

GIGI MEADOWS

A DARK WHY CHOOSE
ROMANCE

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark leather jacket, looking intensely at the camera. The background is a textured, dark grey wall.

VICIOUS

SENTIMENTS

Gigi Meadows

Vicious Sentiments

A Dark Why Choose Romance

Copyright © 2024 by Gigi Meadows

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com

Dedicated to the girls who haven't met a good man.

I promise he's out there.

Maybe even two of them.

Contents

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Chapter Fifty-One](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Sixty](#)

[Chapter Sixty-One](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Two](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Three](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Four](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Five](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Six](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Eight](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

Trigger Warning

As the title states, this book is full of vicious sentiments and by no means morally correct. Only proceed if you are into morally black opinions and actions. This book contains dark themes and sensitive topics relating to sexual abuse, death idealization, and violence. With that said, this is a spicy, steamy book and I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter One

In my heart, I know that Death is a she. Call her the Grim Reaper or whatever you please, but she is definitely a woman. Only a woman could handle the intricate delicacies of death. Men are too laid-back, and the afterlife calls for order in its chaos. It couldn't be run how the world is, with men at the helm.

Definitely not.

The peace and sadness of death are gripped best by a dainty hand, one I'm all too familiar with. I know Death like I know birds in the sky or money in safes. Always just out of reach, but acutely aware of its presence.

Right now, it's in the frigid waters below my dangling feet. The water, black with only moonlight glistening the ripples, is where *she* is, where peace is.

I've never felt peace.

I generally only have two modes, pain or numbness. There is a third mode, a trick of the switch like a dimmer on a light, but it's fleeting. I can't stay in that mode too long or else the bulb will buzz with annoyance and impatience for being stuck in limbo too long.

That mode is the one I'm in right now. A mode that I can only be in when so close to Death. I can feel her near and it is beyond euphoric. I'm one slip away from basking in her peace and it's exhilarating.

Everything would go away. I would never have to see the damp water marks tinged with mold on my bedroom ceiling. The empty cupboards and my growling stomach wouldn't bother

me. The bruises and raw tears on my skin wouldn't hurt anymore. I could never get another bruise, if I was with her, with Death.

And I would go to her if I wasn't afraid of what it took to meet her. But it seems the only way to get there is to endure even more pain and I don't know if I can do it. Not when I already feel so much of it. I just want to close my eyes and never open them again.

Life has given me nothing but suffering. A cruel and thorough agony from things that should bring comfort. At the hands of my father, my boyfriend, my runaway mother. My home gives me a sore cough. Even school should have been a safe haven, but the teachers turned a blind eye to Mr. Canes.

There is no light at the end of the tunnel, the tunnel of childhood. When I turn eighteen, nothing will change. I've graduated but there are no scholarships or colleges to run away to. My grades reflect the life I've lived. There is no dream of getting away. Where would I go? No other options seem any better. Life will continue to hurt me.

I've learned I can't get away from it.

The only solace I feel is when I'm close to the edge. The edge of this bridge or the edge of a blade. But again, it's fleeting. Death doesn't like to be teased and impatience is her strongest trait.

I either do it or I don't.

I edge closer on my butt, and the hems of my shorts curl as the feel of the fabric against my skin turns into cold and scratchy concrete. I grip the bar above my head, imagining my hands loosening their grip as I drop. The wind whipping through my hair as I fall, my body slicing through the air. The sting of a thousand needles as I splash into the ice water. My lungs reactively taking in the muck of the stream, the sputter, the involuntary fight my body will put up.

Warm tears pool in my eyes and then slip down my cheeks.

All I want is peace. I don't want to feel this pain anymore. Why is the only way to get peace to go through more pain? If it's to earn it, then I've earned it a hundred times over.

I just need to get it over with. I loosen my hand on the bar.

"Hey! Hey! You're going to fall!" a man's voice echoes in the night.

I'm startled, caught red-handed, and pull myself back quickly, looking to see who witnessed my dance with Death.

Billrock Bridge is at the edge of town—a town of less than three thousand—and no one should be here right now. Not only that, no one would want to be here. It's also close to two a.m., with a cloudy sky that threatens rain.

I should be the only one out here.

But I'm not. There is a man at the end of the bridge, the side not coming from town. He's hard to make out, but jogging closer to me.

"I'm fine," I holler, trying to control my voice, and stand up.

Please go away.

"Wait!" He picks up speed.

Just great, I think, more suffering. This man in the night probably wants to leer at me, grab me on my already sore bruises, and take advantage like all the rest. I cast my head down and make a quick turn away from him, heading back to town.

"How much farther till I find a gas station or something?" he calls.

"A mile." I throw over my shoulder, not slowing. "But it's closed."

He's close enough now that I can hear his footfalls and I involuntarily start to shake. It has to be a ruse. He's going to grab me from behind. I can feel the pain before it even starts.

“Do you have a phone?” He’s breathy and falls in step next to me.

I jerk my head to get a quick glance, surprised he hasn’t pounced yet, but I don’t linger long enough to pick up any features.

“No.” I want to laugh, as if I could afford a phone and even if I could, who would I call?

“What? How do you not have a phone? Am I in the twilight zone?” he has a playful lilt that is most likely coating deception.

I shrug and step away from him, but he scoots closer. So close that with my head down, I can see his shoes. Shiny leather with buttery laces made of suede. The hems of his pants are pleated and crisp. I risk another look at his face.

Despite myself, I relax. I really shouldn’t. I know that bad men come in all forms, but there is something different in his face. He’s older, maybe late twenties and he has some stubble, but it’s lined to perfection. He’s clearly not from here. And his eyes, despite the darkness, aren’t beady or sinister. They are bright, sincere, and colored like a warm chestnut. They have a softness at the edges I haven’t seen before on a man.

He’s not happy though, actually the opposite. His lips are turned down, but it looks foreign on him, almost as if frowning is not something he does often. The subtle lines on his face indicate he normally sports a smile.

I must be looking at him oddly because he furrows his brows and looks down at his dress shirt, fidgeting with the shiny buttons. It’s not the type of shirt teachers wear or even the kinds of insurance men. No, this is fitted tightly over lean muscle, the sleeves rolled up, the material something softer than plain old cotton.

“Do I—” he starts, but then shakes his head and looks back up. “My car broke down.”

I give him another odd look because that seems unlikely. He doesn't seem like the type to drive the kind of car that breaks down. Even his cologne, which is gently wafting towards me, gives off a pleasant and masculine scent. It smells expensive, mixed with the scent of a new car.

"McLaren," he clarifies at my expression. "That's what I get for buying foreign. Almost a million yet a Honda would have served me better."

He gives a small smile, which makes me feel like I am supposed to laugh, but I don't. He doesn't look like a threat and foreign cars breaking down seems plausible, but I'm not going to show him my guard is down. I've been tricked before.

"Right," he straightens his mouth and nods, running a hand through his hair, as if realizing his joke has fallen flat. He starts taking me in, probably wondering what kind of person I am that I didn't laugh at his joke.

I cross my arms over my chest and take another step away from him. I don't like being examined. I don't know what it is about me, but when a guy starts looking, that's when the pain comes. I have long hair because that's what girls are supposed to have. I've thought about chopping it all off to thwart the men who make me uncomfortable, but have never done it. I like my hair and it's easy to hide behind. I'm also wearing shorts, which I shouldn't because my legs are always the first thing men touch when they get too close, but it was abnormally hot today and my dad hasn't fixed the AC that broke three years ago. I'm wearing a loose t-shirt to hide my cleavage, but that doesn't stop someone from realizing that the bulge from my chest is large on my frame. I'm grading myself on how tempting I might be to this stranger when I suddenly feel his hand on my arm.

I jerk quickly, though I know it's futile. How stupid of me to think any man could resist their urges.

"Relax," his voice takes on a hardened edge and it makes me freeze like a dumb human because even an animal would run.

“Did someone do this to you?”

I hazard a glance at my arm, the one that he’s surprisingly not manhandling, but holding up lightly with his fingertips. I cringe at the sight. It’s a lot worse than it was this morning when my so-called boyfriend grabbed me, slammed me against the side of my house, and shook me till his anger petered out. You wouldn’t think a hand could do that much damage, but he was on something, gripping with all his strength and twisting until the skin burned and slightly tore.

Still, it was better than what my dad had done under my shirt.

I can’t get away from my dad and I’ve tried to shake away from my boyfriend, but at this point, I’m his girlfriend whether I like it or not. He’s made that very clear.

“How old are you?” The stranger asks, letting go of my arm. “What’s your name? Do you live nearby? Who did that?” His questions are a jumble because I’m still waiting for him to take his piece. But his eyes haven’t turned ravenous and he’s taken a step away from me, running a hand down his face and clenching his jaw.

“I’m fine,” I whisper, confused. Why is he getting angry?

“Who did that? How old are you?” He repeats.

I stutter trying to answer, but some sort of sob begins forming at the back of my throat. Angry men lash out, they cause more pain, and I don’t even know what this man is capable of.

“Seventeen,” I somehow manage, but I don’t tell him who did it, mostly because I don’t understand why he cares.

He takes a step closer and I flinch, coil in on myself, and brace for the pain. When it doesn’t come, I peek out from under my hair.

He’s shaking his head, breathing through flared nostrils. When he catches my eyes, it roots me into place and I freeze as he steps closer.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He takes a deep breath like he’s trying to calm down. But I’ve seen those fail before.

“I promise.” He leans down to level our eyes, and I realize how tall he is. He could easily overpower me. My boyfriend does it and he’s twice as small as this guy. Mr. Canes does it and he doesn’t have the muscles this stranger has.

I should step back, maybe run. I know this. I know this game like the back of my hand. No man is safe. They all cause pain and they all lie. The words don’t mean anything. He just wants to gain my trust and then rip it to shreds. He wants to leave me coated in his cologne that’s so expensive I can’t scrub it from my skin.

“I promise,” he repeats, settling the palms of his hands under my elbows. “but I am going to hurt whoever the fuck did that to you.”

Chapter Two

Dawn has started to break and the hum of the gas station owner's car has filled the silence as it pulls into the two-pump parking lot. I've been with the stranger, Julian, all night, sitting on the curb.

Despite myself, I believed him when he said he wouldn't hurt me. I don't know if it was his soft eyes or the way his voice ground out vengeance, but I led him to the gas station. I even let him pull me down onto the curb with him when I tried to walk away.

Sit with me.

So I did.

No one has ever shown anger at my pain, not even myself. I prefer to be numb, one of my two, almost three modes. But a new feeling is swirling inside of me, so faint I don't know what it is, but I know it's because of him. So I stayed with him all night, trying to decipher it.

He asked me my name. I told him, Hailey. He asked me who hurt me. I didn't say anything. He told me about his car and his cell phone that shattered on the road the second he opened his door. He even slipped it out of his pocket and showed me. He told me he was late but didn't explain why. He asked me if I lived here, and it was obvious that I did, so I didn't answer. He asked if someone was going to miss me being out so late, and I couldn't help but snort at the idea. He asked about school, and I told him I had just graduated. He brought up college, and again I snorted.

I needed to stop snorting. It was in my nature, as prey, to not seem tasty, and snorting was something I developed to protect myself. I'm not sure I even know what my real laugh sounds like because I never get the chance to hear it. But I made a note to stop snorting because as the gloom cleared, and I caught more glimpses of Julian in the buzzing Fred's Station light, I realized how handsome he is. I would have noticed sooner if my caution hadn't kept me blind.

I still don't want to seem tasty in his presence but I don't want to seem inedible either. That realization keeps me sitting on the curb, uncertain, as Julian stands to get into the store that Fred is unlocking.

When the bells on the door jingle, I expect I'm alone, until a hand shoots out in front of me. On instinct, I flinch.

"Stop that. I'm not going to hurt you." The hand stays where it is, waiting for me to take it. After a second, I do. He pulls me up with unexpected ease and I tumble lightly into his chest.

I suck in a tight breath at the pain and grab my ribs, bending slightly.

I hear Julian exhale through his nose. "Is there more that I'm not seeing?"

I look up at him with no intention of answering and see his jaw ticking again.

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'" he growls, and my heart speeds up. He has been calm all night, and I'm not ready for his quick temper.

Please don't lash out.

I'm not sure what he sees on my face, but his voice drops low and he mutters, "Sorry." His face relaxes with the word.

"Come on." He tugs my hand and leads me into the store.

Fred is a heavy man in a white beater with chest hair overflowing from the top. His face is normally disgruntled but now it's pinched, and aimed at Julian from behind the counter.

“I need to use your phone,” Julian says.

“Phones for customers.” Fred harrumphs and folds his arms over his bulging stomach.

The tic is quick to come back in Julian’s jaw but he inhales and turns to me.

“Grab whatever you want,” he tells me. “Drinks, snacks—” He stares at my arm in the bright fluorescent lights. “Ice.” He tacks on and lets go of my hand.

