death sometimes. I was sure one of you would break your neck, climbing that tree, seeing who could go higher.”

My head bobs up and down eagerly. “We were so happy. You guys gave us a truly happy life. It’s not the kind of thing you understand when you’re a kid, but you appreciate it when you get older. You gave us everything we needed.”

She swallows hard, her nostrils flaring, and her chin trembling. “And what good did it do? I lost one child at the hands of another.”

Fuck trying to be quiet. “No! You didn’t! That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Mason adored Jonathan. He would’ve done anything to protect him.”

Her shoulders rise and fall when she sighs. “I think I’ve heard all I need to hear from you.”

“You can’t do this!” Is there desperation in my voice when she stands up like she’s ready to go? Yes. I’m beyond trying to hide it. “You can’t honestly believe Mason was behind Jonathan’s death. You can’t believe it in your heart.”

“An eye for an eye,” Mom murmurs. Her face is expressionless, but it’s her flat voice that chills my heart. “This is what needs to be done.”

“You can’t kill him!” And now, a whole new range of possibilities opens up in my frantic mind. What if this was nothing more than a way of getting me out of the hotel so I can’t warn my brother of what’s coming? What if they want to use me to lure him out?

“I know I can’t. I tried. That’s why you have to do it. You are the only one who can get close enough.”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

She approaches me, and I only realize at the last second what she’s about to do when her hand pulls back and she delivers a sharp slap across my face. The whole world goes bright white for a second while sizzling pain bursts to life in my cheek and radiates outward.

My mom’s never hit me, didn’t even spank us as kids. This woman in front of me is so far gone. I can barely bring myself to call her my mother anymore. But that doesn’t mean I can’t help her. There is still time, time to find her way back to us. If I can just get her away from here, get her help, I’m sure one day she can be my mom again.

She doesn’t say a word, leaving me gasping and fighting to stay on my feet while the world spins. She locks the door behind her, and the sound rings out like an accusation.

One thing is for sure. I need to get the hell out of here. Frustrated tears threaten to fill my eyes, but I force them away. If I want to feel sorry for myself, there will be plenty of time to do it once I’m out of here.

What was I thinking? That she would magically see reason? There’s no getting through to her. And if she can’t protect herself, she can’t protect me. The memory of those bruises and that swollen eye make me test my theory on how to break through my tape. I find the sharpest of the four corners of the desk and turn around, rubbing the tape over it. I work quickly, racing against the clock, and it doesn’t seem like

it's doing much good until I feel the tight wrap loosening. That gets me moving faster, ignoring the pain in my sprained wrist, and focusing everything on succeeding. I have to. There's no choice.

By the time the lock clicks again, I've been at this forever and there's a thin layer of sweat coating my skin. I stop what I'm doing, leaning my ass against the desk, hoping nobody will piece together what I've been working on. The tape is looser now than it was, and I think I've cut close to halfway through. There are so many layers, and I can't fucking see what I'm doing.

"Look at this." The pair of tall, bulky men who enter are dressed in black, but this time, there are no ski masks to hide their faces like there were back in the garage. Once I spot the swollen nose on one of them and the bandages around it, I remember the elbow I drove into it.

No wonder he's looking at me with blank hatred.

"How's the nose?" I ask, smiling. "I hope it's not bothering you too much."

"That's right," he murmurs before snickering. "Be a smart-ass now. Pretend there's anything you can do about this." He and his friend exchange a nasty laugh before they're on me, and no amount of squirming or kicking will help as they force me to turn around and bend over the desk.

"We might as well get something for our trouble," one of them grunts while the other laughs.

Absolutely not. This will not happen. I throw myself back with all my might, the back of my head connecting with the face of whoever was closest, before I make a run for the door. All I get for that is an arm slung around my waist, lifting me off my feet and carrying me back to the desk.

"Fucking bitch." I'm slammed against the unforgiving metal surface and register the feeling of hands yanking at the waistband of my jeans. I was only panicking before. Now I'm a rabid animal, and the adrenaline rushing through my system

gives me the burst of strength needed to snap the tape and free my hands.

Right away, I use my good hand to grab the wrist of the man pulling my pants down. A sharp twist, and he lets go, gasping in pain before I bend his hand at an unnatural angle. The sound of bones and tendons snapping shouldn't excite me like it does. He howls before I pivot and drive the heel of my hand into his face, demolishing his freshly broken nose and sending him to the floor in a heap.

The second man jumps me from behind, an arm around my neck. I throw myself backward, slamming him between my body and a filing cabinet. It's not hard enough to kill him, but it is hard enough for his grip to loosen, and for me to slide out of his grasp. A knee to his balls leaves him groaning in misery before I take his face in my hand and slam his head briskly against the metal cabinet doors. He drops, too, plunging the room into silence only punctuated by my rapid breaths.

Something flashes and gleams at his waist. There's a key ring hanging from his belt loop by a carabiner. I detach it and take his gun for good measure.

Whoever's behind all of this needs to work on training their men. I have a sprained wrist, and I still took two of them down easily. Sheer animal panic will do that, I guess.

Nobody came running at all the shouting, and I think I know why. They knew what those guys were coming in here to do. They probably figure it's all part of the so-called fun. Let them.

I tiptoe to the door and peer up and down the hall. From here, I can see the doorway I entered through. The thought of making a run for it is appealing, but I have to wonder if they left my car intact. They might have rendered it useless just in case. I could be wasting time trying to escape that way. But I have to go. I can't stay here.

Dammit, I can't leave Mom, either. I should, I know I should. But dammit, I have to try. I have to find her. Maybe I can free us both.

I run on silent feet, always looking around me, wondering where she could be. I don't hear voices. There are no footsteps. Did everybody else leave?

When I come to a windowed office in the corner of the floor, I get my answer. She's in there with the door closed, sitting on the floor with her knees drawn to her chest and her forehead resting against them. A cry of pain almost leaks out of me, but I manage to hold it back as I try out the keys, looking for the one that will free her. It takes four tries before the key turns, and I open the door.

"What are you doing in here?" I whisper, going to her. "They locked you up, too? Why are you letting them do this?"

"How did you get out?" she demands, wide-eyed.

"Answer my questions, Mom." I look behind me, expecting to find men running. It seems like my escape is still a secret.

"There's not enough time to explain everything, and you wouldn't understand, anyway," she tells me. "You're too far gone. You refuse to see the truth." I would swear there's madness shining in her eyes. It makes me want to scream and cry and hit something.

"Then convince me, but let's do it someplace else. Come on, my car is outside. We need to go now!" I insist, tugging her arm.

An arm she viciously yanks back. "This is how it needs to be," she insists in a cold voice. "Mason needs to die for what he took from me. This is the only way."

"I can't let you do that."

"But you have to help! We need you!"

I shake my head mournfully, knowing this was a waste. I should've run when I could. She's already lost to me. "I'm not doing it, Mom. I can't."

Her gaze snaps up over my shoulder in time with the sound of footsteps ringing out behind me. "Then both of you are

useless to us,” a man announces in a deep voice with a thick Russian accent.

A sharp cracking sound pierces the air, and Mom’s head snaps back, her eyes frozen wide in shock, with a bullet hole between them.

“No! Mom!” I throw myself over her, screaming, holding her lifeless body. Grief crashes into me, pulling me under and tearing me open. I scream against her shoulder in rage, pure and hot. I tried. I tried, and it wasn’t enough.

A sudden burst of pain in the back of my head blots out everything. I barely have time to understand the unseen man hit me before darkness closes in.

GRIFFIN

As soon as we figured out where the picture was taken, we headed to the location. Usually, I'm cool and collected before a mission. The calm before the storm, if you will. Not today. Not with Natalie in danger. My stomach is in knots, my chest is tight, and my molars hurt from grinding them. Glancing over at Dallas, I see the same turmoil in his eyes.

"We'll find her," I promise.

"Yeah, but we don't know in what condition," Dallas states. "She's been here for hours. Anything could have happened by now."

"I don't think they would hurt her," Trent says, his voice steady, unlike mine.

"I agree with Trent. When they came to the hotel, they wanted to take her, not kill her. If they wanted her dead, she—"

"Don't finish that sentence," Dallas warns.

"Backup is on the way," Trent explains after looking at his phone. "Should we wait?"

"No," Dallas and I say at the same time. At least we can agree on this much.

"I didn't think so," Trent remarks. "Let's get rolling and kill some bad guys."

"Primary mission is to get Natalie out unharmed," I state.

"And kill bad guys in the process."

“Saving first, killing later,” I press on. “Don’t fuck this up, Trent. You like to work alone, but we actually like our team and try to keep them alive.”

“Fuck off and grab your gun, asshole.” And with that, Trent is out of the car, with us right behind him.

We are all in tactical gear, armed from head to toe with extended ammo and bulletproof vests. All three of us have trained extensively and trust each other with our lives. The chances of us being successful in an extraction like this are usually high. When we deal with civilians, that is. Clearly, these guys have many resources and are most likely trained as well as we are, which means this mission could go wrong very quickly.

Any other time, we would wait for backup, but this is not just another case. This is Natalie we are talking about, and I’m not leaving her in there for another second longer.

I check my gun, rifle, knife, and backup gun one more time as we make our way to the back of the large main building. It’s dark outside, cold winter air dances around, but the clear sky lends us enough light to see with ease in the dead of night.

When we get to the back entrance, we’re surprised to find it unlocked. Trent goes in first, rifle drawn. Dallas and I follow him closely, our rifles aimed as well. The inside hallway is lit with the flickering light from the ceiling. This place is supposed to be abandoned, but someone is clearly here, or at the very least, was here recently.

The space stinks of mold and dust, and the quiet surrounding us is eerie. There are no sounds coming from anywhere. Fear creeps up my spine. What if... no, I can’t go there, not now. I need to keep my head clear and concentrate on the mission. Natalie can’t be dead. We’ll find her. We have to. There’s too much I haven’t said. Things I haven’t told her.

Shaking the ugly thought away, we move on through the hallway, clearing every room we pass.

“Clear,” Trent murmurs when we finish with a room.

It isn't until we come to the fifth room when Dallas finds something interesting. "Look at this," he says in a hushed voice, pointing at something on the table. "It's a newspaper... in Russian."

"We knew it had to be someone involved with a lot of resources."

"And the Russian government would fit that bill perfectly," Dallas agrees.

"Let's keep moving," Trent orders, leading the way further down the hall.

There's still no sign of anyone being here, but that doesn't mean we're letting our guard down. We clear two more rooms before we get to one that looks like a cell. A broken chair with ripped duct tape is lying in the center of it.

"They probably kept her here," Trent suggests. "And they took her with them instead of killing her, which means she is alive." His words feel like a small Band-Aid on the huge hole left in my chest.

He is right; the chances are she's alive, but again, what is she going through? What state is she in and how long will it take for us to find her?

"Let's search the rest of the place," Dallas suggests.

Leaving the newspaper behind, we moved further into the building. The next room is completely empty. Not much to see here. I'm about to tell the guys this is useless when we come to another cell.

What we find inside has the blood freezing in my veins. It's Beverly, dead on the ground with a bullet wound between her eyes. Blood is pooled around her lifeless body, painting a scene of what happened here.

"The blood is smeared like there was a fight, and it couldn't have been her," Trent says as he inspects the crime scene.

"Look at this," Dallas points at something on the ground. I step closer just to realize it's a bloody handprint. "We can have

forensics run the prints, but I'm guessing that's Natalie's. She must've been here. Maybe she was holding her mom, saying goodbye, and then someone grabbed her."

"I don't really care what happened here," I spit, anger boiling inside of me like a volcano, ready to erupt. "All I care about is finding Natalie and getting her back."

"We will," Dallas says firmly. "We'll get her back, and we'll make them pay for hurting her."

By the time we clear the rest of the rooms, our backup finally arrives. Not that we need them anymore. We let them finish checking out the rest of the power plant before we make the dreaded call to Mason.

He answers on the first ring. "Tell me you found her."

I grip the phone a little tighter. "I wish I could say we did."

"Fuck."

"We found a cell. It looks like they were holding her there. We also found some Russian magazines in another room."

"Russian..." Mason seems to think it over for a few seconds before he continues. "The mission that went wrong, causing Jonathan to get killed, was in Russia."

"That can't be a coincidence."

"I agree. Anything else?"

"Yeah." I take a breath, preparing myself for what I'm about to tell him. "We did find a body in another cell."

"Someone we know?" Mason questions.

"Yes... it was your mom. I'm sorry, Mason."

There is a long pause. Long enough for me to wonder if he has hung up the phone. "Are you still there?"

"I'll see you when you get back."

And with that, the line goes dead.

NATALIE

My eyes flutter open, and right away I wish they hadn't. It was easier to be unconscious. To float away, oblivious. Sure, my sleep was full of ugly dreams and horrifying images. My mother's dead body, for one. That awful hole between her eyes.

But there were also pleasant dreams. Me, Jonathan, and Mason climbing the tree out in the backyard. The two of them telling me I couldn't climb as high as they could just because I was a girl. I could hear Mom, could see her looking so young and pretty, calling to us from the back door and begging us to be careful. If I could only go back to those days.

There's no sense of thinking that way while I'm tied to a bed, my hands above my head. Several other beds are in this room, but mine is the only one currently occupied. It's creaky, old, and every move I make causes the metal to shriek. Sort of like an alarm, something that could alert anybody else in the building to my being awake. They didn't use duct tape this time—nylon rope bites into my skin, chafing it painfully when I test the tightness of the knot.

I suck a pained breath in through clenched teeth, and my heart takes off at a gallop. What are they going to do? Obviously, they found Mom no longer helpful and got rid of her. I can't afford the stabbing pain that lances my chest when I think about it. There will be time later for that. Right now, I have to find a way to get out of here.

Heavy footsteps chill my blood, and I fight harder than ever against the rope, but it's no use. I'm only flushed,

breathless, and sweaty when a tall, dark figure fills the doorway to the makeshift dorm.

“You are awake.” The midday light streaming through the window over my head reveals his grim smile. His weathered face is hard and cold as he looks me up and down with narrowed, steely eyes. His Russian accent tickles the back of my mind, approximately in the same place where there’s still a painful throb marking my every heartbeat. Then both of you are useless to us.

“You murdered my mother,” I whisper.

He lifts a thick shoulder. “She was no use to us anymore. And if you would like to escape the same fate,” he continues, approaching the bed slowly, seeming to enjoy my growing dread, “you will tell me what I wish to know.”

My mouth is bone dry, and my heart is about to pound out of my chest. This is a killer, cold-blooded and heartless. He will not hesitate to end me here and now if I don’t give him what he wants.

But he’ll end me if I do, too. Either way, this doesn’t end with me walking out of here.

A dismayed sob tries to force its way out of my throat, but I swallow it back. “I have nothing to tell you.” I’ll be damned if I go out like a coward.

“You say that now,” he counters with a nasty little smile. “But you should know with your background that there are ways of jogging a person’s memory.”

“You’ll be wasting your time.”

“Yet something else I would expect you to say. Truly,” he continues, gesturing toward a man standing out in the hall. “This does not have to be painful or take much time. You must know by now we will find a way to get to your brother, and we will kill him. It is inevitable.”

“Then why do you need me?” It’s difficult to get the words out when I see what the second man hands the Russian: a black case, big enough to hold just about anything.

“We’re hoping to save time. To cut to the chase, as they say,” he explains in a calm, almost friendly tone. While I watch, he opens the case on the bed next to mine. He’s standing in the way, so I can’t see what’s inside. I’m sure this is all designed to freak me out, to get me talking.

I’m not going to talk, but I am most definitely freaked out. A little more with every passing second, in fact.

“Tell me,” he grunts. “The hotel’s safe houses. Where are they?”

“Safe houses?” I whisper.

“I’m sorry. Was your hearing damaged? I suppose I hit you harder than I intended.” He looks back at me over his shoulder, wearing a nasty little smirk. Like he’s enjoying this. He probably is. “Safe houses. Where are they? I’m going to need the locations.”

“No. I’m not giving you that.”

“Very well.” He steps away from the case, and the abundance of sunshine gives me a clear look at the gleaming metal tools on display. There’s an array of scalpels, knives, pliers. A hammer. And that’s only what I manage to identify within a few seconds before my gaze darts to him.

“I ask you again.” He runs his fingertips over the tools, his gaze trained on me. “Locations. You will give them to me, or I will give these to you. Make your choice.”

I wish I could tell myself he’s bluffing. He has no reason to. And the bullet he delivered to Mom’s brain leaves me with no doubt about his sincerity. He is going to kill me here, tied to this bed, and there’s going to be a lot of pain between now and the moment I breathe my last. Could I give him fake coordinates? Sure, but that would only prolong the inevitable.

He withdraws a knife—short, with a long, thin blade. “I’m waiting,” he murmurs, holding up the knife like he’s examining it in the light. Even though I’m completely sure this is theatrics, a means of panicking me, I can’t deny the terror soaking into my muscles, filling my veins.

“Go fuck yourself,” I growl.

He quirks an eyebrow, looking from the blade to me. “Fair enough. We’ll see how long you maintain this attitude.”

I can’t control my rapid, ragged breaths as he draws nearer, holding the knife up so I can see it. He takes his time lowering it, and the first touch of the steel against the delicate skin of my inner arm makes my body stiffen. He caresses me with it, dragging it along my arm. “I’ll ask you again. Locations. Give me locations.”

“I’m sorry,” I grit out. “I think I told you to go fuck yourself.”

His bitter chuckle rings in my ears in time with a white hot sizzle of pain, like a thin line of fire running along the underside of my upper arm. He drags the tip of the knife from my elbow almost to my armpit while I force myself to breathe slowly, to control my perception of the sensations threatening to make me scream. I will not let him break me. I will not give him the satisfaction.

“I hate to defile such smooth, perfect skin.” He even clicks his tongue like he’s genuinely sorry, though we both know he isn’t. “Truly, it does not have to be this way. Tell me what I need to know.”

“No.” I’m shaking, keenly aware of the blood dripping down the underside of my arm, but I will be damned if I give him what he wants.

When he repeats the same treatment on my other arm, I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, but it’s not enough to hold back a tear that trickles down the side of my face. It hurts. I can’t pretend otherwise. And to think, he’s barely touching me. I already know happens when he decides to apply pressure.

It’s like he’s reading my mind. “You know, it’s only going to get worse,” he murmurs. “I will turn your body into a mural. I will carve my name into your flesh. And I will do it slowly, making sure you’re conscious throughout.” He looms over me, staring down at me with the knife in plain view. “I think I will move to your face now.”

The knife comes closer, and closer. My chest is heaving, and a tiny whimper leaks out through my clenched teeth. He's going to do it. He's going to carve my face.

Until the sweetest sound in the world comes from outside the room. *Gunfire.*

His head snaps around, the knife forgotten. "The fuck?" he demands from his guard, who hurries out to see what's happening. Who ruined their good time.

I know who it is and hope sweeps away the pain and dismay that were so close to destroying me seconds ago. The picture. I sent them the picture. They came for me. The shots are closer now, louder. My torturer bares his teeth in an ugly snarl, dropping the knife in favor of grabbing for the pistol in his waistband.

He doesn't aim for the door. He aims at me, like he's ready to fire, and I do the only thing I can think to do. I scream so the guys can find me faster. Wordless, but loud enough that footsteps start pounding our way.

I don't know if they're close enough when I meet the hate-filled gaze of the man standing over me. He's going to pull the trigger. He's going to kill me. *I tried. I truly did.*

There's a deafening crack, and I close my eyes, prepared for the inevitable pain of a bullet piercing me. Instead, the Russian stumbles, cursing. My eyes fly open to reveal him taking aim at someone I can't see, someone standing outside the room. He charges at the door, firing while holding his other hand to his bleeding thigh, causing more shouts in the hall. "He's getting away!" somebody yells between shots, and I think it might be Griffin.

And then Griffin comes in, runs to me, and cuts the rope around my wrists. I'm too relieved to speak. I can barely think. They're here, they saved me, and that's all I need to know. The rest can wait. I feel Griffin lift me off the bed, but I may as well not be in my body. It's like I'm watching from outside as Griffin carries me out while Trent and Dallas cover us. "You're all right. You're safe now," Griffin assures me, but I don't have it in me to thank him. I can't form the words. All I

can do is rest my head against his shoulder as we emerge into sunshine, where an SUV awaits. Griffin lifts me into the back and sits with me in his lap while Dallas takes a seat next to us, wrapping his hand around mine and holding tight. It's over for now. I'm safe with them.

But my mother is dead. I was so determined to save her and bring us all back together, and it was for nothing. They could've killed me. I could've gotten the guys killed when they came to get me.

I failed.

"You're all right now," Griffin whispers, and somehow it's the sweet sympathy in his voice that breaks me. Once the tidal wave of emotion slams into me, there's no helping it. Tears flow freely down my cheeks as one broken sob after another fills the car. Nobody says a word.

That is, until we make it back to the hotel. My head hurts from the crying, and I hurt pretty much all over. That doesn't mean I need to be carried—I shake my head when Griffin tries to help me from the SUV once in the garage, forcing myself to stand on my own two feet.

"We took out a couple of their guys, but the rest got away," Trent explains, and now I see Mason waiting for us in front of the elevator doors. His arms folded, and he's wearing that look of his, the one that practically screams how he's the master of the universe, and he doesn't appreciate being defied.

When he opens his mouth, his chest puffed out like he's ready to let loose, Dallas holds up a hand. "Don't," he warns. That's all it takes for Mason's mouth to snap shut, for concern to replace some of his anger.

Not all of it, though. "We'll talk about it later."

Sure, if that's what he thinks. Frankly, I don't give a shit. All I want is to curl up in a dark room and sleep forever. Sleeping is so much easier than facing the truth.

DALLAS

I's like walking on eggshells, tiptoeing around the apartment, hoping to keep Natalie calm and in one piece after what she's been through. Not that she's had any sort of outburst in the twenty-four hours since we brought her back from that horror she faced. Quite the opposite. She's been practically catatonic since sharing the bare basics of what took place. What she lost.

Which means there's a chance once the shock wears off, and she can allow herself to feel that she's going to break down. Seeing her in such distress, and the thought of it only getting worse, has my chest aching painfully. If I could just take the pain away, I would.

Could it be that I care more for her than I thought I did? Sure, I knew she was special. I knew I liked her, but what about beyond liking? There's a reason I wanted to be the one to locate her and bring her home when she first ran, the same reason I couldn't bear staying behind during the recovery mission.

Finding her tied to that bed, though? Blood running down her arms, an expression of pure terror carved into her familiar features? I've seen terror before. I've seen what it can do to people. I had never seen it from her, and that is the problem. That's why I can't bring myself to tell her off for being stupid enough to run again. The fuck did she think she was going to accomplish? That's one of many questions I would love to pose but don't have the heart to.