I don’t make a move. I don’t have money to buy anything—despite how dry my mouth is—and ice is pointless when the bruises will just be replaced with fresh ones in a day.

Julian has leveled his sights on Fred, slipping his hands coolly into his pockets and yet his eyes are anything but cool.

After a moment, he notices me still standing at his side.

“He’s not going to let me use the phone unless I buy something,” he says it like an explanation, but I still don’t move. He looks at me quizzically for a moment and then slowly smiles. The dimple in his cheek has my face heating oddly and I look away before he notices.

“Here—” He reaches into his back pocket and holds out his wallet to me. He has it clasped lightly between two of his fingers as if he doesn’t care who snatches it.

“You don’t have to—” I start, but he leans in and pushes the weighty wallet into my hand.

“Get whatever you want,” his husky voice is just for me and there is a sincerity in his eyes that makes me mindlessly nod.

His wallet is like a bomb in my hand and it feels wrong. My cheeks heat and I quickly dip my head to hide them behind my hair.

“Hey,” his voice is low and he slips a hand under my chin, grabbing my eyes. “It’s okay. I promise. Get whatever you want.”

When I return to the counter with a simple bottle of water, Julian sighs but doesn't say anything. I try to hand him back the wallet to pay, but he shakes his head.

"You pay him." He nods to the wallet.

Embarrassed, I open the bi-fold and freeze at the stacks of the one-hundred-dollar bills inside. I hesitate. Am I supposed to pay for one bottle of water with a nice, clean, and crisp hundred-dollar bill? I look up to Julian for confirmation, and he nods. Gingerly, I thumb out one and slide it over the counter, a slight tremor in my hand that I can't control.

I've never held any bill larger than a twenty and there are at least enough hundreds in his wallet to make maybe five-thousand. No wonder the wallet feels like a brick.

"Cash is king," Julian says as if noticing my awe. "Now about that phone." He looks at Fred.

I try to hand back the wallet once I tuck the change inside, but Julian places a hand over mine. "Hold onto it. We have more shopping to do."

Chapter Three

My guard is falling faster than I'm okay with, but he didn't try anything in the motel room that I stupidly followed him into. In my defense, I really don't want to go home and lose the feelings Julian elicits in me. They will be quickly buried beneath the smell of my dad's alcohol and drunk ramblings until Kyle shows up to apologize with his forceful entry into my body. No, I don't want that yet. I'm gripping onto the ease of Julian with all I have.

Right along with his wallet that I'm terrified to lose. It's tucked into the pocket of a new jacket he bought me and nestled next to a new phone he also bought. I tried to say no, but he explained the need with such logic that I crumpled.

It's getting cold, you need a jacket.

Everyone has a phone, it makes me feel weird that you don't.

It's late afternoon now that all the errands are done, and he's led me to a restaurant I've never eaten at before. It's Bridgerock's version of a steakhouse, and Julian seemed deterred at the storefront until I told him that it's as nice as he will get here.

We're sitting in the dim lighting across from each other, and I can't help but feel a little self-conscious. Even though he's wearing the same clothes as last night, he did freshen up in the motel room. He still seems put together, and I'm just a mess in a new jacket. Not to mention, he's older, and I'm very much younger. That alone should have already sent me running, but there's nothing this man can take advantage of that I haven't already lost. Unless...

“You aren’t a pimp, are you?” I blurt it out and then smack a hand over my mouth. I can’t believe I accidentally let that slip. I must be tired.

His eyes go wide for a moment and then he laughs.

“I really want to take offense to that but I suppose... I mean, what else are you supposed to think?” He stops laughing and slowly frowns. “No. I’m not a *pimp* or a... sex trafficker.” He winces. “Oh god, that sounds awful. You don’t feel like I’m keeping you here, right?” He leans in. “I just...” his voice lowers. “You’re—” his words seem on the tip of his tongue but then he shakes his head and leans back. “Sorry.”

“For what?” I curiously ask.

“For almost saying what I almost said.” He takes a sip of the iced tea he ordered.

“What...” I gulp, unsure and afraid of what he’s going to reveal. “What were you going to say?”

“Things I shouldn’t say to a seventeen-year-old.” He smirks.

A pleasant tingle hits me and I blush, casting my head down.

“Don’t do that.” He sets his glass down and leans back in the leather booth.

“Do what?”

“Hide your face.”

My cheeks burn even worse and I can’t help but look down again. I hear him sigh but it’s not an impatient sigh, it sounds sad. I don’t like it, so I look up.

He stares at me, a smile slowly working its way up his cheeks till the sight makes me blush again. I get the urge to hide behind my hair but I resist. I really hope I haven’t made a mistake.

Chapter Four

When we left the restaurant and climbed into the rental, he asked where I lived, and I started navigating. I'm not sure what's wrong with me but I feel panicked, a new mode popping up without warning. I still don't want to go home but I don't know what I'm thinking. That he's going to take me back to the motel? And then what?

Whatever this was is ending, and now all I feel is this panic. How am I supposed to go back home and take the pain again and drown in the numbness, when I know that he exists? That somewhere he holds the key to ease and safety?

It dawns on me that it *is* safety. Something about him makes me feel safe. Which is outrageous because he's a stranger. But I've been in less danger today with him than I've ever been with my father.

My hand shakes as I point for him to make a right. The final right before my house comes into view, with all its sagging siding and overgrown weeds. The sun has dipped behind the horizon, so at least it won't be in all its depressing glory. But I'll see it tomorrow and the thought makes me sick.

Julian is squinting and leaning over the steering wheel, having a good look at the neighborhood. He has the same disdain on his face as he had at seeing the motel and the restaurant.

"You live here?" He slows the car to a crawl.

I don't answer, so he looks over at me and I nod.

"And when do you turn eighteen?"

I clear my dry throat. “November second.”

He nods, clenching his jaw.

I feel hopeful for a second. Maybe he will come back for me then, when I’m eighteen and not a liability. But then I deflate because this man will surely forget about me by the time he lays his head down on the standard pillows of Bridgerock’s Sunshine Motel. He’s handsome and rich and well-mannered, and while I may live in a house, I’m trailer trash and smell like dollar store body wash.

“Who’s that?” he asks and nods out my passenger window.

We’ve stopped in front of my house and Kyle is sitting on the dilapidated steps. His snap back is on backwards and the junk tattoos on his forearm are lit up under the dangling porch bulb.

He looks agitated.

“Uh...” I start but I don’t want to call Kyle my boyfriend. He’s a guy who claims me against my will.

Kyle hunches his neck out, looking directly at me until recognition flashes on his face. He’s up in an instant, shouting my name, and my heart hits my throat. He’s not going to like this—a man driving me home. It’s going to take hours of his thrusting before he feels like he’s the only one again.

I don’t want it. God, I don’t want it. I feel tears pool in my eyes, and the nice steak dinner turns to rocks in my stomach. I’m desperate, so desperate to escape it that I’m about to turn to Julian and beg him to drive when he speaks before I can.

“Stay here,” he orders, his voice hard and leaving no room for disobedience.

He’s opened his door and ducked out by the time Kyle is in front of the car.

“Who the fuck is this?” Kyle is flailing his lanky arms at Julian while staring at me. “You out being a fucking whore?”

I can't. I can't. I can't breathe. I can't do this. I try to suck in air but it's too short and I'm quickly hyperventilating.

Julian slams the door, and I want to lock them so I have some minuscule bit of protection but I can't move. I'm frozen watching the rage on Kyle's face, my head bobbing up and down with each short breath I get.

I can't explain this away. Kyle won't hear it. Not with this nice rental being rubbed in his face. It's not going to be just the thrusting. There will be punches. Probably to my already tender ribs—thanks to my dad. And I can't. I can't. I should have jumped. I should be with Death, safe in her arms.

“Did you touch her?” a voice booms, and I can feel it vibrate the seat beneath me. It's Julian, his measured tone replaced with a fury I haven't heard from him yet.

“Get the fuck—” Kyle starts but Julian towers over him, places a palm on his forehead and shoves. The veins in his forearm bulge with the flex of his muscles.

Kyle stumbles back but his thin frame is aerodynamic and he doesn't fall.

“Motherfu—” He lunges at Julian.

“Yeah,” Julian nods. “You touched her,” he says matter-of-factly, pointing at Kyle. Julian's arm whips back and then careens into the center of Kyle's face. I hear a crunch and flinch.

Kyle cups his nose, blood pouring between his fingers.

“Son of a—” Kyle tries, but yet again, he's cut off by Julian who throws a low right punch to Kyle's side. This time, he does fall, and Julian doesn't miss a beat, straddling him and pulling up his nice slacks to get on his knees.

At this point, all I can see is Julian's back and his elbow repeatedly piercing the air behind him.

Suddenly, I can breathe. A deep breath fills my lungs and I sag. Kyles down. He's down and he can't hurt me. Tears spill onto

my cheeks in relief. I hope he kills him, I think, but then take it back. Kyle doesn't deserve Death's sweet cradle.

When Julian finally gets back into the car his breath is measured but his chest is puffed. His knuckles are covered in blood and there are little splatters of it on his shirt, dulling the shiny buttons.

He grips the wheel, tensing and flexing over and over again until he calms.

"Do you want to stay here?" he asks but doesn't look at me.

I shake my head.

"Do you want to get anything?"

I shake my head again.

"Good. Don't change your mind." He puts the car into reverse. "Because we're never coming back here."

Chapter Five

I think there's a multitude of times in everyone's life when a moment happens that changes their course forever. Most are probably not aware when it does, but I am. I'm floating outside of my body, watching my first life-changing moment in real-time, disconnected from myself but not afraid to be.

There have been times—not life-changing times—when I've disconnected from myself, and it was frightening. I would be so far away from my body that I couldn't save myself if I needed to. But I couldn't stay connected, it hurt too much. I would watch in horror as my dad snapped back both of my pinkies in punishment, or when Mr. Canes pushed himself, painfully, into where he shouldn't be. I would slip away from my body when Kyle used his pocket knife to carve his name into my skin, or anytime things seemed unreal.

Because they couldn't be real. They couldn't be happening to me. If they were, then I wouldn't be able to come back from it. I wouldn't be able to get dressed or eat or breathe.

But now, as I float above my body, I'm not scared. Yes, what's happening seems unbelievable, but I don't have to worry about what's going to happen to my abandoned body. I'm curled up in the sleek and buttery leather passenger seat of Julian's McLaren. The seat is heated. He had pressed a button near my thigh and took great care to not accidentally brush against my skin when he did so. The radio is so soft that I can't make out if a song is playing or a commercial, but the buzz is nice. Orange street lamps continuously pulse into the interior of the car as we travel farther and farther away from Bridgerock and it's soothing.

I'm not worried about dad. He probably won't even notice I'm gone and when he does, I can't see him caring. He's never cared about me before. A little pang threatens to pull me back into myself and I push the dirty image of my dad out of my mind.

The car glides on the pavement so benevolently, that if I didn't know better, I would think we were flying. I'm drifting to sleep, unable to stay up any longer, but I didn't stay up because I felt like I needed to be on alert. It was because I was excited. I didn't show it but I felt it. To be honest, I didn't know how to show it. I can't think of any time in my life when I felt excited. I never had a moment where I thought my mom was coming home. I knew no woman would ever return to my dad. I never had a moment to look forward to. Mr. Canes wasn't old, he wasn't due to retire and graduating wasn't going to get me any farther away from him. And Kyle would never leave Bridgerock. There was nothing to look forward to.

But I was looking forward to wherever Julian was taking me. A part of me knows I should be worried. He could leave me at a women's shelter or take me to child services. He could be worse than any man I've ever come across, a wolf in sheep's clothing, but I don't think so. There is something in his eyes, in the tone of his voice, when he said we were never coming back to Bridgerock. He said 'we'. He also told me to get comfy because 'we' weren't making any stops. He was late for something but he didn't seem stressed. After a while, he said we still had about a thousand miles to go and asked if I was hungry.

I told him no even though I was but I didn't want to slow him down.

He stopped at a drive-through anyway. I ordered just a burger, which produced a sigh from him and he added a large fry and a chocolate milkshake to go with it. For himself, he ordered a black coffee.

I ate everything, down to the last crunchy fry and had to stop myself from taking the lid off the milkshake to get the melted drops at the end. I was careful in the car that cost almost a

million dollars, but Julian didn't seem to bat an eye as the new car smell was replaced with the scent of grease and salt.

I ease back into my body, forcing myself to believe that this life-changing and exciting moment is real, and fall asleep.

Chapter Six

Julian's calm demeanor is replaced with a stoic chisel once we'd traveled the thousand miles. He has both hands on the wheel, gripping it so tightly that the cuts on his knuckles break open and little beads of blood appear.