I will never be able to make sense of what she does to me, but I do know that even after all the things she put me through, I still love her.

I don't know what Griffin is thinking. It seems we have more in common than I imagined. Neither of us is any good at talking about feelings—not a surprise. The tension in the apartment is thick enough to cut with a knife, but neither of us has come out and addressed it directly. We'd rather take turns pacing in frustration, wrestling with the sense of powerlessness a man can only feel when a woman he cares for is in pain and has built thick walls around herself.

It comes as a relief when Teagan steps off the elevator, holding a wide cardboard box in one hand. Instantly, her energy seems to brighten the place and make the air easier to breathe. "I brought some bear claws," she calls out cheerfully. A little too cheerfully, with an edge of desperation in her voice.

When there's no answer from Nat, still in her room, Teagan gives us a worried look. "I figured since they're her favorite..." she whispers, wincing.

"It was a good thought." I hold up a finger, signaling for her to wait before going to Natalie's bedroom door and knocking briskly. "Teagan brought you some bear claws. You better hurry if you want to get any." It's absurd, pretending to be cheerful at a time like this. When the girl still hasn't showered since she got home yesterday. When she won't let any of us touch her, even to help cleanse the wounds to her arms. At least she took care of that. She's present enough in her own mind to handle the necessities.

Otherwise? She's a ghost in her own home. I'll never forget her flat, toneless delivery of the outcome of her trip. How she witnessed Beverly's murder. This time, there's no pretending. No disappearing for years, letting her children believe she's dead. A bullet to the brain generally gets the job done. If only Natalie hadn't witnessed it. If only she didn't blame herself.

The fact she opens the door is a minor victory. This is not the Natalie I thought I knew. Polished, capable, in control of herself and any situation she's up against. The dark circles under her red eyes tell a story of their own. The way she walks with her shoulders hunched, half-bent like she's protecting herself somehow tells another. I almost wish there was hatred in her gaze when her eyes meet mine, but I see... nothing. Emptiness.

"Teagan's waiting for you," I offer. She nods, then heads straight for the living room. All I can do is follow in her footsteps, asking myself what the hell we're supposed to do for her. I suppose there's nothing anyone can do but be here for her. She needs to pull herself out of this.

Teagan's smile is brilliant, warm. "There you are. You're going to have to help me with these." She extends her arms, offering the box. "Help yourself. Otherwise, I'm going to have to eat all of them, and I won't be able to fit into my jeans if I do."

Natalie only eyes the box, almost like she's weighing her choices. Finally, she sighs. "Thanks for going to the trouble, but I don't think I'll have any. Help yourself, though," she adds, addressing the room at large. She eases herself into an armchair, drawing her feet up until her knees practically touch her chin.

"Are you sure?" I'm sorry to see Teagan's face fall, knowing how hopeful she was. "How about I leave them here, anyway? In case you change your mind."

"Go ahead," Natalie murmurs, her voice flat and devoid of interest. It's like all of the color has drained out of her, leaving a black and white reproduction of what used to be so vibrant and intense. Colorful. Captivating. Only now do I understand everything that drew me to her to begin with. I miss it. She'll come back, she has to. I'll be right here by her side when she does.

Teagan leaves the box on the kitchen counter, looking like a guilty kid. Like she regrets coming down. If she didn't already, she certainly does once Natalie asks, "How's Mason?"

Teagan winces like she's in pain, her throat working before she says, "He needs time."

"Of course he does." Looking at the floor, Natalie smirks like she was expecting that. Frankly, I'm still pissed at her for taking a tremendous risk, both for herself and for those who would inevitably come after her, yet it's obvious why she did it. She wanted to try once more to turn Beverly around. She failed. It's bad enough she feels responsible for Beverly's death without her brother freezing her out.

At the same time, I see his side. How can any of us trust her when she's so damn determined to go behind our backs and risk us all in the process? Beverly was her family, but so is Mason. Does betraying one by trying to save the other balance out in the end? I could lose my mind trying to make sense of it.

"Everything will be okay," Teagan insists. "I mean, God knows brothers can be a pain in the ass. I have more than enough stories." Yes, because after all, it was her brother's risky behavior and shit habits that landed her at the hotel to begin with. Not quite the same, but I can see where she would draw the parallel.

"Yeah, brothers are a pain in the ass." Still, for the first time all day, Natalie musters the ghost of a smile. It doesn't reach her eyes or last long, but I know I didn't imagine it.

"I guess I should go. I'm right upstairs if you need me, okay?" She wants to help, and I'm sad for her since it seems her efforts are going unrewarded. I catch Griffin trying to give her a reassuring grin before she steps onto the elevator.

There's nothing about Natalie's body language to show one way or another whether she noticed Teagan's exit. She doesn't move, barely breathes. I exchange a look with Griffin, who lifts a shoulder. What now? She's out of her room, but what happens now?

One thing is clear: the girl needs to shower. The tearstains on her cheeks are still visible, cutting through whatever grime managed to find its way to her face while she was held captive. All it does is remind me of what she suffered. "You'd

feel better if you washed up,” I offer, exchanging another look with Griffin.

“You will,” he agrees. “Wash all that shit away. Let it run off you.”

“Because it’s that easy,” she mutters.

“It can’t hurt.” A flash of inspiration strikes, and I add, “You don’t have to shower alone. There’s plenty of room for all three of us.”

What I wouldn’t give for her to offer some flippant, sexy response. All she does is sigh. “I’ll be fine.”

“You know what? I don’t think you will.” Stepping in front of her, I hold out my hands. It’s time somebody took charge. She’s not some fragile China doll who might shatter at the slightest nudge. This is Natalie, and while she deserves compassion and patience, she needs to be pushed a little. “Come on. Let us take care of you.”

It takes much too long for her to stir from her silent misery, long enough to look up and meet my gaze. Fuck, what I wouldn’t do to wipe away every shred of pain and grief swirling in those blue depths.

“On your feet,” I murmur, curling my fingers toward my palms in a come hither gesture. “We’ll get you cleaned up.”

Griffin takes the initiative, getting up and heading for the bathroom. By the time Natalie places her hands in mine, the shower is already running. The sound gets louder the closer we come to the open door. He’s already waiting for us inside the glass stall, so I help Natalie out of her clothes and lead her inside before quickly stripping to join the two of them. There’s plenty of room, and it seems Griffin and I are on the same page as we join forces to do what Natalie can’t seem to do for herself now.

For once, there is nothing sexual about our interaction. She doesn’t register the fact that she’s in the shower with two naked men, both of whom she’s fucked. She only stands stock still, closing her eyes when I guide her beneath the shower spray to soak her hair. Griffin, meanwhile, wets a loofah

sponge and soaps it up. I pour shampoo over Natalie's head and begin massaging it into fragrant suds, working as slowly and gently as I can. I sense Griffin does the same, cleaning her body carefully, handling her with tenderness.

Were this any other time, I can imagine sparks flying in a situation like this. With her ass pressed against my groin, and her soapy tits in his hands. No doubt we'd have her skewered between us in no time.

As it is, though, she only moves when we move her. Griffin has to lift her arms. I have to tip her head back to rinse her hair. She's checked out again—the brief interaction with Teagan must've taken all of her strength. I've seen combat vets sink into shock like this, so profound it numbs them to everything around them. All that exists is the world inside, where everything is dark and cold, but safe.

Eventually, she's going to figure out she's safe with us.

For now, it'll have to be enough to show her and hope she eventually understands.

NATALIE

The last two weeks passed slowly and painfully. I barely talked the first few days, and even after, I had to force each word out of my mouth. The nightmares were brutal during the first week, and by the second, I started taking the sleeping meds Griffin got from medical, out of desperation. Now I just sleep a lot. Sleeping feels good because I don't have to talk, feel, or think.

I know I can't do this forever. I have to face reality and process what I went through, but right now, I just can't.

My apartment is quiet. Dallas went to the gym when Griffin came back from his workout. One of them is always here; they never leave me. At first, I was angry about that. I wanted to be alone, but now, the thought of being alone has my stomach in knots, and my chest tightening in fear. It's odd. I've never felt this way, never been so attached to anyone before. Is it the grief or is it something more?

The shower turns on in my bathroom and, for a split second, I think about joining Griffin. That thought disappears as quickly as it popped into my head, like everything else these days. When I think about doing anything, my mind asks why? Why should I do it when nothing matters? Nothing feels good. There is no motivation for me to get up, but I force my legs to swing out anyway.

My stomach growls painfully. I've barely eaten anything the last few days, and I can feel my body getting weaker. I need to eat something. Even if it's just a few tiny bites or one of those protein shakes, Dallas has been making for me.

I sit up on the side of my bed, and my head spins immediately. When was the last time I even got up? Too long ago apparently because the moment I push up on my feet, I'm wobbly on my legs, as if my muscles don't know what to do anymore. I take a moment to steady myself, glad that neither Griffin nor Dallas are here to see me act this pitiful.

When I feel steady enough to walk, I make my way to the kitchen. I'm not surprised when I find a brown box with the logo of my favorite bakery sitting on my counter. Teagan has been bringing me bear claws almost every day, even though I have declined to eat them every single time.

I step up to the counter and open the brown paper box. There are four bear claws inside, looking delicious. I pick up the box, holding them inches from my face to take a deep breath. The familiar aroma of the sweet treat and its spices fills my lungs. My stomach growls and responds, begging me to take a bite.

Setting the box back down on the counter, I take out one of the sugary treats and take a small bite. The soft pastry nearly melts on my tongue. I chew the morsel slowly, waiting for the familiar satisfaction that comes with eating sweets. I'm waiting for my taste buds to explode with joy, to urge me to chew and swallow so I can take an even bigger bite next. But none of that comes. Even my favorite food from my favorite bakery is simply tasteless.

"Good to see you up." Griffin startles me.

The bear claw slips from my hand and lands with a low thud on the kitchen counter.

"Shit, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," I say quickly, putting the pastry back in the box. I grab a paper towel to clean up the mess I made. "I just didn't expect you out of the shower so quickly."

"I just went to rinse off after my workout."

I look over to where he is standing. He's wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his lower body. His hair is wet, making it look almost black. Usually, when I look at his half

naked Adonis-like body, my own body comes alive, and I have the urge to hump him like a hormonal teenager. Today I feel nothing. I'm just numb to everything.

The worst part of it is that I want to feel something. But I know if I do, it will open the floodgates, and I will feel everything instead of something. And for that, I'm not ready yet.

"I think I'm just going to go back to bed for now. It's still early." I glance to the floor to ceiling window where the first rays of sunshine filter through into my apartment.

"Care if I join you?"

"Of course not." Griffin and Dallas have been sleeping in the bed with me for the last two weeks. But sleep has been all we've been doing. The few times either of them tried to hold me, I pushed them away, wanting to be alone in my grief. Which is why I'm not surprised when we lie down on the mattress, and Griffin keeps a healthy amount of space between us.

We stay in bed for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling without saying a word, until I feel the sudden need to be closer. I scoot over to Griffin, close enough to feel the body heat radiating off his half naked body. The towel is still secured around his groin, but I have the sudden urge to rip it off. Fighting that urge, I scoot even closer until my arm and leg is pressed against his. When I tilt my head to look at his face, I find him already staring at me. His facial expression holds so many emotions, it's hard to pick one. There is a yearning in his eyes I haven't seen before, and I suddenly feel terrible about pushing him and Dallas away the last few days. All they wanted to do was hold me, and I couldn't even give them that.