I saw a beautiful sign for Cape Canaveral, lit up by ground lights in the night, and I sat up straighter to see what Florida was like. I've never seen anywhere besides Bridgerock and part of me is disappointed I slept so much on the drive, or else I would have been able to see the other places we traveled through.

I still don't know what Julian is late for but I can't fathom what it would be at three a.m.. He had been texting from his new phone frantically, with one hand on the wheel, an hour before, and while it didn't seem like he was hiding the texts, I didn't ask.

"We'll get some food after this," he says, as we finally cross a small bridge.

"It's okay," I whisper, my face glued to my window.

It's not lake or dam water beneath the bridge but ocean water. I've never seen the ocean, and it's too dark to make out much, but I'm taking in what I can.

"We'll get food after this," he repeats, and I turn to nod.

When I do, I see a massive cruise ship and my eyes widen. There are three of them, and we whip past signs that say cruise parking. Julian is driving fast despite the small roads, and the ships are soon out of sight as we curve along and pass more signs.

A fire station sign, a coast guard sign, a seaport sign, and on Julian's side, a rocket launch viewpoint. Another curve and a right and then we are surrounded by nothing. He slows, and I see another car up ahead, parked at an odd angle on the side of the road with its headlights off.

"It's fine," Julian says, and I realize I have been furrowing my brows. "Stay in the car. Ten minutes at most."

I nod.

He pulls up along the side of the other car, and I notice three men leaning against the hood. Julian turns the wheel and we make a slow U-turn before he puts the car in reverse and backs up behind the men who have moved to the trunk of their car. The cars are trunk to trunk and I resist the urge to twist in my seat.

Julian cuts the engine and begins to fumble with the dash panel beneath the screen that controls the radio. To my surprise, it pops open easily and he reaches in.

"Don't worry," he whispers, and before I can be confused, he pulls out a gun.

It's a black sleek handgun that fits perfectly into his palm, and he leans forward, tucking it into the back of his belt.

I should be alarmed, but it's clear that the gun isn't for me. I also don't find guns scary. I've been hurt far worse from just hands. Maybe I should worry about my situation—the men outside, the involvement of said gun—but I believe Julian when he says it's fine.

He gets out of the car, and I again resist the urge to turn around. I hear the trunk pop and the murmurs of the men. Without turning my head, I eye the side mirror. All I can see is a bit of the dark tail light and the profile of one man. There's a jostle followed by a click and it seems familiar enough that I would think Julians accessing the spare tire.

There's a weight shift in the car—I feel my seat rise—signaling that he's removed something. The trunk shuts and I shift my eyes to the rear-view mirror. Julian's placed a big case or bag on the trunk and he's making an unzipping motion. The men crowd around him and one flicks his gaze to the mirror I'm peering through. I quickly look away before he can make eye contact and keep my eyes down for the rest of the exchange.

Chapter Seven

The Orlando National Airport is crowded and feels more vast than the whole town of Bridgerock. I stick close to Julian, my legs burning to keep up with his long strides. I couldn't fall behind even if I tried though because he has my hand clamped in his. Neither of us have any luggage and I feel out of place when we stop and he lets go of my hand.

Needless to say, I've never been to an airport and the metal detector that is three people in front of us has my heart hammering. Irrationally, I feel like it's going to beep when I walk through, even though all I have is the new phone.

I mimic Julian and pull a plastic tub to me, placing the phone inside. I think of the zipper on my jacket and in a haste tug it off and throw that in too. Julian watches from the corner of his eye and smirks. I hide my embarrassment behind my hair.

Julian goes through the detector first and doesn't beep. I'm not surprised, as I'm sure he does this all the time. I watched him put the gun back into the hidden compartment in the McLaren as well, which we dropped off at a shipping facility. Julian says it will be transported back home, wherever that is.

When I asked why we weren't driving back, he said that it was necessary to drive here but not to drive home. I didn't ask him to elaborate.

I hug myself and step through the metal detector. Thankfully, it doesn't beep, and Julian grabs a hold of my hand again. As I shrug my jacket back on and pocket the phone, I notice one of the female security guards giving us an odd look. At first, I think

it's my dreary outfit in comparison to Julian's upscale attire but then remember that he's older and our hand-holding might seem inappropriate. He doesn't look old enough to be my father and it's clear he's not a brother.

I want to worry about it, but can't. All I care about is that I feel safe when Julian is holding my hand.

I'm not even concerned with whatever he traded with the men at the port, that whatever he did trade is now hidden in the trunk of the McLaren. I assume it's sketchy but how bad can it be?

"Have you ever been on a plane?" Julian looks down at me and I shake my head.

"Are you nervous?"

I shrug. I am but my excitement is overpowering it. I also think that if Death wanted me, she would have taken her chance when I offered all the times before. Even so, if the plane did crash, I'm not afraid of her.

"Well, this should be a nice experience to pop—" He stops, blinks, and then smiles slyly.

He starts rubbing his thumb on the back of my hand, clearing his throat.

"It'll be nice. We're in first class," he says.

Chapter Eight

Again, to my dismay, I slept through the whole flight. I was a groggy mess at the layover in San Francisco and I was lucky to put one foot in front of the other.

Finally, Julian says no more planes when we land in Santa Barbara. He leads me like a man who knows his way around an airport and before I know it, we are outside in the afternoon sun. I'm thinking of the McLaren and wondering if it could have already been shipped here, but instead we approach a sleek black car with a man in a suit leaning against the passenger door.

The man must be sixty but he's well filled out and doesn't look frail. He has kind eyes that quizzically take in Julian's grasp on my hand and then flick to my frayed shorts and scuffed sneakers. He averts his gaze quickly and opens the back door.

"Home or...?" he asks Julian.

"My mom's, Eddie. Please," Julian replies and ushers me into the back seat.

His mom's? I'm nowhere near presentable. I make a noise in the back of my throat, and Julian chuckles.

"It's fine." He slips in beside me and Eddie shuts the door.

"I..." I start but don't know what to say. It's not like we're in a... a relationship and I'm meeting the parents, but I feel grossly under-dressed. I want to say this, but there is no recourse because I don't have any clothes to change into anyway.

"Yes?" Julian prompts, leaning against the passenger door, an amused smile playing at the edge of his mouth.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I think it’s the sensible thing to do.” He shrugs lightly.

I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean so I let my hair fall forward and look away. None of this has felt like a mistake up until this moment. Leaving my life to go with a stranger across the country? Not an issue. Witnessing said stranger pull out a gun and do a suspicious transaction? No problem. Meeting his mom? I’m shaking.

I haven’t had many experiences with women, unless you include Death. My mom left before I could make memories, and girls at school seemed to hate me. What if Julian’s mom hates me? Will she force me to a shelter? Send me back home? I’d honestly prefer to be homeless. Whatever sense of safety Julian has bloomed in me is something I’m not letting go of. I won’t go back home and lose it. Surely, I can find my way.

Eddie has been driving for fifteen minutes when Julian rolls his tinted window down. The salty air bursts in bringing warmth and light.

“Do you like the beach, Hailey?” he asks.

“I’ve never been to the beach.”

“You’ve never...” He turns to look at me and frowns. “Well, then you won’t get sick of it so soon. Have a look.”

He motions me towards his window and I lean over him slightly to see but all I can make out is the shoulder and guard rails of the freeway.

As if noticing this, Julian wraps an arm around my lower back and pulls me closer. I’m practically in his lap when he releases me.

“See now?” he asks. I can feel his breath on my cheek and it takes everything in me to look out at the ocean and not turn to face him. If I did, our lips would brush and I don’t think I should want that. Why do I? And what if *he* wouldn’t want that?

My heart is beating fast as the freeway zips past my vision and I try to calm down. I just must be tired and overwhelmed. The past few days have been a lot. I'm not thinking clearly.

I lean back into my seat, careful not to touch him any more than I already have. What if I am having some sort of breakdown? A person would have to be crazy to do what I've done. Maybe I should be more concerned. What did he trade the men at the port?

"Do you sell drugs?" I blurt, embarrassed but needing to know.

Julian smirks and rolls the window up. "Do I look like I sell drugs?" He turns to face me, and I'm relieved that he looks amused instead of angry.

I don't answer because I'm not sure. Of course, he doesn't look like any of the dealers in Bridgerock but he could be a big shot, part of a cartel or something.

"No, I don't sell drugs." He concedes, grinning. There is a lilt in his voice and I'm reminded of the game Guess Who.

"Do you... smuggle body organs?" I ask more bravely, encouraged by his amusement.

"No, I don't smuggle organs." His lip is twitching.

"Are you a poacher?" I imagine priceless marine life or ivory tusks.

"Do I—" He glances down theatrically at his shirt and pants. "Do I look like a poacher?"

Feeling a little manic, I can't help but laugh. "No, but I'm out of ideas."

"You're out? What about a lawyer or a doctor?" he chides. "Do I honestly come off so sinister? I'm going to have to work on my appearance if I'm to hide my devious lines of work."

I laugh again.

“You find this funny?” He’s smiling. “Accusing a nice gentleman of being an organ thief? I thought I looked like a Bitcoin billionaire or a tech prodigy.”

“I thought a Bitcoin billionaire would drive a Tesla?”

“Do they? My mistake. I’ll have to add one to my collection.”

The little window that separates us from Eddie rolls down, and I quickly sink back into my seat, feeling like I’ve been caught playing when I shouldn’t.

“You want me to stick around, Julian?” he asks over his shoulder and I realize we’ve parked.

“No, that’s alright.”

Whatever fun I was having is quickly replaced by dread. Why isn’t Eddie sticking around? How long will we be here?

Julian grabs my hand and opens his door. He slides out of the car with grace and I’m left shimmying after him.

I almost trip over my shoes when I take in the house we’re standing before. We are in a curved driveway of smooth cobblestone, flanked on either side by pillars. The drive is slanted and I have to look up to see the massive house—excuse me, mansion—that has different levels jutting out. Most of the ‘walls’ are windows and just between corners of the levels, I can make out that the back of the home faces a cliff that must lead down to the beach.

“You alright there? Or is this not up to your standards?” Julian is smirking when I look back at him and I pick my jaw up off the ground.

“I don’t belong here,” I say, looking down. I’m not even inside the house yet and I feel unworthy in the driveway. I’m ashamed to be so insecure, but it’s true. I wouldn’t even belong here if I was sent to clean the house. There’s a pedigree about these things that I know nothing about.

Like when middle to upper-class people ask you to take your shoes off, that is expected. But this level of upper-class? Their shoes only touch red carpets and Porsche interiors. Why would they take their shoes off? I'm not supposed to be here in my beat-up sneakers and exposed legs.

Julian frowns. "You belong wherever I take you."

The front doors are unlocked and click luxuriously when we enter. The house is silent when Julian hollers, "Ma!"

For a minute I forget that I'm about to meet his mom and hold my breath at the gorgeous home. It smells like a department store, fresh and new, but it's filled with plants. So many tall, drapey, and vine-like plants that I don't see any color scheme besides green.

Julian steps ahead of me, and I linger by the door, contemplating if I should take off my shoes when he turns around. He sighs and puts out a hand for me to take.

Timidly, I do so. He tucks me into his side and hollers again. His body is warm and firm, so much so that I may lean in more than what is appropriate.

I hear a faint response but it sounds distant. We round a corner that opens into a sprawling kitchen gleaming in white marble, while beyond there are french glass doors that are open with billowing curtains letting the sea breeze in.

I would think I'm in a dream but I don't think my heart would be beating so fast in such a tranquil environment.

There's a staircase to the right and I hear light steps padding down. I immediately look at the floor. I know it's not respectful, or how I want to make a first impression, but I'm scared and self-conscious. I don't want to meet her eyes in my travel-worn clothes or feel ashamed that I didn't take my shoes off in her palace.

"Jules! Did everything—"

She halts, hand poised on the banister and notices me. My discomfort heightens.

“What’s this?” She continues down the stairs.

“So, Ma...” Julian drags out the words and trails off. I feel his hand slip from mine and in a panic, I look up. He’s leaned himself against a wall, stuffing his hands in his pockets, head hung in a way that is nothing like the high chin I’ve seen from him.

“Oh, Jules. What did you do?” her voice is round, full of emotion, and not at all threatening. I hazard a glance at her, a nervous tremble at my lips, and realize she’s billowing towards me.

She is wearing a silk floral blouse that drapes down to her knees and her hair is tied in a loose bun on top of her head. She must be in her fifties but her skin is glowy and full. She’s voluptuous and soft around the edges, not lean and slim like I expected, based on Julian’s form.

She comes up to me without any hesitation, arms outstretched.

“Oh, sweet little peach. How old are you?” Her eyes are wide and concerned.

I blink, unsure how to answer and look to Julian for help. I’m not about lying and would prefer if he handled this. But all I get is a slight shrug while he rubs the fresh stubble on his cheek.

When I don’t answer, she turns to Julian. “What did you do, Jules? She’s nowhere near you...” she trails off and quickly wraps her arms around me. I don’t flinch, despite the pain in my rib. She’s warm and her hug feels all-encompassing, cocooning and safe.

“You better not have laid a hand—”

“I haven’t touched her, Ma.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” I can feel her head bobbing while I’m pressed into her cushiony bosom. “I raised you better than that.” She pulls back to look at me.

“How old are you, Peach?” Her hands warm my shoulders.

“Seventeen,” I whisper.

“Oh my goodness, you *are* young. Jules, don’t just stand there. Go put on some coffee before I go into withdrawals.”

Julian slips from the wall and passes behind his mom and into the kitchen. I watch him like a baby duck that wants to follow but I’m pinned to the spot by this woman that smells like warm vanilla and I feel tears irrationally pooling in my eyes. I need to get a hold of myself.

“Come on, sweet girl. Tell me your name.” She wraps an arm around me, rubbing my shoulder and leading me towards the bar-stools that loop around the massive marble island.

I tell her my name in a shaky voice and take a seat, but she doesn’t sit next to me. She goes around the island, pushing Julian out of her way with her hip and taking the pot he was filling with water away from him.

“Hailey. Hailey,” she repeats my name, busying herself with the coffee machine. “That’s beautiful. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl.” She shrugs her hands into the air, little beads of water flying.

I tuck my own hands into my lap, trying to still the emotion in my chest and find Julian’s eyes. He’s leaning over the counter, both forearms holding himself up and smiling at me.

“Everything is fine,” he says with an encouraging nod, and I wonder what I must look like for him to feel the need to reassure me.

“Of course everything’s fine.” His mom rears around and elbows him in the side. “Get off my counter.”

I bite my lip to stop from snorting, my emotions like a roller-coaster. Julian is not little and his mom must be two feet shorter than him but she's treating him like a child, and for some reason it's comforting. I've never seen a woman have so much *presence* around a man.

She eyes me, seems to note my half-smile and continues. "Always on my counter. Draping himself on furniture like he's Adonis himself." She makes big swirling gestures with her hands. "I tell you, the amount of draping this kid does would make you think he's a curtain."

"Alright, Ma," Julian says, a pink tinge on his cheeks.

"Alright, what? It's true. You *and* your brother. Drape here, lean here." She theatrically throws herself against the giant stainless steel fridge, posing with her arms crossed. "Like bronze statues, as if everything's your pedestal."

Julian rolls his eyes, but I can see what she means. He *is* handsome just like a bronze statue, and I wouldn't mind gawking at him from afar in one of his drapes or leans. I would blush if he caught me but part of me thinks he would like it.

Chapter Nine

Margo, Julian's mom, brews me a cup of coffee so delicious that I bet it would put Starbucks to shame. She then leads us out to one of the balconies that overlooks the ocean. She tucks me into a cushioned swing, done up in knit blankets and cream-colored throw pillows. It's angled towards the setting sun, with equally lavish chairs around it. She strips my jacket from me, saying sunlight will do me good, and then freezes when she sees the bruises. She recovers quickly from the sight, pretending not to notice and thankfully doesn't ask any questions. But from beneath my hair, I catch her giving Julian a look. He doesn't reciprocate and instead looks at me as if he knows I'm watching.

For a bit, while the sun sets and the air cools, Margo continues to pick on Julian. I sip on the coffee that is full of fancy syrups and keep my hands warm with it. Once it's empty, I set it down on the table in the center of us. Julian leans forward, and at first, I think he's going to offer a refill, but instead pushes some hidden button that ignites the table into a mesmerizing fire.

I'm content listening to them lovingly bicker, as I float above myself. It all feels unreal again. Despite the coffee, I'm somehow falling asleep. The fire is so warm, and the swing so soft, and while I don't know what is going to happen, I feel safe. I watch myself curl up with one of the pillows, and then as Julian drapes a blanket over me.

It just isn't possible that this was happening to me. My luck would have had me attacked by the stranger on the bridge, not whisked away like Cinderella. I never even believed in prince charming from the fairy tales. Every man I had ever known was

so far from charming that they eroded all glimmers of hope I possessed.

Some similarities existed between real life and fairy tales though. In both, men were strong, taking down enemies and showing off their strength. They were in charge, making demands that left no room for negotiation. It was unfortunate that in the real world, men used those traits to inflict pain.

It's probably rude to fall asleep at Julian's mom's home. I try to stay awake but the most I can manage is an in and out type of consciousness. At some point, I tune into whispering but can't open my eyes to see.

All I hear is, *poor thing*, and *you did the right thing*.

Chapter Ten

I wake to smells so foreign that I keep my eyes shut, trying to stay in the blissful dream. There are scents of linen, cotton, and lavender with aromas of bacon and toasty bread. They permeate the air like wisps of heaven. I breathe deeply, clutching the blanket and waiting for the pleasant fragrances to be replaced with rot and mildew. I don't want to wake up and tiptoe past my father. If he drank too much the night before he will be in a pool of vomit, angry and too hung over to pull himself out of it. He will force me to clean him up, a backhand here or there if I gag.

But if I stay asleep too long the backhands will be fists. I reluctantly open my eyes and then blink a few times in disbelief. The ceiling isn't marred with water damage or mold, and the heavenly smells don't vanish. I take another deep breath that comes shakily and my eyes well up.

It's not a dream.

I rub the soft blanket between my fingers and stretch my legs, feeling the downy sensation against my skin. The past few days come back to me in a blur. I really must have had a breakdown because everything is hazy and I can't really believe what I've done.

I don't regret it, not in the slightest.

I even feel warm when I remember the blood pouring from Kyle's nose. He had done much worse to me and the only regret I have is that I wasn't strong enough to do it myself. I wasn't even strong enough to leave on my own. Even if Julian had dropped

me off at a shelter I would be forever grateful for him pulling me out of there because I never would have done it myself.

I sit up, curling my legs underneath me and take in the room that Julian must have carried me to. The comforter over me is a white velvet that matches the heavy curtains and is contrasted by a pale gray in the ceiling trim and baseboards. The colors vary in muted shades but everything is alive with plants. Large leafy trees that look like swiss-cheese and mini palm trees stretch out in all directions. They grace every dresser, table, and shelf. It's like a smaller version of a botanical garden and I'm in love with it.

Nothing ever lived long in my house. Every dog or flower eventually fell ill, and the only greenery in Bridgerock was the dried-up grass at the park. I'm surprised that I even made it out alive. A small thrill races through me.

I'm alive.

Chapter Eleven

I stayed in the bedroom for as long as I could before my stomach ached and the smell of bacon overpowered my anxiety about wandering in someone's house.

I wish I had stayed in the bedroom.

As soon as I find my way down the stairs I'm met with four pairs of eyes. The first pair I find is Julian's, who is leaning against the counter. His stubble is gone and his hair is freshly washed. For the most part, it's neat and tucked but there is one lock that hangs forward, brushing his lashes. In my rested mind I realize that I didn't need to be in a mental breakdown to go with him. Anyone in their right mind would follow him.

He's stunning in a way that around the edges he's sharp and dark but at his center he's winsome and bright. Yes, his hair and eyes say danger, do not proceed, but his body is controlled and chiseled beneath his clothes. His smile is pure and genuine. His cheeks, the subtle lines on his face, tell me he's never felt malice or bitterness.

I give him a half smile, trying to bury how enamored I am, aware of the other eyes on me.

"You better get a muffin before Cape eats them all," a young girl says from the island where she's sitting. She couldn't be more than twelve, her bright blonde hair pulled into a sleek bun at the nape of her neck. She's wearing purple silk pajamas and swinging her feet vicariously in the high bar-stool. "He already ate three."

"Actually, I ate four," Cape, presumably, says from the seat next to her.

I can immediately see the resemblance to Julian but he's more aggressive in his features. He's leaning back on the stool, arms hitched over the wings in a pose that invites people to take him in. It's a cocky pose, one I know well.

I look away from Julian's brother's gaze, not wanting his attention.

"Four then." The girl rolls her eyes. "All the chocolate ones. There's still blueberry and cinnamon though."

"That's okay. I'm not that hungry," I lie, edging closer to the island. The spread is like nothing I've seen before. Piles of bacon, eggs, hash browns, pancakes, a quiche, and said muffins.

"Oh stop that." Margo sets a coffee mug on the counter and grabs a plate. "You'll have a bit of everything. You're nothing but skin and bones."

I really don't want to impose. I'd quietly avoid looking at the food and just ignore the pain in my stomach. I'm used to it by now. But I can't help but feel grateful for Margo's pushiness as she heaps eggs and a mountain of bacon onto my plate. My mouth waters as I shuffle closer to the buffet and nestle next to Julian.

He raises an amused brow at me and I blush. I may be a little too close to him but I feel like a fish out of water. He's the only one I know, if barely.

I try not to eat ravenously as Margo introduces me to Cape and Marney, her goddaughter. She tells them my name too but I can sense it's for show. They already know who I am, probably discussing me before I came down. I wonder what Julian told them. That he caught me about to drop myself from a bridge? That I'm riddled with bruises? That I'm weak and needed saving?

It would all be true, and maybe I'd be okay with Margo knowing and Marney wouldn't understand at her age, I don't think, but Cape? The thought makes me want to curl in on myself. He seems like the type to laugh at my weakness, kick me while down, rub dirt in my wounds and tell me to get over it.

I know I shouldn't be judgmental. He could be a good guy. After all, Julian defied my expectations. But he has an aura, a gray mist hovering around him. Even now I can feel his eyes inspecting me. Every bite I take, every time I push my hair behind my shoulder, every involuntary huddle I make into Julian, is under a microscope.

If anyone else notices they don't pay it any mind. Maybe I'm being paranoid. It wouldn't be out of the question considering what I've been through, but I don't think it is.

Marney is talking animatedly about ballet while Margo gives her a loving dose of undivided attention. The scene makes my heart warm and I smile absently, wondering where Marney's parents are.

"I'm outta here." Cape stands, grabbing another muffin.

"No, you're not." Julian straightens, his voice taking on an edge. I can't help but scoot away from him because of it.

"It was your deal baby bro. I'm not tracking it."

"The fuck you aren't, Cape." Julian folds his arms.

"Language." Margo smacks a hand on the marble and I jump.

With shaky hands, I put my fork down and back up. I don't mean to, it just comes naturally. But within seconds Julian puts an arm down and reaches for me. While I'm surprised he noticed, I hesitate to take it. He's angry, about what I'm not sure, and while it's not at me, I'm used to indirect anger being taken out on me.

"You're fine," Julian says under his breath, tilting his chin down but he takes a step in front of me.

"Is she?" Cape rears forward, getting in Julian's face and locking eyes with him. Cape looks smug but his voice sounds threatening. I take another step back, feeling the food turn to acid in my stomach.

"I can protect my girl, unlike you."

His girl? But before I can make sense of it, Cape throws his body against Julian who then knocks into me. I'm on my ass with my sore rib screaming in pain before I even realize what happened.

"That's too low! Too low, little bro!" Cape is roaring as he keeps shoving Julian, who is miraculously still standing even though the force of that first shove knocked my tailbone into the marble floors so fiercely that I'm sure it's going to bruise.

The brothers are both the same height and build, and I shouldn't worry about Julian, but there is something dark in Cape's eyes. As if his irises have unhinged from his pupils and left the party. How he's even related to Julian, I can't tell. Not with the rage pulsing in the veins in his neck. He went from relaxed to barbarian within seconds.

Even when Julian put Kyle on the ground he was calm and collected, not chomping at the bit like Cape. Cape has a chaos of emotions flitting through him. The veins say anger and his eyes say crazed but his hands, which are slamming into Julian's chest, are reserved. They hammer with force but shake with clear restraint. He doesn't want to hurt his brother, I realize.

But I stay on the floor, scooting back on my butt and wincing through the stabbing in my side. He may not want to hurt his brother, but me? Men always want to hurt me. It's like a pheromone I give off that alerts them that I'm breakable and fun to crumple under their fists.

Like drywall.

My body is like drywall to them, a suitable outlet for their anger that will give easily under their fists, making them feel powerful and strong.

Julian looks down at me from where Cape has backed him against a wall, and I quickly hide my face under my hair from him. He has a concern in his eyes, but not for himself. If anything it seems like he isn't fazed by his brother's temper. Instead, keeping his body loose, rolling with the shoves as if letting Cape

get it all out. The concern was for me, a foreign gaze I'm not used to that fills me with embarrassment.

Marney hops off the barstool and walks the long ways around the kitchen island, avoiding the scuffle. She brushes past Margo, who is fiddling with the faucet. Marney rolls her eyes before going up the stairs, a muffin in her hand. I can't help but think that the thirteen-year-old is braver than me when suddenly I'm being showered in cold water.