"I'm sorry I've been giving you guys the cold shoulder," I mutter, feeling ashamed of how I've been acting.

"Everyone grieves differently. There is nothing wrong with needing some space after losing someone you love."

“But the thing is, I lost my mom years ago. Mason and I already went through the grieving process together. Or maybe only Mason did, and I was still holding on. I wanted so badly for her to be that person again. It blinded me. I just wanted my mom back.” My voice cracks at the end, a wave of heavy emotions crashes into me, and I immediately try to shove those feelings down. Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a calming breath, willing those ugly thoughts away.

“Don’t do that,” Griffin orders. “Don’t fight letting yourself feel. You’ll only make it worse if you bottle it all up. There will come a time the bottle can’t hold any more and bursts into a thousand pieces.”

“I hate to say it,” Dallas’s voice suddenly comes from the doorway, “but Griffin is right. You need to stop bottling everything up and let it out. Even if it sucks, you’ll feel better after.”

I look up to find Dallas walking into my bedroom. He’s wearing black shorts and a white shirt, which is basically see-through now that he’s so sweaty. His muscles are bulging, flexing with each step he takes.

“Did you just say I’m right?” Griffin asks before joking, “Let me get the calendar to document this day.”

For the first time in a while, a tiny smile tugs on my lips. I don’t think I’ll ever tire of their banter.

Dallas pauses at the foot of the bed. He looks at us cuddling and something I can’t quite put my finger on washes over his face. He sighs deeply. “I’ll give you two some space.”

He is about to turn around when I stop him. “Wait, please don’t go! Lie with us.”

He pauses again, as if he is searching carefully for the right words. “I don’t know. I think you need Griffin more than me right now.” There is a note of sadness in his voice, and I hate hearing it. I hate I made him feel like I don’t want him.

I sit up straight. “Why would you say that? I need both of you; if you haven’t noticed yet.”

“You don’t. What you need is a healthy relationship, not some weird love triangle that’s going to confuse you even more. You’re grieving, and you need—”

“Stop telling me what I need. I know exactly what I want—both of you. I knew it before my mom’s death, and I definitely know it now. Don’t make me choose and please don’t leave.” I am a little shocked by the desperation in my voice, but I’m not ashamed either.

“All right, I won’t leave,” Dallas promises. “But I will go shower before I lie down with you.”

He spins around and the three little words I’ve been thinking about pop into my head. *I love you*. I almost say it out loud. Part of me wants to scream it, but there is something holding me back. Some part of me is still scared. Scared that he won’t say it back and is still gonna leave. And when he does, he’s going to take part of me with him.

GRIFFIN

I hate to leave her like this. You'd think I wouldn't bother with guilt, considering how little it's ever bothered her to leave me and Dallas in the middle of the night. But we weren't wrestling demons like the ones who still sometimes wake her from a sound sleep so she can tremble and cry quietly, as if she could hide it. Like we aren't both aware of every move she makes nowadays.

The meeting Mason called is scheduled to take place in ten minutes. Nat's breathing slowly, evenly, and has been for at least half an hour. I'm confident she's out for the night, or at least for a few hours. Long enough for us to go up to the conference room and return without her ever knowing we were gone.

We take our clothes out to the living room and dress quickly, neither of us saying a word until we're on the elevator. The closing of the elevator doors unlocks a question I've been dying to ask since before Dallas joined us in bed earlier. "What do you think about all of that? The things she said about wanting to be with us."

He pauses for a long time before saying a word. All I can do is remember how disappointed he looked when he found us together. There was a while where I figured he cared more about our rivalry than he did about her. I'm starting to think otherwise. Only a man who genuinely cares about somebody looks that disappointed, but acts like they're ready to step aside. If she had what she wanted, he was ready to let her have it without putting up a fight.

“I think she needs time before she figures out what she really wants,” he decides. “She’s still too fucked up over what happened.”

He’s right. Now isn’t the time to figure things out. We have to stay focused on doing the right thing by her.

I doubt she’ll think the right thing is leaving her behind while we go upstairs for a meeting, but it’s unavoidable. Mason doesn’t want her involved with what happens moving forward, and not only because he doesn’t trust her. Deep down inside, he has to understand what she went through back there. The past couple of weeks have given him enough time to get over the worst of his anger and betrayal. I doubt he would give her a big hug if she showed up in front of him right now, but he can appreciate that she was tortured after witnessing her mother’s murder.

Still, that’s not enough to invite her to the meeting he called tonight. He gave us explicit instructions to wait until she was asleep, and if she wasn’t by the time the meeting was scheduled to begin, it could wait. This must be serious if he’s willing to leave her on her own, but then she is using those pills to help her sleep now, too. It could be he figures she’ll be out cold, and not a threat.

Teagan meets us in the kitchen when we arrive. She turns away from the cup of tea she was fixing, biting her lip anxiously. “How is she?”

“You know, it seems like she’s getting better,” I tell her. “Just a little, but one step at a time.” I sure as hell never expected her to come so close to me in bed after spending weeks acting like we’re both carrying some contagious, deadly disease. It’s a far cry from the up-for-anything Natalie who managed to convince Dallas and me to sleep with her at the same time, but it’s a positive development.

“He’s waiting in the conference room,” Teagan explains, and we head in that direction with her following us. Mason and Trent are engaged in quiet conversation at the table, but it ends when Dallas and I enter.

“Careful,” I warn with a smirk. “Some people take it personally when the talk goes silent as soon as they show up.”

“Don’t worry,” Trent tells me while we take our seats. “If I wanted to talk shit about you, I would do it to your face.”

“I have no doubt.” I nod to Mason, who clears his throat as he looks around the table. Teagan sits at the end opposite him. I’m sure he’s already filled her in on everything we’re about to discuss, but there’s no deciphering the look they exchange.

“It’s becoming clear the Russian government is somehow involved in the shit that’s been going down here,” he explains.

“And how have we come to this conclusion?” I ask.

“It’s based first on Nat’s description of the team leader who took that knife to her. Since her return, we’ve run the prints of the prick who blew his own brains out rather than be questioned in the garage, and he was a longtime Russian asset.”

The weight of this settles over all of us, and the room remains silent for several moments before Mason continues. “Along with that, there’s the connection to Jonathan.” His voice cracks a bit on the name, and his brows pull together like he’s in pain. “He died in Russia. It only makes sense that the people who’ve worked their asses off to get back at me were from Russia.”

He leans back in his chair, blowing out a sigh as he stares at the ceiling. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve tried to forget about it,” he admits. “But I can’t. It’s impossible.”

“You can’t do that to yourself.” Dallas’s voice is quiet and firm, but clearly disregarded. Mason only blows out a snort before shaking his head. A glance at Teagan reveals her pain as she witnesses this.

“Beverly was wrong when she accused me of murdering my brother. Murder denotes premeditation, and there was none of that. But it was still my fucking fault. I fucked up and somebody out there knows it. Somebody who was involved. A Russian. Maybe a family member of someone we were

ordered to kill. Someone looking for vengeance. They knew they could get it through my family.”

He blows out another sigh and goes silent for a long time. There’s nothing for us to say, nothing that could make it better. Everything he says makes sense—though he doesn’t deserve all this guilt he’s heaping on himself. I know he doesn’t believe that. Considering the lengths somebody is willing to go to get back at him, they don’t believe it, either.

Once he has a hold of himself, Mason continues, sitting up straight again. “That’s not all.” He looks at Dallas. “Over the past few days, I’ve tried to reach out to the other members of the SEAL team.”

“And?” Trent prompts.

Mason’s jaw works while Teagan emits a strangled whimper. “And they’re all dead,” he mutters.

My eyes go wide. “All of them?” It’s unbelievable.

“Everyone. I don’t know if they saved me for last, or if I was the hardest to track down. Maybe I’ve managed to stay alive longer than everyone else because I’m protected by the hotel.”

Another voice rings out from the hall leading into the room. “Whoever is behind this, they’ve been planning it for a long time.”

We all turn at once at the sound of Natalie’s entrance. She isn’t quite as loud or strident as I’m used to, but she sounds more like herself than she has in a long time as she strides into the room. She didn’t take the time to get changed and is still sporting pajamas and a messy bun, the way she was when we left her.

I feel Mason’s furious gaze burning a hole into the side of my head. Turning his way, I shrug. “She was asleep.”

“Yeah, and the baby woke up to find herself alone.” She pops her hip to the side, glaring at Dallas and me. Between the two of them, it’ll be a miracle if I don’t burst into flames.

One thing I notice: she hasn't looked at Mason yet. He's made a point not to acknowledge her. It's enough to make me roll my eyes. What is it going to take to bring them back together? "Well?" she demands, dropping into the chair beside Trent. "Catch me up. What did I miss?"

"You were not invited," Mason grits out, staring at the table.

"And yet here I am," she reminds him. "Somebody start talking."

At first, it seems like they're going to wait each other out while the rest of us sit here like smacked asses. It's Dallas who breaks the silence. "It looks like all of this is coming out of Russia."

She shrugs. "I could've told you that."

Mason snorts, still going out of his way to avoid looking at her. "Careful. I might have to ask what you mean by that."

"Obviously, I mean exactly what you think. That I'm somehow in on all of this shit." She catches me looking at her, and I guess my disappointment shows. She looks away, biting her lip.

Mason releases a deep breath before continuing. "Satellite footage places this guy at a mob-run brothel in Russia. This doesn't stop until we stop him."

"Do we have any more information?" Dallas asks.

"Not much. We're not even sure of his name. Only of his movements—we were able to track him from that power plant straight to Moscow and beyond. He didn't waste any time running home."

"We sure as hell can't wait until he's in the wind again," I decide, and a handful of grunts of agreement follow my statement. "I say we go now. Finish him. I still have contact in Moscow that can get us into the country unnoticed."

"Hell yes," Trent grunts. Dallas nods firmly, then turns to Mason.

He opens his mouth, and it's clear he's about to agree—before Natalie beats him to the punch. “So, when are we leaving?”

“Who's we?” Mason asks with a groan. “I don't remember inviting you.”

“I don't remember asking you for an invite,” she snaps. “Newsflash. I deserve to look him in the fucking face before he takes his last breath. After what he put me through? He blew our mother's brains out in front of me. He was about to carve my face to ribbons. I'm done being depressed and scared. I need to face my demons. Yeah. I'm going.”

I'm sure as hell not about to agree with her. It's obvious Dallas is as against the idea as I am, scowling at her, his jaw ticking. And here I am, practically biting my tongue off. What is she thinking?

The problem is, I know what she's thinking. I wish I didn't because it would be easier for me to refuse her, to lock her up somewhere until we get back if only I didn't completely understand her reason for wanting to go. After what she went through, she deserves to look at that bastard once more before he dies. She deserves the satisfaction of his recognition when their eyes meet.

Mason's seething when he nods. “Fine. You can go.” Before she can react, he adds, “Which means I'm going, too.”

NATALIE

Tension is high as we board the jet a few hours after our explosive meeting in the conference room. I understand why my brother is so upset with me; he has every right to be. I fucked up. I should have listened to him and asked for help instead of going in myself. I already paid for my decision dearly. It's something that's going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I shove the thought away. I need to get my head in the game and show the others that they can count on me. If that's even possible.