"I did not raise you boys to act like children," Margo shouts, angling the detachable faucet at Julian and Cape. The cold water is bouncing off Cape's back and spraying me on the floor just a foot away.

Cape immediately turns around, letting go of Julian, and both start groaning.

"Ma!" they grumble in unison. "Stop!"

"No! Get out of my house!" She keeps the water spraying.

"Come on, I just showered." Julian puts his hands up to try and block the water.

"I don't care! You've pissed me off. Now out! Both of you!"

"Ma, I'm sorry—" Cape starts but Margo flicks her wrist, and the water sprays into his mouth. He sputters, blinking rapidly and putting up a futile hand.

For all the rage and macho man stunt he just exerted, it's quickly washed away by a little water. He's gone from red in the face to disarmed in a second and I can't help but picture a ferocious dog that's met its match by a hose.

I slap a hand over my mouth to stop from laughing but it's too late and I snort embarrassingly loud. They all snap their heads in my direction.

Margo and Julian crack a small smile but Cape cocks his head at me, eyes glimmering, irises back intact.

“Enjoying the show, little miss on her ass in the corner?” he says. “Glad I can be of entertainment.” His eyes roam over me. “But I’m not the one in a white T-shirt.” He smirks.

I look down and realize the water has seeped through the fabric of my borrowed shirt and my breasts are basically on display.

Chapter Twelve

Margo leads me to the laundry room and it is as big as my bedroom in Bridgerock. It's done up with wicker baskets and glass containers full of soaps and beads. There's little glass bottles with sprays, and plants on floating shelves with cute wooden letters that spell out home. It's something I've only ever seen in magazines and I'm in awe even though I'm shivering.

Julian had tried to help me up from the ground where I sat like a wet cat, clutching my chest, but Margo sprayed him again and told him not to touch me, that he had done enough. The guys skulked out then, shoes squeaking on the floors as they dripped, and Margo reattached the faucet.

"I swear those two are going to drive me to an early grave," Margo is muttering as she pulls down a fluffy white towel. "Making me look like I didn't raise them better than that." Her hair bristles as she shakes her head to herself and then turns to look at me.

"Oh, you poor thing." She touches my wet hair. "I'm sorry you got stuck in the crossfire." She scowls. "They know better and Jules shouldn't have said what he did." Her eyes unfocus and turn sad for a second.

I wonder what happened to the girl that Julian implied Cape didn't keep safe. But I'm more curious that Julian called me *his* girl. The idea causes a warm feeling in my chest that swirls next to a pit that's formed in my stomach. Because I don't know what all this means.

He basically rescued me from being about to let myself fall to my death but then took me straight to his mom's.

"Take that wet shirt off so I can put it in the wash." Margo blinks, coming back to the moment. "I'll find you something else for now, and when Marney gets done with ballet we can go shopping."

"That's okay," I say, shaking my head. I've already imposed so much and I'm not sure how to navigate the situation. Obviously, I don't have any money. Did Julian explain to Margo where I came from?

It dawns on me what I've actually gotten myself into. I have nothing. No money or things, no prospects or plans. I'm completely dependent on Julian. Or maybe his mom that he's left me with. Either way, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do or how to act.

Am I just a charity case Julian has dumped on his mom? Does she take in wayward teenagers often or will she be sending me to a women's shelter that she probably donates money to?

"Don't be silly. I didn't see a suitcase. You need some clothes." She looks me over. "And maybe a trip to the salon. Your hair is gorgeous but a little shaping wouldn't hurt." She smiles brightly, rubbing my cheek. "Now take that wet thing off before you catch a cold."

I bite my lip and hesitate. I don't have a bra on, obviously, since I was able to give everyone a show just a few minutes ago and I've never changed in front of anyone. Unless you count being forcibly undressed.

"What's wrong, Peach? I have all the same bits as you. No need to be shy." She shakes the towel in front of me. "Chop chop, you're shaking like a leaf."

I slowly do as I'm told, tugging the wet shirt over my head. It gets caught in my hair, a tag on the back snagging a strand attached to the tender part of my scalp. It takes me a moment to

fiddle it free and when I can finally see again, Margo is staring down at my body.

Her lips are pulled down and the towel hangs loosely from her hands. At first, I feel self-conscious, unsure of what an older woman would make of my breasts. Do I not look normal? I could be overdeveloped. Is that disconcerting to her?

But then I follow her horrified eyes and frown as well.

The skin around my sore rib is a splatter of purple and red. I hadn't had time to check and am equally surprised by the bruising. To be honest though, I probably wouldn't have looked even if I was still in Bridgerock. It does no good to inspect wounds. It only reminds me of how I got them.

"Oh, Peach," Margo sighs gently as she stares at the bruising.

"It's not that big a deal." I try to laugh but the only thing that comes out is a weak exhale.

I reach for the towel in her hands, eager to cover it up and pretend it doesn't exist. But Margo leans down apprehensively, tucking the towel under her arm and getting a closer look.

I awkwardly cup my breasts to get them out of her face as she delicately brushes the tender skin.

"It's fine. Really," I say. The pathetic exhale that's supposed to be a laugh comes out again.

"No," She whispers, shaking her head incredulously. "You have a broken rib," Her voice cracks with concern.

My lip quivers against my permission. I knew it hurt too bad, knew my dad's work boots were too hard. I had thought maybe internal bleeding but managed to push that worry away the longer I kept breathing. A broken rib though? That's nothing. I've had broken bones before. So why is my lip quivering and my eyes starting to pool?

"Has Julian seen this?" Margo looks up at me and slowly rises, bracing her hands on her knees.

I shake my head. I had tensed when he pulled me up at the gas station but I hadn't told him. He was a stranger. Technically, he still is a stranger.

And so is Margo. Even though I'm standing topless in front of her with stupid tears threatening to roll down my cheeks. I haven't cried in front of anyone since I was eleven.

I suck my lip in to stop the quiver and try to keep from blinking to prevent the tears but it feels futile when I catch Margo's eyes.

Her eyes are brimming with their own waterworks as they gaze over my arms and chest, as if just noticing how much more there is. I know the bruises and angry red marks exist, the myriad of scars that mar me. I don't have to look to know what she's seeing. I feel them every time I move.

I used to wait for them to heal, hoping I could one day see what I looked like without them, wondering what it would feel like to be free of the minor pains. But I gave up when every time the bruises would start to heal to a sickly yellow, they would just get replaced by an even darker, fresher one.

Margo sucks in a shaky breath and closes her eyes. Two perfect tears, one on each cheek, slide slowly down her face, and something about them undoes me.

She may be a stranger, but I don't resist her comfort when she reaches out and pulls me against her. A sob escapes me as she buries me in her arms and I can't stop the flood of tears that ensue.

She wraps the towel around my back and sinks to the floor of her lavish laundry room with me when my legs start shaking and give out.

She holds me while I cry every tear I've held in since I was eleven.

Chapter Thirteen

I stay on the chaise in Margo's bedroom, wearing a plush robe, while she takes Marney to ballet. Julian hasn't come back and the house is quiet in its grandness. The balcony doors in the bedroom are slightly open with the sound of crashing waves. Something about the distant ocean and the hulled version of myself has me in a tranquil state. I sit cross-legged, just staring at my hands in my lap until she returns.

She frowns when she does me. She had told me to take a bath, touting the epsom salts may help, but it's clear I haven't done so. When she comes and sits beside me, she says that we don't have to go shopping but then Marney comes in and squeezes onto the chaise.

"I absolutely need a new blow dryer," She starts explaining. "And if we're going to the salon, then Mipsy can tell you the Dyson is worth it. She uses it every time we go and Courtney has one and it's an *investment*." Marney scooches in next to me.

"An investment huh?" Margo raises her brows.

"Yes!" she chirps. "It will last a lifetime!"

"For six hundred dollars it better last two lifetimes," Margo mutters.

"It will!" Marney drags out the last word. "Please?"

Margo puckers her lips dubiously as I furrow my brows. I thought a Dyson was a vacuum. And six hundred dollars? I've never had a blow dryer but I know they only cost like twenty bucks at CVS.

“Maybe,” Margo finally says. “But I don’t think Hailey is up for it today.”

“Oh, my god. Yes, she is!” Marney grabs my arm. “Aren’t you?” She turns to Margo when I don’t say anything. “She doesn’t have any clothes! Don’t you want pajamas at least?” She looks at me again. “I only sleep in Belle Luna.” She flicks her hair. “We can get you some. They are so soft. And they have matching eye masks.”

I think Marney has more excitement in this moment than I’ve had in my entire life. She’s animated and bubbly without a care in the world except if her pajamas come with a sleep mask. When I was thirteen I had to use my only sheet to hang over my window to stop Lester, our neighbor, from looking in at me while I slept.

“Pleaseeeee.” She wraps her arms around mine. “And we’ll go to the salon and get pedicures after your hair is done.”

“You just had a pedicure,” Margo interrupts.

“It’s for Hailey!” Marney defends. “Don’t you want a spa day?” She peers up at me. “We can get facials together and they let you hook your phone in and I’ll even let you pick the music. It’ll be so fun!”

The idea seems like a dream. I don’t think I’ve ever even used nail polish. And a facial? What does that entail? The only ‘facial’ I’ve ever gotten was from Kyle and it turns my stomach to think about it.

“And what are the beautiful women of the house conspiring?” A guy walks into the room. I quickly pull up the shoulder of the robe that has slipped when he notices me. “Oh, um, hello, other beautiful woman that I have not met.” He looks back out the door and pauses. “Should I—am I interrupting?” He steps back.

“Just your sister pestering another poor soul.” Margo gives a lazy smile. “Come on in, meet Hailey.” She motions him forward and she looks at me. “This is Dillon, Marney’s brother.”

He has on black joggers and a Nike beanie that shows little puffs of golden hair similar to Marney's. He crosses the room in two strides and sticks a hand out.

"Don't let my sister talk you into anything. Give in one time and you will end up in tights on Halloween." He gives a wide smile and shakes my hand.

"Stopp!!!" Marney whines. "I'm not talking her into anything. She wants to go. Don't you?" She looks at me with big eyes.

I look to Margo for help but she just shrugs. "You heard him. I ended up at a four hour concert for One Direction and the songs are still stuck in my head."

"I don't even like them anymore!" Marney protests.

Dillon laughs, bright blue eyes crinkling though he can't be older than twenty, and Marney crosses her arms.

"What is she trying to get you to do?" he asks me.

"Um, a facial."

"And a pedicure," Marney adds.

"Well, that doesn't seem too bad." He raises a brow.

"Hailey still has jet lag." Margo winks at me, trying to help.

"Oh." Dillon takes a closer look at me. "You're the one who came back with Julian?" He frowns. "How old are you?"

I shrink in the robe. Neither Cape nor Marney seemed interested in my age, but Dillon is looking at me like he wants to call foster care or some authority.

"I'll be eighteen in three months," I say from beneath my hair.

"And she'll be staying here until then." Margo turns to Dillon, her voice matter of fact.

Dillon looks around her at me and then at his sister.

"She's closer in age to Marney than Julian," He says.

“Don’t I know it,” Margo huffs. “But she’s staying here.”

“What, till she’s legal and then it’s okay?” Dillon’s face turns sour. “I’m younger than Julian and even I wouldn’t—”

“That’s enough.”

“Yeah, that’s enough, Dillon,” Marney adds. “We have an appointment to make.”

Margo turns slowly with her hands on her hips. “You did not call Mipsy.”

Marney smiles sheepishly and giggles.

“If you don’t want to go, Hailey, I can cancel it.”

I tug on the end of the robe. I don’t want to go because I can’t pay but sitting here in this conversation seems like the bigger of the two evils.

“No, it’s okay.” I try to smile down at Marney. “We can go.”

“Yes!” she cheers. “You’re going to love it!” She hops off the chaise and runs past Dillon.

“You out too!” Margo shoos him. “I have to find something for Hailey to wear.”

He gives me one last look and something on his face tells me that this isn’t over.

Chapter Fourteen

The salon isn't bad. Actually, it's wonderful. Margo was taken to a private room but Marney has been with me the whole time. We got pedicures and then she tried to force me into a massage, that I might have given into, if it wasn't for my broken rib. But the facial was like a dream. They smoothed and scrubbed and put decadently scented creams onto my skin.

Now, I stare at myself in the reflection of the mirror as Mipsy, the stylist, adds some finishing touches to my hair. I'm awe-struck. My heavy long brown hair seems lighter and fuller at the same time. It's wispy yet thick as it falls into layers of glossy locks that shape my face and still reaches past my breasts. Mipsy tried to offer bangs but settled with a long curtain fringe. I just couldn't let go of the hair that keeps me safe.