I'm still shocked that Mason is coming with us to Moscow, even more shocked that Teagan stayed behind to look after the Hotel. It's crazy to think that a few months ago, she was just a civilian working in a grocery store. Now she is part of our team, a shadow government operation very few people even know exists.

The jet holds about twenty people and with the swat team we're bringing, almost every seat is occupied. Mason had to call in some pretty big favors to get us all across the border, but I know it will be worth it in the end.

All of our gear, guns, and ammo are stacked in crates in the back of the plane, while upfront are baskets of food and drinks. Each row in the center has room for three people. Two on one side and a single seat on the other.

I take a window seat, and Griffin sits down next to me like it's the most natural thing in the world. I expect Dallas to take the seat on the other side, or at least one in front of us. Instead, he chooses to sit three rows behind us.

I frown. “What’s going on with Dallas?” I whisper.

Griffin searches the plane, just now realizing Dallas is not sitting close by. He shrugs. “No clue what’s up with the old man.” Unlike me, he doesn’t bother whispering, speaking loud enough for Dallas and people surrounding us to hear.

I elbow him in the side. “Stop it.” I usually love their little banter, but something about it doesn’t feel right today. Maybe I don’t want other people to hear. I like having them to myself.

Mason and Trent are sitting in the single seats, unsurprisingly. My brother is all the way at the front. He has barely looked at me all day, and besides the few words in the meeting, he hasn’t spoken to me either. How am I going to make him understand? I play with the thought of going up there to talk to him, but I don’t think having an audience would be a good idea. So I stay in my seat, buckling up to get ready for takeoff.

Not long after we’re in the air, my stomach growls. I haven’t eaten much lately, and I know I need to get my strength up if I want to be at hundred percent for this mission. Unbuckling from my seat, I get up to climb over Griffin, who gives me a questionable look.

“Just getting a bite to eat. Do you want something?”

“Sure, I could use a snack,” he answers, a pleased smile spreads across his face. “I’m glad you’re eating again.”

I give him a halfhearted grin before making my way to the front of the plane. As I pass my brother, an uneasy feeling spreads through my gut. Guilt mixed with lingering anger and a little bit of jealousy swirls around my stomach. I didn’t think about it until now, but I’m jealous that he was able to compartmentalize what happened the way he did. It seems like my mom returning barely affected him. He was ready to charge in and take her out like she wasn’t our mother at all.

Staring at the pre-made sandwiches, small bags of chips and crackers, I certainly wish I would’ve stayed home. That thought vanishes as quickly as it popped into my head. I have

to be there when we find him. I need to make him pay for what he did to me. What he did to my entire family.

“Anything good?” My brother’s voice snaps me out of my trance. “I’m guessing not, since you’ve been staring at the basket for a few minutes now.”

“I just don’t have any appetite, but I know I need to eat something.”

“You do, yes.”

I spin around to face him. “Don’t pretend you suddenly care.”

“Do you think I would be here if I didn’t care about you?”

“You came with us because you don’t trust me,” I accuse.

Mason huffs. “Of course I can’t trust you right now. You have given me a million reasons not to. That doesn’t mean I would have let you go to Russia on your own.”

“I’m not on my own. I’ve got an entire team with me.” I wave at the rest of the plane, where most of the team look around uncomfortably.

“You know what I mean,” he snaps back at me.

“Actually, I don’t,” I say, keeping my voice low. “Can we do this another time, preferably without an audience?”

“I don’t give a shit about them hearing. We need to fix this before we get to Moscow. We can’t have this tension between us. I have to be able to count on you and so do they.” He motions his hand to the people behind him.

He isn’t wrong. We have to be a team, and everyone has to count on each other. With a deep sigh, I flop down on the floor in front of Mason, crossing my legs and leaning my back against the wall.

“You are right. Let’s talk.”

Mason unbuckles and leans forward in his seat, so his face is closer to mine. “I came because I was scared you would do something stupid and get yourself hurt,” he admits. “Yes, I

don't trust you at the moment, but that wasn't the reason I came on this trip."

"I'm sorry I went behind your back and left. I know what it must have looked like to you... to everyone. But I thought I was doing the right thing. You were so quick to give up on Mom, to blame her as the bad guy, and take her out like any other target. I thought if I could just get to her. If I could talk to her face to face, I could have saved her."

"I knew she was gone when I saw her that night she kidnapped Teagan. I looked into her empty eyes and knew that our mother was no longer with us," Mason explains. "Whatever they did to her altered her mind, and I knew there was no going back. I'm sorry."

"I just wanted Mom back," I mutter, my voice barely audible.

Somehow, my brother hears me over the loud jet engine. "I know you did. I wish I could have brought her back. I wish I could bring all of them back, but it's not possible, and now you are all that I have left."

My throat is thick with emotion. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to physically hold myself together.

"And you are all I have left," I murmur, because that's all I can get out without crying.

"I'm going to be honest with you. It's going to take a while to build the trust back up between us, but that doesn't mean I don't love you. You'll always be my little annoying sister, and I don't want anything to happen to you, which is why I'm on this trip."

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, drying up the few tears that escaped before somebody can see them. "I'm glad you don't hate me."

"I could never hate you," Mason says, his voice calming me down.

"I could never hate you either," I respond with a genuine smile. We're not big on telling each other I love you, so this is the closest we're getting today.

“How are you and Dallas?” Mason asks low enough so only we can hear.

I shrug. “Fine. Why are you asking?”

“Honestly, I was feeling a little bad about the way I handled seeing you two together. It’s none of my business what you do. I guess I was just a little shocked. You always seemed so close to Griffin. I almost expected it there, but Dallas? I just didn’t see it coming.”

I press my lips into a thin line, forcing what I really want to say down. “And then the overprotective brother came out?”

“Exactly. If he is staying away from you now because of me, I can talk to him.”

“I don’t think you’re the issue,” I tell him without telling him what the actual problem is. He’s not ready for that one.

Mason raises his eyebrows, waiting for me to explain more. When I don’t, he continues, “All right then. I won’t get involved in your business when it comes to your love life. At least I’ll try.”

I really hope he’ll stick by it, especially if he finds out I had a threesome with his two best friends.

“Thank you. I’m gonna go and sit back down,” I say, as I get back up on my feet. “But I’m glad we had this talk.”

He grabs my hand as I pass him, squeezing it gently before saying, “Same.”

I give him one last smile before I make my way back to my seat. While I’m up, I look over the seat behind me at Dallas, hoping he will look my way. Instead, I find his eyes closed, and his head tipped back against the seat. I guess he is napping before the big day.

Griffin looks at me in confusion before twisting his neck to find where I’m staring. “We should do the same. Get some sleep, I mean.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I say as I climb over him to get back to my seat.

“You didn’t bring any snacks,” Griffin whines.

“Shit, I started talking to Mason, and I totally forgot. Want me to go back?”

“Nah. I’ll go. You settle down and get comfy.”

I try my best to get comfortable, scooting my butt from side to side, turning my head, lying against the window frame, but nothing is even remotely comfortable. Using my thumb, I press the round button on the side of my armrest and throw my body back to recline my seat as much as I can. It moves about an eighth of an inch before the mechanism tells me it won’t go any further.

Griffin comes back holding a few different bags of chips and two sandwiches. He hands me half of his loot before he sits back down and unwraps his half. I open one of the bags of chips and start to munch on the crunchy snack. I still don’t have my appetite back fully, but at least this doesn’t taste like a cardboard box.

“What did you and Mason talk about?” Griffin asks between taking huge bites of his sandwich.

“Basically, clearing the air and making sure we are on the same page moving forward,” I explain. “Why? Scared we were talking about you behind your back?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“We did talk about Dallas. Mason offered to talk to him. He feels bad about how he reacted.”

Griffin’s eyes go wide in surprise. “Interesting. So, he would be okay with you dating Dallas.”

“It seems that way.” I don’t mention the comment Mason made about Griffin. It doesn’t really matter what my brother thinks because when he finds out that I want to be with both of them, I doubt he will be so open to the thought.

I’m not sure when I finally fall to sleep, but when my eyes flutter open the next time, I’m cuddled up against Griffin’s shoulder, slobbering on his shirt. He doesn’t seem to mind; he’s asleep, snoring softly. The cabin is dark and quiet. As I

look around, I realize almost everyone is sleeping. I twist around to check out Dallas, whose eyes are also closed, his head leaning against the window frame. I wish he would talk to me instead of pulling away. Hopefully, once we are back in the states, things will settle down, and we can move forward with what we have.

All we have to do is get out of Russia alive.

DALLAS

Well. Isn't this just like a scene from a family sitcom? All we're missing is the emotional music swelling in the background.

It isn't that I'm unhappy everybody seems to be getting along better now. Their bickering was beginning to work my last nerve. I hope nobody expects me to muster a smile, though. She shouldn't be here. I do not want her here. A detailed list of everything that could go wrong on this mission runs through my head the way it has been since Mason gave in to her demands.

I understand why she feels this is important. But I don't have to like it.

She tries to catch my eye as we're disembarking from the plane once we're fully armed, but I'm not ready to do that. Not when there's something she doesn't know. I meet Mason's gaze over the top of her head, and he nods firmly, his jaw ticking when he does. I couldn't give him the answers he demanded when I told him I'm leaving, but it changes nothing. Once we're through with this mission, I'm gone. She doesn't know what she wants. She's confused, and it would be way too tempting to give in. Because I want her, I want her with all of me, and I'm not sure even a hardened son of a bitch like myself could handle her coming to her senses and realizing the mistake she made by welcoming two men into her life. It's better to take myself out of the equation before that happens.

She doesn't know it. But she will soon enough. First things first: getting out of here alive, Natalie included.

A series of vehicles wait for us, and we waste no time splitting into teams as decided en route. I'm with Mason and Natalie, while Griffin takes another truck with a few of the SWAT team members. Along the way, we check our headsets, confirming there's a clear line of communication. It's dark, the roads barely lit, but the men driving the trucks are familiar with the terrain and know precisely where we are going.

"No taking risks," Mason orders in a tight growl, and I know he isn't talking to me. "Got it?"

Natalie doesn't look up from her Sig, which she holsters before retorting, "Then none of us should have come here because this whole thing is a risk." My chest warms when I hear her sarcastic quip. She's getting better. She is becoming herself again. I'll have to take that with me when I go, leaning on that knowledge whenever I miss her. At least I know she's recovering. What happens tonight should further aid in that recovery. She'll have closure, and now that it seems she and Mason are on speaking terms again, it's the last piece she's missing to make her whole.

I'm certainly not one of those pieces. She only thinks I am.

It isn't long before the frozen nothing we came from gives way to civilization. For the sake of maintaining an element of surprise, each driver took a slightly different route. There isn't much that can announce an impending attack, like a cluster of almost identical vehicles rolling through town. "Three minutes," the driver announces.

"What's the latest intel?" I ask Mason, who's currently reading a message on his phone.

"He's been hiding out at this brothel since his arrival. Fucking coward," he adds with a snort. "Using a bunch of sex workers to shield him. Pathetic."

"Not for long." Natalie is grimly determined, poised at the edge of her seat, prepared to spring. I want to reach out to her, to calm her down. It would get me nowhere, and I don't need to send mixed signals now, either. Not when I'm close to shattering her illusions. I can only watch as her knee bounces, betraying her anxiety. Not that it's much of a secret, anyway. I

can't imagine anyone walking headfirst into a situation like this without their nerves being strained to the point of shredding.

“All units converging,” the driver tells us, and we take the opportunity to double check our weapons. Again, I find myself holding back, wishing I could reach for her, caress her, beg her not to do anything stupid in there. The world is a better place with her in it—that much I know to my very core. I have no right to speak to her that way. What kind of man would I be if I did?

I'm almost glad there is no time to reflect on this before all four vehicles converge in front of a nondescript building on the edge of town, flanked on either side by nightclubs where it seems the clientele isn't what you'd call high class. I have the pleasure of witnessing a man stumble from one of them and vomit all over the ground, his own shoes, and the side of the building before staggering off. It looks like he wasn't the first to paint the sidewalk tonight, either.

Mason's voice rings out in my headset. “On my count.”

I reach for my door handle, and Natalie does the same on her side. “Three... Two... One.” All at once we pour from the vehicles, with Mason taking the lead. Once he kicks in the door, we storm the building. It's clear from the start they weren't expecting us, as half-naked women scream and run in all directions, while men dressed in suits scramble for cover. A few of them look like they're ready to reach for a weapon, but they think better of it when they see for themselves how many of us there are.

“Heading for the back!” Griffin barks in my ear, while Mason orders the rest of us to split up and search the rooms.

I'm not leaving her side. He can't expect me to do it. This means sticking close to him since he doesn't want to leave her on her own, either. Whether that's to do with keeping her safe or a lack of trust, I'm not sure. I want to believe it's the former, but there could be a bit of the latter mixed in even now, after they had their heart-to-heart on the plane.

A woman whose outfit is see-through to the point of being useless charges up at us, screaming in Russian. I get the sense she's the madam around here. We've disrupted business and upset her girls. Mason brushes past her like she doesn't exist, which only leaves her screaming louder than ever as we continue checking the shadowy rooms, searching for a man I had the pleasure of shooting weeks ago. I'll never forget the sight of his face any more than Natalie ever could. So far, I haven't seen anyone remotely matching him. Just a bunch of average men whose good time is ruined.

Griffin's voice rings loud and clear as I'm beginning to question whether our guy got spooked and ran. "Got him. First floor, back room."

Blonde hair flashes past me. "Wait!" I bark, but I'm talking to myself for all the good it does. Natalie charges back there, paying attention to neither me nor her brother as we both urge her to be cautious. She's on a mission of her own, and we just happen to be along for the ride.

By the time we reach the end of a long, nearly pitch black hall, she has come to a dead stop in the doorway to the room where Griffin waits. I reach her first, and I hear her short, rapid breaths even over the chaos still brewing behind us. I don't dare touch her, fear of how she might react. It might be too much, and I can't do that to her.

"You all right?" I ask instead, careful to keep anything resembling pity out of my voice. She would never accept my pity.

She gives herself a shake before nodding, then steps aside so Mason and I can get a look at the man now on his knees, his arms raised, fingers laced behind his head.

It looks like he's been living back here, with a bed in one corner and a small TV sitting on top of a microwave. It's not exactly clean, and it's not comfortable, but he doesn't deserve much better. I look around the room, expecting someone to start questioning the man currently sweating bullets as his defiant gaze darts around, sizing us up.

My own gaze falls to his side, where bandages stand out beneath a thin T-shirt. This is the guy I wounded. What a shame I didn't hit an inch or two to the right.

I realize now Mason has hardly blinked since he came in. He's too focused on the snarling bastard glaring up at him. "It's you," he mutters, his brow furrowed in confusion. "They told me you were dead, Lukas."

Lukas barks out a laugh. "How kind of you to remember my name. It was the only thing you managed not to take from me. You and your filthy fucking team!" He spits on the floor to punctuate this.

"Mason?" I mutter. This is news to me. Griffin has gone from holding Lukas at gunpoint to looking to Mason for understanding.

"If I only knew you made it out alive, this would all have made sense a lot sooner." Mason looks shaken. "I would've known who to look for."

Lukas snickers before spitting again, and this time I notice there's blood mixed in. The welt darkening his cheek tells me Griffin got physical with him. "You murdered my family."

"I was doing a job. We were all doing a job."

"As I now do my job!" Lukas screams. His voice is strained, tendons standing out on the side of his neck while his face goes red. "It is my duty to avenge them. To take from you as you have taken from me. I may not have completed my mission, but I made certain you lost what you loved. And you will always know it was your fault."

He pauses to let his words sink in before adding, "There was nothing you could do to stop it." His cold laughter is tinged with madness, intense enough to make my skin crawl.

The gunshot that cuts off his laughter comes from Natalie's Sig. She lowers the gun once he's hit the ground, his mouth still hanging open, before turning her back on the corpse she created.

She's a fast shot, but she doesn't hide her face fast enough for me to miss the grim satisfaction on it. Fuck, I need to hold

her.

Mason beats me to it, wrapping an arm around her, the two of them standing in silence. That's the way it should be.

NATALIE

For some reason, I thought after this trip everything else would fall into place, that somehow all my problems would be fixed. Of course, I was wrong. I don't know what I was even thinking. Yes, there is a tremendous amount of relief that I ended his life. I took out the man who took so much from me, but there is so much else I need to deal with now. Mostly the fallout of my own actions leading up to what happened in Moscow.

I barely remember the flight home. I was still trying to process everything, and I couldn't handle the way Dallas had been giving me the cold shoulder. He barely talked to me, hardly even looked at me. Is he mad I killed the man who killed my mother or is he still hung up on me leaving? I can't blame him for the latter. They trusted me, and I left. Just like with Mason, I have to work on building that trust back up. I just hope I can before it's too late.

For the first time in forever, I'm by myself in the apartment. Griffin went down to the restaurant to grab us some food, and Dallas went to his place after we landed just a few hours ago. I've been waiting for him to come back, or at least give me a call, but I guess I'm expecting too much from him. We never made a commitment to each other. So I can't expect him to act like he's my boyfriend or something. I don't even know exactly what he is to me. I know I want him the same way I want Griffin. But what does that actually look like? With everything that has happened, I haven't thought about it. Haven't thought about how Dallas and Griffin must be feeling.

I've been so fucking selfish, and the people surrounding me are having to pay the price.

Walking into my kitchen, I'm heading for the refrigerator to get a cold beer when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Dallas: We need to talk. Can you come to my place?

I read his text and immediately my stomach drops. Something is off. Why does he need to talk to me, and why does it have to be at his place? This is wrong.

Me: Why your place? Can't you come up here?

Dallas: I can, but I want this to be private.

I'm about to tell him that Griffin is not here, but when I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall, I realize he should be back any minute.

Me: Okay, I'll be there in a few minutes.

Shoving my phone in my pocket. I make my way to the elevator, more relieved than ever that I actually got dressed, styled my hair, and put some makeup on today.

I type in my code to the elevator panel and push for the sixteenth floor. A few seconds later, I arrive at my destination. The door slides open with the bell sound, leading me into the hallway. I keep walking until I make it to Dallas's apartment door which is slightly ajar.

One step inside, and I come to a sudden halt. My feet remain cemented into the ground as I stare at the two suitcases, only a few feet away from me. Dallas is standing right behind them, dressed in a suit like he's about to head out.

"I'm leaving," he says, as if the picture he painted here wasn't enough of a hint.

"Why?" I ask without thought, like I'm on autopilot.

"It's better this way."

"For whom?" I throw my arms out, making unnecessary hand motions. "I don't understand."

Dallas sighs, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Better for all of us. You and Griffin are great together. You should give it a real chance.”

“We are... I think. I mean, we haven’t really talked about it, mostly because we should be talking about it together, all three of us.”

“Nat, there can’t be a three of us.”

“Who says? Is the threesome police gonna come and get us?” It’s a halfhearted joke, but neither one of us is laughing. I take a step toward him. “Are you really that scared of what people are going to think?”

“I don’t give a shit what people think.” Dallas huffs.

“Then what’s the problem?”

He pauses before muttering the next words slowly. “I can’t trust you.”

“I know I messed up, and I know it’s going to be a while for me to get your trust back. But I’m okay with that. I will work my ass off to prove to you every day that I deserve this. How am I going to prove myself to you if you leave?”

“It’s not that easy, Nat.”

“Wanna know what I think? I think you are just scared. Scared that I love you, and you are going to fall in love with me.”

“Do you?”

“What?”

“Do you love me?” Dallas asks, and my mouth suddenly goes dry. My first instinct is to say no, not to give these three little words away. Because, once you do, you can’t take them back. They might just be three words, but they can hold a lot of power. They let the other person know how vulnerable you are. And right at this moment, I’m pretty fucking vulnerable.

“I do.” I force the words past the giant lump in my throat. “I love you.”

Dallas's face goes slack, shock taking over his features. I'm not sure what answer he expected, but me telling him I love him was definitely not it.

With each second that passes, the ball of anxiety in my chest expands. Why is he not saying anything back? Did you not hear what I just said? The story Dallas told me about his grandparents pops into my mind... *you really start loving someone when you tell them something you are scared of sharing, and they react in a way that calms you.*

I was scared of sharing this, and now it's his turn to calm me down. Unfortunately, he doesn't.

"I'm sorry, Nat. I just can't do this right now." He leans down to grab the handles of his suitcases, extending them so he can pull his luggage behind him. "I'm sorry," he repeats his apology. But there is nothing he can say that will make me feel better.

He walks past me toward the door, and all I can do is stand there like a deer in headlights. The scent of his aftershave still hangs heavy in the air when I hear the elevator close behind me, leaving me more alone than I have ever felt in my life.

NATALIE

After everything I have been through in the last few weeks, you'd think Dallas walking out on me would be nothing in comparison. The truth is, him leaving is more painful than I ever thought possible. I take a few minutes to compose myself before going back to my apartment.

"There you are," Griffin greets me, concern lacing his voice. "What's going on?"

"Dallas left," I blurt out as I walk into the kitchen, where Griffin has arranged the food we ordered into a buffet on my table.

Griffin's shoulders sag with a sigh. "I tried to talk him out of it."

"You knew?" I almost sit down, but I'm too wound up to be still, so instead, I pace through the kitchen.

"I knew he was thinking about it. I didn't know he would actually go through with it and definitely not so soon." Griffin takes a seat and start piling food on his plate.

I play with the thought of telling him what I said to Dallas, but after the way Dallas reacted to me saying I love you, I'm more scared than ever of telling Griffin. I love them both, but one rejection a day is going to be enough for me.

"Let's just eat and forget about it," I say, as if it was that easy to brush off. I flop down on one of the chairs, forcing my restless legs to be still for a few minutes. Griffin, of course, sees straight through me.

“You don’t have to do that, downgrade your feelings like that. I know you love him, and I know you want both of us, not just one.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you are not enough,” I admit to him.

“I don’t feel that way. I never did. I can’t explain it, but there was never really any jealousy between us, either. Not as you would expect. It was more like a healthy rivalry. Maybe it’s because I trust him like a brother, or maybe because you have never acted like you prefer one of us. You have always treated us as equals.”

I take a serving spoon and add a tiny amount of green beans onto my plate. “I know this whole situation is not conventional, but neither is our life.”

“I guess the only question left is what if Dallas doesn’t come back? Are you okay with giving us a shot without him?”

A huge lump builds in my throat at the thought. “I feel like I would be cheating on Dallas if we do. I know it sounds crazy, but in my mind, it was always the both of you.” I keep my eyes trained on the crooked, oversized green bean on my plate. I don’t want to see Griffin’s facial expression, since I’m guessing he is disappointed.

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” he says calmly, but I don’t miss the tone of hurt in his voice. “Like you said, it’s not a conventional situation. There are no set rules. You feel how you feel and that’s all we can go on.”