Marney is in the chair next to me, cross-legged, with her phone in her lap. She's been telling me all about Taylor Swift and some athlete Travis Kelce, which she talks animatedly about as if they are her own friends and she sees them every day. The chit-chat feels warm, and I want to lean into it but I don't know how. I've never had a girl to gossip with. I just nod and smile at what I think are appropriate times, and she seems fine with it.

"All done." Mipsy pushes my hair forward. She's an edgy forty-something who could pass for twenty with all the bangles on her wrists and the leather choker she's sporting.

I lean forward in the chair and tug on the ends. It's so beautiful I could cry. The hair paired with whatever they did to my skin makes me look like a movie star.

“Thank you.” I turn to her as she puts down the shears.

“I really didn’t do much. Just added some layers.”

I want to believe her but I look so much different. Whatever magic she worked, I never could have done myself. I never got to go to the Supercuts near the Winn Dixie in Bridgerock but I doubt they would have been able to do what she did.

“Now put on the dress!” Marney has tucked her phone away and has come to stand beside me.

I frown at myself in the mirror. We had stopped in a cute boutique where Margo pushed item after item at me, and even when I protested, she bought all of them. Marney had tacked on the Belle Luna pajamas in black but then she became obsessed with a dress that Margo would not budge on letting her wear.

It’s a silk blue scrap of fabric that has a slit up the hip and a plunging neckline with virtually no back. I could see why Margo wouldn’t let Marney buy it and when she wouldn’t budge, Marney pushed it onto me. Saying that if she couldn’t have it then I absolutely needed it.

Margo didn’t bat an eye and added it to the collection of new clothes for me, which included a pair of black heels that Marney thought would look cute with the dress. There was no trying to get her to understand that I would have nowhere to wear the dress or the shoes, but she didn’t relent.

“Maybe when we get back?” I try to appease Marney.

“Noooo. I have to see how it looks and your hair is all done. It will be perfect.”

I start to protest when Mipsy speaks up. “You can change in the lounge area. We are about to close up, so it’s just us.”

Outnumbered, I make my way to the space with a curved couch and dripping crystal lights and pull on the heavy velvet privacy curtain. I toss the tee-shirt Margo gave me to wear and my tattered shorts into the shopping bag and pull out the silky dress.

As I stand in my bra and underwear, I realize that there is no way the undergarments are going to fit under the revealing fabric.

I take a deep breath and take them off, slipping the dress over my bare body and then tucking my freshly pedicured toes into the heels.

I don't even get a second to look in the mirror before Marney pulls back the privacy curtain and squeals.

"Oh, my god! You are so pretty! My boobs are never going to be as big as yours. You sure you never had a boob job?" she asks for the third time. "Because I will get one the second I turn eighteen."

"Trust me, it would have been better for me if I didn't have them," I say and immediately regret it. She's only thirteen and clearly hasn't been exposed to the things I have.

Marney throws herself on the cushions. "As if. I can't get any boy to look at me. Kristin's boobs are almost as big as yours and every boy wants to talk to her."

"That's not always a good thing," I say despite myself as I turn to look in the mirror.

I see all the reasons why it's not always a good thing all over my body. The dress hides my rib but it can't cover up the finger marks on my arms or the tatter of bruises up my leg, especially the nasty yellowing one near my hip where the slit parts.

But I can also appreciate my hair and dress and the way I don't mind seeing myself in the mirror for once in my life. Something about the dress's deep shade of blue makes my eyes pop, and the glossy hair shines so brightly that I can overlook my riddled body and see myself for once.

And I look good, irresistible even.

The second I think it, I regret it. I don't want to be irresistible. I want guys to be able to control themselves around

me. But now, taking myself in, I can see what I have been blinded to. No wonder men look at me and take what they want.

I look down at the heels, their arches giving me a good two inches, and if I wanted to wear this outfit, at least the heels could stab anyone who tried to touch me. The thought surprises me. I've never fought back but something about my reflection... I want to look like this, feel like this... pretty. And I want it without repercussions.

“Wow.”

I startle and look up to see Julian in the mirror. I immediately cast my head down and let my hair fall forward.

His shoes appear in front of me. “You’re hiding your face again.”

I look up despite my blush and am surprised that I still have to tilt my neck to see him.

“Did you pick out this dress?”

Marney sits up. “I did. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

Julian smiles and looks me up and down, his eyes lingering on the slit. “Not as gorgeous as the girl wearing it.”

I feel a heat rise between my legs and I can’t stop myself from snorting.

Suddenly his hand is on my waist and he’s pulled me closer.

“You don’t think so?” his voice is playful but there’s a touch of sadness.

The concern again embarrasses me and I hang my head. He sighs before Margo appears with a bag on her arm.

“I can’t even get a massage for one minute. Where did you come from?” She looks at Julian.

“Ma,” Julian’s tone changes and he turns but he doesn’t let go of my waist.

“The dress looks good on you though.” Margo winks at me.

I feel silly in it now though, standing in a salon with the three of them, all my wounds on display. At least Marney doesn't seem concerned, and Margo is expertly avoiding looking. But I know Julian is examining me from his peripheral vision from the clench in his jaw.

"Everyone ready to get out of here? I think Mipsy wants to go home." Margo waves Marney up.

"Wait! We have to get the Dyson!" Marney jumps up.

"We aren't getting a six-hundred dollar blow dryer." She rolls her eyes and starts gathering the other shopping bags, including the one with my clothes.

"Get the girl the blow dryer." Julian tightens his arm around my waist.

"Don't start in. This girl is more spoiled than any other tween on the planet."

"Ew don't call me that. I'm *thirteen*, not a tween."

"You'll be a teen when you're twenty."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Neither does a six-hundred dollar blow dryer." Margo waves us toward the front of the salon.

I expect Marney to start throwing a tantrum, to become mean and entitled, but instead she gives a single huff and heads towards Margo.

"I'm going to show you a video on how it works and then when we come next time you'll buy two, one for you and one for me."

"We'll see." Margo smiles conspiratorially and then looks at me and Julian. "Are you two statues? Come on."

I make to titter forward but Julian keeps a hold of me.

"I think we are going to find some dinner." He looks down at me and smiles. "You look too good not to go out," he says under

his breath, and I hold his eyes, the blush blooming on my cheeks as I try not to duck under my hair.

Margo pauses, the bags crinkling on her arm. “Julian,” her voice takes on an edge.

“It’s just dinner, Ma.”

“Sure it is,” she sighs and turns her back. “You bring her back to my house. Not yours.”

Chapter Fifteen

I'm forced to sit like a lady because of the short dress. We're in Julian's nice car and my silky hair tickles my bare shoulders as the wind whips in from the window. It's not the McLaren, it's a different car but still just as nice. I eye the radio dock and wonder if there's a gun hidden behind it as well but then quickly look away when Julian quirks a brow.

"Music?" He asks and taps a dial.

The car fills with a low hum, and I shift in my seat, trying to tug down the dress and find a comfortable position. I'm not used to having to be conscious of how I sit since I typically don't wear anything so revealing.

I notice it draws Julian's attention and his eyes linger on my legs. At first, I warm, admiring my legs as well, how well the blue dress compliments my skin, and then suddenly my stomach turns. A pit of unease and cold dread steels my spine, coiling around me. It's such a sudden flip in my emotions that my heart starts racing. The air in my lungs disappears.

I shouldn't be in a dress this short. I shouldn't be alone with him. I shouldn't feel warm under a man's gaze.

I grip the leather center console on my left as if just waking up and realizing what I've gotten myself into. I shouldn't have agreed to the salon. I shouldn't like my new hair. It draws too much attention. I should have gone back with Margo and Marney. I shouldn't like the way Julian called me his girl or said I looked too good not to go out. What did that mean? Did I trade the evil I knew for an evil I don't?

“Hailey?” Julian shifts the gears and the car slows. “What’s wrong?”

I don’t speak. I can’t speak. I shouldn’t speak. His hand comes up to mine on the console and I jerk away before he can touch me. This is it, this is where my instincts are proven right. I’m so stupid. How could I let my guard down? Feel anything other than numb? Now I’m screwed. I’m going to feel every lash, every thrust, every stinging slap. All the walls I built are in ruins on the ground and I have nothing to protect me.

I should have let go on the bridge, be damned if he witnessed it. He wouldn’t have been able to save me. I should have been braver. What kind of person can’t do what it takes to prevent the pain? Death would have swaddled me in her blissful nothingness, taking me somewhere hope and despair aren’t a toxic pair that make each other so volatile.

I gasp for air, clutching my chest as my heart slams against my breastbone. My body can’t take it. I knew my body couldn’t take anymore, that’s why I chose to feel nothing. If I didn’t feel happy, I couldn’t feel the pain that threatened to crush my body like a soda can. What have I done?

The car is pulling over to a curb as I clutch at the silly dress, as if I can somehow change my actions and turn it into a burlap sack that no one would find appealing. Tears flood my eyes as the fabric cloys at my dampening skin, sweat drowning me in shame. I’m so stupid and I’m screwed.

“Hey, what’s happening?” Julian’s voice is close, too close. He’s turned in his seat and is leaning over the console.

I shrink against my door.

“Please. Please, don’t,” My throat constricts on the words and I squeeze my eyes shut. I hate the way I sound—desperate and scared—because it won’t matter. Pleas and tears never do anything. They fall on cruel ears and only succeed at exciting men further. They like the fear. It makes them feel more powerful, makes them more fevered and merciless.

But I can't help myself.

"Just let me out. Just let me out," I beg.

I promise myself that I'll run this time. I won't let it keep happening to me. I'll go to a women's shelter. I'll make it on my own or I'll force myself into Death's arms.

"I'm not letting you out on the freeway," He balks.

Through the tears I see his face is stricken, a hand hovering in the air, wanting to touch me, and my body starts shaking at the sight.

"Please," I screech, my voice reaching pitches I haven't used since I was fourteen. "Don't hurt me."

"I wouldn't—" his voice rises. "Hailey, it's okay. You're okay. I wouldn't—"

"Please." I'm full-on sobbing, my body convulsing against the door.

"Just calm down," he says.

But I can't because it's going to hurt so bad. My skin feels electric, buzzing and waiting for the impending afflictions. Maybe if I had stayed unfeeling I could be calm, take it while I floated above, but I've been feeling. Feeling Margo's embrace and Marney's naivety, feeling so much hope that despair has come back with a vengeance.

"Jesus," Julian huffs and then he unbuckles his seat-belt. "Just hold on."

Oh, god. Here it comes.

But then his door clicks, the sound of the passing cars flood in, and he's getting out. He closes the door behind him and I'm in silence. He rounds to the front of the car and I think he's going to come to my door. I jerk to the center console futilely. He's still going to be able to get me. Is he going to drag me out by my feet?

But he stops at the hood and shoves his hands in his pockets. He's mouthing something.

Is this better?

I suck in a shaky breath. Better? Is he not going to pull me out onto the concrete?

You're okay. He mouths. Breathe.

I blink, tears rolling down my cheeks. What's he doing? I glance at the other cars on the freeway speeding by and then back to him in his nice slacks and rolled-up dress sleeves, his collar whipping against his neck from the traffic.

Breathe. He mouths again, his eyes locked on mine, and I try tampering down the hyperventilating.

You're safe.

I uncoil just an inch, shifting so the seat belt latch isn't digging into my butt.

He nods. *Good. Now deep breath.*

My heart slows. My skin cools.

He takes his hands out of his pockets and leans on the hood with his elbows. He motions to himself and then to me. He's showing that he's out there and I'm in here.

Can't hurt you.

I relax my muscles, sliding even further back into my seat. He nods again, a smile slowly coming to his lips. It makes it hard for me to read what he's saying.

That a girl. Good. I think.

After a few moments of him lounging against the hood, every bit as drapery and statue-like as Margo accused, my breathing levels and I sag. I examine his eyes that haven't left mine. There's no anger, no hidden cruelty. They are soft and reassuring, almost pained. Embarrassment burns my cheeks.

I swallow against my dry tongue and mouth. *I'm sorry.* I mouth to him.

He shakes his head and pushes himself up. He motions to his left, to my door, cocking his head in question and I nod weakly.

He comes to the window and braces himself above it, leaning down. He twirls a finger and I roll the window down.

“Are you feeling better?” he asks.

I nod.

“Are you sure? Because you can shimmy over the center and drive away if you want. I can call an Uber.”

The offer fills me with shame and I want him to know I would never do that but can't bring myself to say so.

“I don't have a license.” I use it as an excuse.

His brows raise. “Oh, so you were thinking about it,” he chuckles.

“No!” I protest.

“No, that's alright.” He smiles. “Go ahead. Take the car. I just ask you to hand me my phone first.” He points to his seat, where I notice it lies. “Otherwise, I'll have to walk and might stumble across another girl to take home with me.”

“No—” I start.

“Oh, you don't want me to bring another girl home?”

“No, I—”

“I mean, she probably wouldn't be as pretty as you.”