“That’s not true. We go on your feelings too, and I don’t want to hurt you.” I stab the small green vegetable with my fork and shovel it around my plate a little. Maybe if I pretend to eat, Griffin won’t say anything.

“You didn’t. Dallas left both of us.”

“He did, and I should be mad at him for it, but I know he thinks he is doing the right thing. He believes he is doing us a favor.”

Griffin opens his mouth to respond, but before a single word comes out, the elevator door behind us opens, and

someone walks into my apartment. I turn around to see my brother heading toward us.

“Am I interrupting?”

“No, just sitting down to eat,” Griffin explains. “Want to join us? We have plenty, and your sister doesn’t seem to have a big appetite.”

“Nah, I’m about to go to dinner with Teagan. I just wanted to check on you before we leave. Dallas called me to tell me he won’t be staying here any longer. What’s going on?”

“You got your wish, I guess,” I whine. “You wanted him to stay away from me and now that’s exactly what he’s doing.”

“Motherfucker,” Mason swears under his breath. He pulls a chair out and takes a seat. “I’m sorry, Nat. I know I overreacted when I saw you two. You have to understand, I’m your brother and seeing you with a guy, with any guy, is not easy. Seeing you with one of my best friends is especially hard.”

“About that...” I glance over at Griffin, who gives me a bewildered look before shaking his head profusely. I press my lips together, immediately regretting that I was going to bring this up before talking to Griffin. “Never mind.”

“No, you don’t get to never mind me after that look.” Mason shakes his head. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Well...” I’m not sure how to start. I glance between Mason and Griffin before keeping my gaze glued on Griffin, hoping for a little guidance.

“Wait, now you two are having a thing?” Mason questions, his eyebrows raised up to his hairline.

“Look, we are not trying to hide anything from you,” Griffin chimes in. He pauses, as if he is trying to find the right words to say. “Nat, Dallas, and I have been spending a lot of time together. And as you know, we have known each other for a long time. We have always been close, and somehow, that developed into something else.”

Mason stares back at him as if he is not understanding a single word.

“I love both of them,” I admit proudly. A second later, I realize what I just said.

“Wait, you love us?” Griffin questions while Mason looks too stunned to speak.

“Yes, I have been meaning to tell you. But after I told Dallas earlier, I was scared of getting rejected twice.”

“Okay, slow down.” Mason holds up his hands like he is trying to make sense of everything. “So, you,” he says slowly, pointing at me, “are in love with,” he points at Griffin, “him... *and* Dallas.”

“Yes.” I nod. “I know it’s unconventional, but I love them both, and I want to be with them, not just one of them.”

“Okaaaay.” Mason draws out the word, like he needs that extra time to think. His facial expression seems bewildered, his eyes are wide in shock, and his mouth is hanging open in surprise. It takes him a few minutes to compose himself, and I’m happy waiting because I don’t really know what to say myself.

“I love you too.” Griffin breaks the silence with his confession. “I’m sorry about Dallas. I don’t know what’s going on with him and why he didn’t tell you how he feels. I know he loves you just like I do.”

“All right, I think that’s my cue to leave.” Mason slams his palms on the table and gets up from his seat. “I just want to say one thing before I go.” He turns to me, locking eyes with a purpose. “I don’t care who you love, I just want you to be happy and safe, and I want you to trust him... or them enough to tell them anything and not have any secrets. I’m going to need a minute to get used to this, but I support you and love you no matter what.”

“Thank you for saying that. It means a lot to me. And I do trust them.” I get up and give my brother a hug. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me in.

“Good, now I gotta go tell Teagan about this, because I just lost a bet.”

“Wait, what?” I laugh, pulling away from Mason’s embrace.

“Apparently, she is more of a people person than I am because she saw this from a mile away. I told her she was wrong, so I guess now it’s my turn to pay up.”

Oh my god, Teagan is going to love hearing that she was right. “What did you bet on?” Maybe I should be annoyed that they are using my love life as a bet, but I know they don’t mean any harm.

Mason shakes his head with a mysterious grin. “I’m sorry, that’s private.”

“Gross.” I fake gag. I don’t want to know about my brother’s naughty bets, but I guess it’s only fair since he knows now that I’ve been with his two best friends.

I watch Mason leave my apartment in a hurry while Griffin and I remain sitting at the table. I still haven’t had a single bite to eat, but my stomach feels a little better now that I have at least cleared the air with my brother. More than that, he seems okay with the situation. I wish Dallas was here to see it. Maybe that would ease his mind, too.

“Do you think Dallas is coming back?” I question.

“I think he is a dumbass if he doesn’t... actually, I think he is a dumbass either way, but even more so if he stays away.”

“Maybe I should have fought harder earlier. I shouldn’t have let him leave so easily.” Should I call him? Or maybe he just needs time. Damn, I wish I knew what to do.

“You did the right thing, don’t blame yourself,” Griffin says as he starts to clean up the plates. “I’m going to put this in your fridge. Promise me you’ll eat something later.”

“I promise I’ll try.” I smirk.

“That’s good enough.” Griffin winks at me.

I help him wrap up everything and store it away. After the kitchen is sparkling clean, Griffin sighs, leaning on his elbows against the counter. “I guess I’m going to head out, unless you want me to stay.”

I’m so tempted to say yes, but every time I imagine myself being here with Griffin and how that would make Dallas feel, I just can’t do it. “I think that would be best. I need some alone time, and to clear my head.”

“And I’m prepared to give you time. Just know that I’m not going to give up that easily, either.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

DALLAS

I've made the biggest mistake of my life. That's all I've been thinking about since I left her standing in my apartment at the Hotel. I'm only fifty miles away, hiding away at one of our safe houses, but I feel like there are five thousand miles between us.

What have I done?

A mistake... no, I did the right thing. I have to believe that.

I imagine Nat and Griffin cuddling on the couch, happy and content that I'm out of the picture. That thought should make me jealous and angry. Instead, it makes me feel at peace with the decision I've made. Now that I am out of the way, they can start a real relationship together.

Taking a swig of my beer, I take a seat on my couch and prop my legs up on the coffee table. The TV is on, reruns of *Criminal Minds* playing on the screen, but it fails to hold my attention.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out quickly, hoping it's a new mission I can use to get my mind off things. When I see Mason's name flash across the screen, my feelings are mixed. He normally doesn't call about a mission.

I hit the green button. "Hi, Mason, everything okay?"

"No, asshole. You broke my little sister's heart. I guess it was my fault that I didn't give you the older brother's speech earlier. So here it is now. You break my sister's heart. I'll break your bones."

“May I remind you that you were the one who told me to stay away from her? I’m literally doing what you told me to.”

“Since when do you listen to anything I say?”

“Look, I know it doesn’t make sense, but trust me. It’s better this way. We are not a great match, but she has the perfect guy right there with her.”

“I know about your weird-ass threesome relationship,” he says, all nonchalantly. “Nat told me.”

“Oh,” is all I can muster up to say. I didn’t expect that. And I’m not sure what to expect from Mason now. I half expect him to come through the phone with a right hook.

“I don’t get it, but I do know that Natalie was happy with the both of you, and now that you’re gone, she’s miserable again. She doesn’t want to be with Griffin. She wants to be with both of you.”

“I just don’t understand how that’s ever going to work.”

“And you never will if you don’t try,” Mason points out. “What do you have to lose, old man?”

“Now you sound like Griffin.”

“If that’s what it takes to get you back here, I don’t care what or who I sound like.”

“And you are seriously okay with this? You’re not going to ambush me on my way in, are you?” I half joke.

“I can’t make any promises on that, but if it makes you feel better, I managed not to punch Griffin while Nat told me about your love triangle relationship or whatever you wanna call it.”

“What if I’m too late? Natalie is probably pissed I left. What if she won’t take me back?”

“God, since when are you so scared of everything? Get yourself over here with a bucket of bear claws and win my sister’s heart back before I break your jaw.”

“Your brother’s speeches just keep getting better and better.”

“Thanks. Now stop the pity party and get your ass back here.”

“On my way,” I say in a hurry before I hang up the phone. My heart races, suddenly having a purpose again as I get up and scramble to get my stuff together. Excitement fills my veins thinking about seeing her again. Mason is right. I’ve been scared and throwing myself a pity party when I should be with the two people waiting for me at home.

I gather my things and lock up the safe house before getting into my car and driving back to the hotel. I’m only an hour away, but the car ride feels like an eternity. At least until I get there, then suddenly the trip went by too fast, and I wish I had more time.

Pulling into the parking garage, a million things are going through my head. At the top of that list is what I’m going to say once I get upstairs. I cut the engine and step out of the car to head to the elevator. I punch in my code and press for floor seventeen, Nat’s apartment.

My stomach is in knots and my pulse is racing when the door finally opens into Natalie’s place. The apartment is quiet, no lights are on, and for a moment, I think she isn’t here. I check my phone. It’s six thirty. She should be here. I expected her to be cuddled up on the couch with Griffin. Maybe they are in the bedroom.

I move through the apartment, searching for her. “Nat? Are you here?” I call out as I pass the kitchen. When no one responds, I make my way to her bedroom, where I hear the shower running. Taking off my jacket, I throw it on the bed with my phone and keys. The bathroom door is slightly ajar, so I sneak a peek inside. What I see inside has my heart sinking.

Nat is sitting in her shower with her legs drawn up to her chest and her head lowered, with her cheek pressed to her knees. Her eyes are closed as the hot water caresses her bare skin. I can’t hear her crying, and I can’t see her tears, but I know she is sobbing by the way her shoulders shake and her eyes are squeezed shut.

Without thinking or caring about my clothes, I pull the shower door open and step inside. Natalie's eyes fly open, and she tries to jump to her feet, but I'm quicker. Getting down on my knees, I wrap my arms around her, engulfing her in a hug. I pull her to my chest and let her sob into my now soaked sweater.

"Why are you crying?"

"You left..." she says between sobs. Those two little words are all it takes for my heart to break into a million pieces at the realization of what I did.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I say, even though I know it won't be enough to make her feel better. "You were right. I was just scared of committing, scared to even try and give us a chance." I almost ask her to stop crying, but I refrain, knowing that no matter how hard it is for me to see her like that, this is exactly what she needs. She needs to let it all out. That's the only way we can move forward.

"It's okay, I'm here now." I soothe her gently while letting her sob in my arms until the last tremor moves through her body.

"You came back," Nat says when she finally stops crying. "And now you are completely soaked." She gives me a halfhearted smile.

"I don't give a shit about my clothes; all I care about is you... and maybe Griffin, a little bit."

Her smile widens, and this time it actually reaches her eyes. "Come on, let's get you out of these." She peels off my sweater and undershirt, discarding them into a wet pile in the corner of the shower. We both get up to our feet, and I turn off the water.

I slip out of my shoes and undo my pants, letting them fall down, while Nat grabs a white fluffy towel to wrap herself in before handing me a towel as well.

"Thank you." I grab it and start drying myself off. "Where is Griffin?"

“I sent him away. It just didn’t feel right being with him without you being here.”

“You’ve been with Griffin while I was gone before,” I remind her.

“That was different. You were just gone for a few hours then, and at that time, I didn’t know how I felt about both of you.”

“About that...” I’ve been in many relationships in my life, especially when I was in my twenties, but one of my biggest secrets is, I actually never said those three little words to anyone, which makes this moment all the more special. “When you told me you love me... I was scared to say it back, but I’m not scared anymore. I love you too, Natalie.”