“That's not what I—”

“But if you want me all to yourself, I understand.”

“Julian.”

“No. No. I understand. It's okay. I'm a one-woman man anyways.” He rests his forearms on the window sill and his chin on his arms. His smile is so big that I can't help but feel my own cheeks rise and I purse my lips to try and stop them.

There's mischief in his eyes and I hold them in battle. He's being childish and I feel something similar bubbling within me. I want to be playful back, give a good quip, but being silly isn't something I'm accustomed to and I don't know what to say.

It leaves us staring back at each other in silence, a warm tension brewing that makes me want to close the distance between us.

A second later, the moment is gone. His smile smooths out and his eyes slowly grow serious.

"I would never hurt you. Not ever," he says.

I nod but don't say anything. I want to believe him, but I don't think I can.

"Okay," he sighs, and I think he knows I'm not convinced. "You sure you're alright?"

"Yes," my voice cracks and I clear my throat. "I'm sorry. I don't know what that was."

"I'd say it was a panic attack." He frowns and then taps the sill. "But I bet you're pretty hungry now." He pushes himself up.

Chapter Sixteen

The sun dips past the horizon as we pull up to our destination, and a valet person takes the key fob from Julian. He helps me out of the car and his palm is warm in mine. soothing, despite my earlier panic. There's only a sidewalk and a velvet rope, but when I look up, I see that the restaurant is every bit as fancy as I anticipated. It's three stories of glass that, looking in, reveals a dim and cozy atmosphere.

A couple disappears into the doors before us, dripping in sophistication, their attire something similar to a prom or wedding. I absently run my hands down my body, feeling unworthy, but my hands are met with the luxurious silk dress that hugs my body and reveals just a kiss of my hip. I remember my hair, how it looked in the mirror at the salon, and try to raise my chin. Inside, I may not belong here, but on the outside, I look every bit the part.

I notice Julian eyeing me patiently, his hand hovering behind my lower back but not touching it. He gives me a tiny nod, and I take a steadying breath before stepping forward.

Inside, we're led to a hushed third level on the opposite end of the building. It has the same glass windows but overlooks the dark ocean below. Thanks to the silk dress, I slip easily into the curved leather booth that makes an almond shape with both ends open. There are two short candles that are flickering in the center of the table. They bounce their reflection off the glass window in a whimsical rhythm that matches the flutter of my heart.

Julian hesitates at the end of the table, looking at the space next to me and then across from me. He readjusts his sleeves, and after a second, takes the booth across from me.

I try to sit up straighter, place my hands in my lap, and keep my legs in their lady-like position. It's immediately exhausting. I wonder how long I can keep this up, especially with my rib aching in agony.

"Drinks?" A waiter appears out of nowhere. He has a cloth hanging over one arm and is dressed head to toe in black. He can't be more than a couple years older than me but his face is placid and devoid of personality, as if his job has chiseled away it.

"Yes," Julian says. "We'll have a bottle of Chateau Margaux. Whatever the sommelier recommends." He quirks a brow at me with a sly smile.

"Of course." The waiter makes to leave.

"Um," I speak up, and he pauses. "May I have a water?" My throat is so dry after the minor breakdown I had in the car.

A flicker of confusion crosses his face but it disappears quickly and he nods. "Of course, Miss," he says and steps away.

In his absence, I catch the eye of an older woman a table away. She's sitting with two other women and she's scowling at me. I avert my eyes and pull at the scrap of fabric that's revealing my high leg, tucking it between my thighs.

"Did you enjoy the salon?" Julian asks me.

I touch the freshly trimmed pieces of my hair and smile but then I think of how much it probably cost, coupled with the pedicure. "I did but I..."

"But what?" He leans in.

"I probably shouldn't have accepted it."

His face creases. "But you enjoyed it?"

"Yes."

“Well then, that’s all that matters.”

The waiter reappears quickly with a dark wine bottle and two glasses, one of which he places in front of me.

“1983 vintage,” he says as he uncorks it with a pop.

A different waitress appears beside him with a pitcher of ice water filled with lemons. She expertly slips around him and fills two glasses before disappearing.

The male waiter pours the wine over his clothed arm, filling both our glasses, nods, and then backs away.

Julian has an amused smile as he eyes my glass.

“Might take the edge off.” He nods at it.

“I don’t think the waiter realized I’m underage.”

“I’m sure he did, but that’s none of his business when a customer orders a fifteen-hundred dollar bottle.”

My bottom lip falls open. Fifteen-hundred dollars? The bottles of alcohol my dad brought home every night were only fifteen dollars. He never spared a drop though, as if it cost him his whole life’s earnings. The glass in front of me is worth twenty times that. I’m torn between having a sip, curious as to what something so expensive tastes like, and politely pushing it away because the idea of having something so costly seems wasted on me. I wouldn’t know if it had all the special notes that it’s supposed to have or be able to appreciate it like Julian.

The most alcohol I’ve ever tried was a beer that I took numbly from my teacher’s blood tinged hand—that was only moments before digging inside me to open me up. He had the beers warm and hidden in the last drawer of his desk. He popped the top and pushed it at me, mumbling something about it helping with any pain I might have.

It did not help. I threw it up ten minutes later in the girls’ bathroom after trying to clean the blood from my underwear.

Remembering makes the inside of my cheeks water and I have to suppress the urge to throw up. I reach for the glass of water instead.

“What just happened there?” Julian’s eyes are narrowed.

I shake my head, and he sets his jaw, but I can see the wheels turning in his mind. There’s no way I’m telling him about that. If I don’t say it out loud, it never happened.

I drink the cold water, feeling it chill my chest and spread through me, calming me.

“I assume you have a prejudice against alcohol,” Julian says after a moment. “In which case I urge you to drink it anyway. A family friend used to drink and when he did, it was ugly. I swore I would never drink, never embarrass myself like that, until I realized that by not drinking I was giving that fear power over me.” He takes a sniff of his glass and then drinks.

I want to tell him that it has nothing to do with what I’ve witnessed in other people when they drink. Like my dad. The alcohol didn’t *make* him cruel and I don’t believe it would make *me* cruel. It only brings out who you already are. But I don’t want to tell him what actually caused me to refrain.

“Whoever, or whatever, has painted it in a poor light is doing you a disservice,” he says. “Alcohol, in moderation, can be cathartic. And this particular red is full of heart-healthy catechins,” he chuckles and takes another sip.

I picture my heart—hollow and gray. It could use something heart-healthy. And the power Julian mentioned, something about it is niggling at me. Everyone has always had more power than me. Stronger, louder, bigger, and smarter. I want my own power.

I pull the glass closer to me, bending my head to take a whiff. It smells like chocolate but flowers at the same time. Nothing like the harsh sting of my dad’s breath, and nothing like the yeast of my only beer.

I take a sip.

* * *

The dress has fallen away from my thigh, revealing whatever it's going to reveal. I'm in a dream as Julian cuts another piece off of what I learned is a tomahawk steak, and puts it on my plate. He ordered me a second side of mashed potatoes after I finished the first and just poured me a third glass of wine.

I'm light. I can't feel my shoulders, which are normally bunched up, and my movements are slow, relaxed, hazy in my own vision. Whatever lady-like appearance I thought I needed to keep up is gone. My elbows are resting on the table and I may have licked one of my fingers but in my defense the drippings from the steak are so savory that my actions could be much worse.

The candles have melted down as I tell Julian about the piano in the music room back at Bridgerock. A secret that I've never told anyone.

"Every day after school, I would spend as much time playing as I could before the janitor came to lock the doors."

"Did you grow up with a piano in your home?" Julian asks.

I shake my head and snort.

"Then how did you learn to play?"

I shrug. It just kind of happened. One day during freshman year I wandered in and fiddled with the keys and after that, I couldn't stop. I never had any outlets, no places or people I could go to, but the piano promised a melody I could pour my sorrows into.

"I think that's the only thing I miss from Bridgerock," I muse as I take another sip of my wine. "I mean, graduating kind of cut me off anyways, but at least I knew it was there. That piano is probably the only thing that—"

I catch myself before I go any further. I may be intoxicated, but I know I don't want Julian to see me in that light. I make a

note to not speak about the piano again. It's actually a sore spot anyway.

In my mind I lock up all the music and the feelings of my fingers on the keys. It hurts too much to think about when I know I'm never going to play again.

Julian doesn't press me and instead tells me about Marney and Dillon. Their parents were friends of Margo and passed away seven years ago, that's when Margo took them in. He explains that Marney is resilient, but Dillon took it very hard. It's only recently that Dillons been doing better, something that Julian chalks up to Dillon taking on running. Which explains the gear he was wearing earlier. Apparently, Dillon is training for an ultra marathon, which spans days and hundreds of miles.

When I asked about college for Dillon, Julian laughed and said, "College isn't necessary in our family." Which makes me more curious what they do to be as rich as they are.

"Margo goes a little overboard with Marney," Julian says now. "I guess from never having a daughter and wanting to make up for Marney's loss. She has her doing ballet, piano, soccer, and acting classes. And you should have seen her thirteenth birthday party."

"What was it?" I ask.

"Hawaii. For eight girls. With a private luau, but add mermaid makeup artists and EDM."

"That sounds like so much fun," I sigh.

"A thirteen-year-old's birthday party?" He quirks a brow.

I start to laugh and then stop abruptly. "I've never had a birthday party."

The girls at school would throw parties all the time, and while anyone could show up, that was somewhere I wouldn't want to be. Not when I knew Kyle would be there, and if I didn't go then that meant I got a free night from him.

Julian is frowning as I spear another stuffed mushroom into my mouth.

“Do you have any ideas on what you would like to do for *your* birthday?” he says this nonchalantly and swirls the wine in his glass.

Even though I’m feeling relaxed, I wouldn’t dare tell him what I would like for my birthday. I can see in his eyes, with my own tipsy eyes, that he would make it happen. No matter what it is. I can feel it. The way he’s fed me every juicy, tender bit of the steak and refilled my glass. He would make every dream of mine come true. But maybe that’s the wine.

He’s leaning in, waiting.

I could ask for anything.

But my mind doesn’t know what I would like. I’ve never had options. Mermaid make-up artists? I couldn’t dream that up in a million years.

“Tell me,” he probes. “Tell me, and I’ll make it happen tonight. I won’t make you wait till your birthday.”

I knew it.

Suddenly, I’m leaning in as well, his cologne reaching me, his eyes earnest and sincere. Maybe I’ve had too much wine. He’s addicting to look at. I can’t look away.

“Anything you want. I’ll make it happen,” he purrs, coming closer, and slipping a hand onto the table.

The only thing I can think that I want is him. I picture stepping, maybe clumsily, out of my side of the booth and curling in on his side. Nestling next to him, his warm body cocooning me. I could fall asleep, relaxed and safe, and watch the sunrise on the beach through the glass windows. I might be brave enough too, with the wine swirling through me, giving me power.

I eye his hand on the table, palm up, and I reach out. First my finger tips grazing his and then slowly sinking down into his

grip.

He doesn't hesitate as he wraps my hand in his and smooths his thumb over my wrist. A warm tingle spreads up my arms and into my chest.

The hushed murmurs of the restaurant are suddenly pierced by a loud voice. "I can't. I'm not going to just stand by."

Pulled from my trance, I look up, and Julian's hand tightens around mine. The woman with the scowl from earlier is pushing her chair back and throwing her napkin on the table.

The other two women with her shake their heads before looking directly at me, sympathy painted on their faces. I don't understand why, even as the woman who stood up from the table is headed our way. Her lips are pursed and her eyes narrowed.

I try to glance at Julian; see if he's aware of what I'm seeing, but my eyes are ripped back to the woman as she approaches our table.

"What you're doing is disgusting," she snaps down at us. "Did you pay for her? Where'd you get her? Nowhere legal, I bet."

Her? As in me? I try to pull my hand out of Julian's, but he doesn't let go. His brows are perked in amusement at the woman but his jaw is saying annoyance.

"Men like you are the reason our daughters aren't safe," she seethes, bending over and leaning on the table. She stares at our entwined hands and sneers. "She's a child, for god's sake."

The woman is screeching, drawing attention from other guests. I see our waiter and other servers appear from around a corner. There's what looks to be a chef with a dish rag in his hands too, gawking over the shoulder of a waitress.

The wine and food turn to poison in my stomach, my mind sobering dizzyingly fast. I dip my head, hiding my face behind my hair and use my free hand to tuck the dress back between my thighs.

“I don’t even know what kind of establishment this is, letting you plow her full of alcohol. Does it make it better for you? Being able to take advantage of a helpless girl,” she huffs, out of breath.

“Are you finished?” Julian drawls. “You are causing quite the scene.”

I’m surprised by the cool tone of his voice while I try to shrink into myself.