“You do?” Natalie asks, tears forming in her already red eyes once more.

“I really hope those are happy tears.”

“They are.” She nods, taking a step toward me, eating up all the space between us. “I’m so happy you are back and even happier that you love me.”

She tips her head up and catches my lips in a searing kiss. Her arms snake around my neck, and she pulls me even closer. My hands find her hips, and I slide the towel away, wanting to feel her skin against mine. I devour her, kissing her so passionately she moans into my mouth.

By the time we break the kiss, we are both out of breath and my cock is harder than steel. I want nothing more than to throw her onto the bed and remind her how well we fit together, but I know that’s not what she needs right now. At this moment, she needs both of us.

Grabbing my phone from the bed, I unlock it and dial Griffin’s number. He answers on the second ring. “It’s about time, asshole.”

“I missed you too. Now get your ass to Nat’s apartment and bring me some sweats. My clothes are wet.”

“Why are your clothes... never mind. I’m on my way.” He hangs up the phone, and I throw mine back on the bed.

Natalie has put on some satin shorts and a tank top that leave little to the imagination, which doesn’t help my raging boner to go down any. Not that I care. I’d rather enjoy the delicious view and deal with my blue balls later.

Griffin shows up ten minutes later, bringing a pair of sweats with him. I get dressed quickly, and we all meet in the living room. Griffin and Nat are already getting comfortable on the couch when I join them.

“So, you’re back,” Griffin starts the conversation with a grin.

“I am, and I want both of you to know that I am and that this won’t happen again. If this is what Nat wants, then I’m committed to this relationship.”

“So am I,” Griffin announces before turning to Natalie. “I don’t care what anyone thinks or says about it. I love you and if you love both of us and want to be with both of us, I am one hundred percent committed.”

“I do love you both, and I promise I will never run from you guys again.”

“You better not,” I warn. “If I wake up one more time with you missing, I swear I’ll never let you go to bed without cuffing you to me.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.” Nat laughs, the sound like music to my ears. Happiness radiates from her, and I could kick myself for leaving her, even if it was only for a few days.

“If you want to get tied to the bed, all you have to do is say so.”

Nat doesn’t miss a beat. “I want to get tied to the bed while you fuck me.”

Griffin and I look at each other for a moment. We both shrug, and as if we can read the other’s mind, he picks Nat up

and takes her toward the bedroom. A squeal of delight escapes her as I head to grab something to tie her to the bed with.

Searching through Nat's drawers, I find a few silk scarves among her panties. *Perfect*, I think as I make my way back. Griffin is kneeling between Nat's legs by the time I get back. Her hands are running wild through his hair. Her eyes open wide as I grab both of her hands and bind them together with the silk.

"You know, I've tied many people up in my life, but this will definitely be my first time fucking the person."

A smile appears on her face as she tests the bindings. Satisfied that she can't get away, she looks at me expectantly.

"Grab her legs and move her down the bed, Griffin," I instruct.

Griffin does as I ask. Taking the other scarves, I secure Nat to the bed. Noticing a sleeping mask on her dresser, I put it over her eyes before taking a step back to admire her.

Her arms are above her head, exposing her. She has perfect tits and such a nice, tight pussy. Griffin has already returned to his task in earnest. Nat's hips are grinding up and down on his face while he attacks her clit. Smiling, I bend down and take her nipple into my mouth.

She sucks in air as I twirl my tongue around her hard nipple. Stopping, I move closer to her ear. "Do you like being used like a fuck toy? Is that what you want to be for us?"

Nat is unable to put an answer into words. But her moaning and breathlessness are answer enough.

"That's enough foreplay, Griffin. It's time for the main course."

Griffin raises up and lines his cock up to her entrance. I reach into her nightstand and grab the vibrator I know she keeps there. "No mercy, Griffin." He nods in acknowledgment, pushing into her, and Nat gasps as she gets used to his girth.

Pumping in and out of her, Griffin works up to a fast rhythm. I pinch and rub her nipples with one hand and switch

the vibrator on with the other.

“Oh, my god, yes,” Nat moans.

She must have heard the buzz and is eagerly waiting for me to help ease the pressure that has surely built up in her core. Pressing the small device to her clit makes her body move on its own.

Both of them are out of breath as I turn the vibration all the way up, hoping it will push them over the edge. I don't have to hope for too long as Griffin lets out a loud moan. Nat's legs start shaking as the orgasm takes hold of them at the same time. I love simultaneous orgasms. Watching it happen is almost as good as experiencing it firsthand. After several seconds, they collapse, the aftershocks of the powerful orgasm still rippling through them.

I untie her legs quickly before pushing Griffin back and flip Nat onto her stomach. She gives out a bit of a squeal as I line my own cock up with her used pussy. I can see Griffin's come running out. Which makes my cock stand at full attention. Pinning her legs together, I enter her from behind.

Her pussy feels so wet with Griffin and her own juices mingling. She also feels extremely tight in this position. Enough so that I have to slow my pace to avoid coming. Grabbing a fistful of her hair, I pull her ear up to my face as I bend down.

“Your tight little pussy feels so good wrapped around me,” I growl. “Let's see how long I can last inside of you. Be a good girl and Kegel while I fuck you.”

My challenge is immediately answered when Nat tenses her pelvis. It's like I'm trying to fuck a virgin. I increase my pace, no longer concerned with holding back. Slamming into her as hard as I can, I feel my orgasm building.

I grab Nat's hips and pull her up onto her knees. I need to get deeper and thrust with force. She arches her back to give me better access. I lose all sense of myself and start fucking her with a primal need.

Her pussy pulses, and I can tell she's close as well. My vision goes black as I begin to empty myself into her tight channel. At the same time, her pussy pulsates, milking every drop from me.

I collapse on top of her, trying to catch my breath. After a few moments, Nat starts to giggle.

"What are you laughing at?" I ask, half chuckling myself because her laugh is just that infectious.

"I didn't know you could get that kinky. And If I knew all I had to do was ask, I would have done so a while ago."

"Well, now you know," Griffin says.

"Who would have thought this is how my life would turn out?" I say more to myself than anything.

"Aren't you glad it did?" Nat teases.

Taking the blindfold off of her, I look deep into her baby blues. "You have no idea."

One thing is clear, now that I have her, I'll never let her go again.

She'll always be ours.

EPILOGUE

NATALIE

One Year Later.

Not in a million years did I think this would be my life. Sitting at a beach with a boyfriend on each side of me, sipping margaritas alongside my new sister-in-law and my brother. Teagan and Mason got married at sunrise and though I didn't appreciate getting up in the middle of the night to get ready, the view during the ceremony with the sun rising over the ocean was breathtaking.

"Want another drink?" Griffin asks as he gets up from his beach chair.

"No thanks, I still have some," I say, pointing at my half-empty glass. What he doesn't know is that I will not let anyone get a drink for me. Because then they would know that I have been drinking virgin margaritas all day. The truth is, I haven't told anyone, but I'm 90% sure that I'm pregnant. It's not that I don't want to tell anyone, quite the opposite. I want to yell it from the rooftop, so everyone knows. But I wanted my brother to have this day all to himself, so I decided to keep it a secret until I'm alone with my guys tonight. I can't wait to tell them, though I am a tiny bit nervous as well.

I know Dallas always wanted kids, but I have no idea what Griffin is going to think. We never really talked about this, and we definitely didn't plan for it, but sometimes birth control fails, and I think that's what happened here. Last week I noticed I was two weeks late. Which means now I'm three weeks late. I also have some weird cravings, and my sense of

smell seems to be heightened. On top of that, my boobs have been tender. Did I say I'm 90% sure? Make that 99%.

Using the back of my hand, I swipe away a few drops of sweat from my forehead. "I could go for a dip in the ocean. Anyone up for it?"

"Me," Dallas and Griffin answer at the same time. They have been doing that a lot. I grin to myself as I think about all the wonderful days we have spent together over the last year. Once people found out about our relationship, they were confused. Some even thought it was a joke, and a few thought it would never work. Well, we've proved them wrong. I've never been so happy in my life. Griffin and Dallas are everything I've ever wanted and more. I couldn't imagine my life without them and hopefully I never have to.

"Last one in the ocean loses," I yell before jumping up from my chair to run toward the ocean at full speed.

"Hey, false start!" Griffin yells after me. "You are disqualified!"

I ignore him. Running into the water *Baywatch* style. My feet pound against the hot sand, which turns into cool water splashing around me. My strides slow as I get deeper into the water. My heart pounds against my chest as I feel Griffin and Dallas closing in on me. I push my legs to move forward but am quickly taken out by a large arm snaking around my middle and lifting me into the air.

"Gotcha, cheater!" Griffin yells triumphantly, before lowering me into the water gently. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him close for a passionate kiss. Dallas comes up behind me, and his lips brush along my shoulder before settling in the crook of my neck.

"I love to be sandwiched between you two."

"So romantic," Griffin teases.

"Okay, maybe sandwiched is the wrong term, but it's true. I love this. I love us..." A sudden burst of emotions comes over me, and before I know it, a single tear rolls down my face. *What the hell?*

“What’s wrong, babe?” Griffin’s concerned voice engulfs me as another random tear makes its way down my cheek.

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m just so happy,” I sob. “Everything is so perfect... I’m just... oh hell, I can’t wait to tell you! I’m pregnant,” I blurt out loud enough for half of the beach to hear.

Both Griffin and Dallas freeze. For a few seconds, no one says anything. The waves softly crash into us as we stand there, suspended in time. Suddenly, Griffin moves me around so I face both of them.

“Come again,” Griffin says, his face utterly unreadable.

I glance between them, relieved when a wide smile graces Dallas’s face. I bite my lower lip, still worried about Griffin’s reaction when I repeat what I said, “I’m pregnant. I’m 99% sure. I haven’t taken a test, but I’m three weeks late, and my sense of smell is ugh, and my boobs are wow, and now this.” I point at my tear-stricken face to stop my rambling.

“I love you,” Dallas says, before giving me a kiss on my lips. “I love you and the baby growing inside of you. You make me so happy.”

Griffin is still in shock, his eyes wide, his mouth hanging open like a fish out of water. He stays like this long enough for me to worry.

Dallas slaps him on the arm. “Snap out of it.”

Griffin’s mouth closes before he finally says, “I’m just shocked...” A grin pulls on his lips, and I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “I’m shocked, but I’m fucking happy.”

Relief floods my veins, and another wave of emotion washes over me. “I’m happy too. More than you’ll ever know. Now sandwich me!”

Both guys break out laughing, but do exactly as I ask.

We stay like this for a long time, embracing like the lovers we are, knowing soon we will be parents too.

* * *

Thank you for reading The Decision Maker, if you haven't read Mason and Teagan's story yet, you can do so in

[The Hotel Manager](#).

ABOUT THE C. HALLMAN

C. Hallman is a *USA Today* Bestselling Author who wrote her debut novel in 2018 and has since published over 100 books in various romance subgenres. Her works have been on numerous bestseller lists and have been translated into 8 languages around the world.

Born and raised in Germany, Cassandra attended business school in her hometown before immigrating to America when she was only eighteen. At nineteen, she married her husband, who was active duty military at that time. Together, they traveled the country for years, before finally settling down. Now, she lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband of sixteen years, their three children, two dogs, and one hairless cat.

With a love for reading, that love slowly transpired into writing she put her fingers to the keyboard and started writing about the dark side of romance.