“I’ve sat right there.” She points at her abandoned table. “All night, forced to watch your sickening little rendezvous. It’s dark in here but not dark enough to hide what you do to her. You think you’re some big shot—”

“You’re embarrassing your dinner guests.” Julian motions to the other two women she was with, who seem to be gathering their purses.

“You’re the one that should be embarrassed. What kind of man has to manipulate a young girl and dress her up like a whore.”

Julian tears his hand from mine and then the table is banged. Every plate, glass, and piece of silverware rattles with the force of his fist slamming down on it.

The woman jumps back, clutching her chest.

“My god,” she breathes, as Julian makes to stand.

“A whore?” he growls.

My heart starts to thump wildly in my chest.

“You want to berate me?” He gets in front of her. “Call me disgusting?” He towers over her. “Fine.” He shrugs with a tight tremor. “But don’t you *fucking* dare say a thing about her.” His body goes rigid.

The woman’s voice breaks nervously. “You can’t intimidate me. I’ve dealt with men like you my whole life.”

Julian laughs. “Men like me? I don’t think so.”

A couple of people have turned their chairs to watch the commotion while the woman's guests have stood and descended the stairs. The wait staff are still congregated near the kitchen door but one of them is now fumbling with a walkie talkie.

If the police get called, will they find out I'm only seventeen? Will I get sent back to Bridgerock? Will Julian get in trouble for letting me drink the wine?

"I know so." The woman gets a proper step back and tries to straighten up. "What business do you have with her if not for something nefarious?"

"That would make it my business."

"That's what I thought."

"Think what you want. I don't really care. But you're going to back the fuck up and shut your mouth."

"I'll do no such thing. I'm not going to be scared out of saving a young girl."

"The girl you just called a whore."

"That—"

"Do you need saving?" Julian tosses over his shoulder to me, cutting off the woman.

I want to say the only saving I need right now is from this situation but as I try to speak, my mouth goes dry. A large man in all black is bounding up the stairs, eyes set on Julian. My eyes start to burn with tears. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have drank the wine.

"I'll take that as a yes." The woman swoops nimbly around Julian and is suddenly clutching my arm. "I'll get you out of here, Dear."

Her bony fingers are like ice as they dig into my skin and tug at me.

"Are you insane?" Julian yells, spinning around just as quickly. "Get your hands off her." I can see his neck strain, a vein

bulging as he tries to restrain himself. “Don’t make me—”

I’m trying to shrug the woman off, backing against the cool glass, but her nails are sharp and she’s got a tight grip.

Julian is firing away at the security man that’s made it to us. He’s saying something about not hurting a woman, but it’s drowned out by the insistent cooing of the vulture-like lady with a death grip on me.

“We’ll find your parents. Get you out of that dress. He won’t hurt you anymore,” she says.

The tears are blinding my vision as I choke on a sob. I want to tell her Julian doesn’t hurt me, that he actually saved me, that I like the dress, that I don’t want to ever find my parents, but all that comes out is a whimper.

Suddenly, the table is ripped out from its place. The candles and dinnerware go crashing to the floor.

“That’s enough!” Julian booms so loud that I feel the glass behind me vibrate.

The woman freezes, her hand loosening on my arm, and I take the opportunity to wrench it from her, tucking it against my chest. She had grabbed it in the same place that Kyle had and the bruises ache once more. One of my heels has slipped off and my free foot is on the booth, knee up, as I cower against the cold glass.

“You’re lucky you’re a woman.” Julian shoots daggers at her.

The woman is frozen, hunched over near me, eyes wide as the bouncer puts a hand under her elbow. “Time to go,” he says.

For a second, she just stares at Julian, her thin lips pursed and then she rears her head back and spits. It lands right on his cheek.

Julian’s jaw grinds back and forth as a tremor rolls through him. Suddenly, the similar vein of Cape’s appears on his forehead, and it’s like I can see blood and rage pumping up his

neck. His fist is clenched by his side, and it shakes with barely contained violence.

Without thinking, I whip a hand out and slap the woman across her face. Horrified, I quickly take my hand back and clasp it over my mouth. Her jaw hits the floor, and her eyes flare as she grabs her cheek. Oh, my god. Did I just do that?

Terror runs through me. I don't know why I did that. Julian just looked so angry, and it was so awful of her. How dare her saliva touch his skin? How dare she ruin the best night I've ever had? But I've never slapped anyone, even if they deserved it. Which she did, and Julian couldn't do anything about it.

The bouncer tugs the woman away, who seems stunned, and I look at Julian in worry. Will he think I'm some feral cat? I shouldn't have done that. That's not who I am.

When I catch his eyes though, they are sparkling and his lips are curved into a side smile.

"That a girl," he says and wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

Chapter Seventeen

On the way back to Margo's, Julian shows me his house. We don't get out of the car, but he pulls up in front and points.

It's only three massive homes down the street from Margo's, and while it's just as expensive as the rest of the homes, it's sleek and gray, with darkened windows and several floating balconies. He doesn't ask me if I want to go inside, but I can feel the unasked question in the air. Whatever restraint he has is impeccable considering the incident at the restaurant, and the way he stares at my legs in the dim glow of the street light. I think he wants to ask if I would like to see inside, and I might say yes, but he refrains and then hitches a hand over my headrest, reversing us all the way back to Margo's.

It's a dizzyingly slow drive as his arm never leaves the headrest and is aching close to the side of my cheek. I can not only feel the heat coming off it, but see the muscles flex under the fabric.

I really don't want to go back to Margo's.

But now that I'm in my 'room', exhaustion has taken over. I've just slipped out of the dress and into the satin pajamas when Marney knocks lightly.

"Oh, my god. We're like twins!" She beams and loops her arm through mine, dragging me to the mirror. She's in her Belle Luna set as well, except in a pastel rose color. She grips me tight and then poses, puckering her lips in the mirror. Her phone comes out of nowhere as she holds it up and snaps several quick pictures.

“We look cute,” she states, looking me in the eyes as if I was worried.

“So how did your dateeee go?” She lets go and plops down on the bed.

“It wasn’t a date,” I say.

“Stopp. I don’t care what Dillon thinks. He can be a dick. I want details.”

“What... What does Dillon think?” I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know but can’t help myself.

“That you’re too young for him and blah blah blah.” She waves her hands theatrically and I see a bit of Margo in the movement, even though Marney is so young.

“But we’re not—”

“Oh, please! Julian doesn’t even talk about girls let alone bring any home.”

I try to picture Julian celibate but I fail miserably. He’s way too good looking and charming. Even if women weren’t on his mind, he would be on theirs, clawing and chomping at the bit to get a taste.

“What?” Marney asks.

I smooth out my face to try and hide my frown. “Nothing,” I say and shake my head.

“Don’t let Dillon get to you,” she whines and pulls at the duvet, tucking it into her lap. “I’m glad you’re here. We don’t outnumber the boys but at least now we’re even.” She makes a pout and my heart strings tug.

It can’t be easy losing your parents and then being around only boys. Not that Margo doesn’t count but she’s so much older.

I sit down on the bed across from her, wondering if any of her girlfriends are true friends. I know I didn’t have any but I probably wouldn’t have had any appropriate girl talk to gossip about anyways.

Dinner with Julian may not have been a date, at least I don't think so, but I can still indulge Marney.

"Something did happen," I whisper to her.

Her eyes light up. "Did you kiss?"

"No," I snort and roll my eyes. "I ended up slapping someone."

Her jaw drops dramatically. "Shut up!" she squeals.

I tell her about the awful woman, leaving out the bit where I was called a whore. She gasps after every sentence and I find myself scooting closer to her as we talk conspiratorially. At some point, I'm snug in the duvet with her and it feels like she's the friend I've always wanted, even if she is only thirteen.

I don't know many thirteen-year-olds, and of course I can see the bits of her that are super tween, but she's whip-smart. She has an elevated seriousness that must come from losing your parents so young and what she's been through. I think it's aged her and gave her a self-awareness she probably wouldn't otherwise have.

Numbly, I wonder how aged I am, considering what I've been through.

Finally, when I have no more details to give, she groans. "So, nothing happened between you guys?"

"No," I tell her for the third time.

"Because of how old he is?" she probes.

I shrug. I don't want to tell her about my experiences with men and I honestly don't know what to make of Julian. He *is* older, but somehow he doesn't feel any older than me. Seeing out of my own eyes, I don't feel like a child with him, the way the woman at the restaurant spoke of me, but I can see how it looks through other people's eyes. It's probably not the best idea to get involved with Julian.

Marney untangles herself from the blanket and yawns, making her way to the door. I'm about to say good night when

she turns around, her hand resting on the doorknob.

“At least you’re almost eighteen. Then you guys can do whatever you want,” she says and then leaves me. The thought giving me butterflies.

I fall asleep quickly. The pajamas really are cozy and I have no idea what magic the bed is made of because it feels like sleeping on a cloud. I’m in that place where I know I’m asleep, but something is waking me, and my eyes are too heavy to open.

Muffled voices are coming from outside my door. Bickering, trying to whisper but too heated.

“You will not... Sleeping.” It’s Margo.

“...going to happen...” Julian whispers back.

Why is he here and not at his house?

The sound of his voice gives me the energy to open my eyes and peel the comforter back.

“She’s seventeen,” Margo snaps at him.

“I know, Ma. Jesus, I know. I just want—”

“Want what? To watch her while she sleeps?”

“I’m just going to sit in there.”

“You don’t think that’s a little disturbing, Jules?”

Silence.

I slink out of the bed and tiptoe closer to the door.

“What has gotten into you?” Margo says, and I can hear her sigh through the door.

“I don’t know,” Julian groans. *“She’s just so fragile, Ma.”*

“I know.”

“I mean, whatever’s happened to her has been fucked.”

“I know that too. Her rib is broken.”

“What?!” Julian’s voice raises, and the floor creaks. The knob slightly rattles and I jump back, expecting the door to fly open.

“Shhh.” The floor creaks again, but the door doesn’t open. I picture Margo stopping him. *“It will heal on its own.”*

“What kind of scum of the earth would—”

“The world’s full of it. You know that.”

“But to her? She doesn’t deserve that.”

“No one does.”

Another silence comes and I inch closer to the door.

“There’s a lot of fragile girls out there,” Margo says.

“But she’s special.”

“How, Jules? Why her?”

“She’s... Jesus, Ma...”

I push my ear against the door.

“She’s not just some broken girl. She’s... She’s...”

A moment ticks by while he struggles to find the words, and finally Margo speaks.

“I know. I know.” The floor creaks and I think she’s pulled him in for a hug. *“But you have to wait till—”*

“I’ll wait,” Julian cuts her off. *“But she’s still mine.”*

Margo sighs.

“Tell Dillon to stick to his own fucking hallway in the meantime.”

Chapter Eighteen

Despite last night, I let Marney drag me with her for a walk with Dillon. Apparently, it's a rest day in his marathon training but he still does some activity. I'm guessing that Marney is trying to warm me up to Dillon, so when she pulled me around the corner and begged for me to go, I said okay.

We go out the back french doors and follow some steps down to the beach. It's getting nippy outside, but the sand is giving off warmth and I'm tempted to take off my shoes and walk barefoot, never having felt sand. But both Marney and Dillon have on sneakers, and I don't want to seem like the girl enthralled by a beach. To them, it's probably not even a blip on their radar, but for me, I can't stop craning my neck to look at the waves.

I just can't believe there is such an expanse. In Bridgerock, the mountains surrounded the town, making it feel like there was no way out. The ocean though, feels massive, open, and freeing. I feel like I'm breathing deeper than I ever have.

Marney is walking backwards and rambling to Dillon and me about a ballet recital with her arch nemesis—her words—and she's freaking out about it.

"I can't believe we are going to be in the same set," she groans. "She doesn't care about the rest of us and thinks the whole show is going to be for her. She spins into us all the time and the instructor doesn't say anything."

"Spin back into her," Dillon says.

He's wearing joggers and a shirt with the sleeves cut off where the sides dip down and show off glimpses of his abs. He clearly puts work into his physique, but if I know anything about men, it's that they don't need to be any stronger than they are. But so far, he hasn't been aggressive towards me or said anything rude, even though I know that my presence upsets him. I'm thankful for that, at least, but every time he looks at me, his face crumples.

"I'm not going to stoop to her level," Marney sneers and Dillon laughs.

"It's just doing to her what she's doing to you." He shrugs. "But if you want to—" He raises his nose in the air and mock flicks his hair back. "*—Not stoop to her level...*"

I can't help but snicker at the imitation and he smiles at me for a moment. And then, as if thinking better, lets his face sag.

Sigh.

"Margo says you do to others as you want done to you," Marney says, "I don't want *her* spinning into *me*, so I'm not going to spin into her."

"Fair enough." Dillon frowns in thought. "What do you think, Hailey?"

I'm caught off guard by the question and stumble in the sand. An amused dimple appears on his cheek as I straighten myself out.

"I agree with Marney," I say, "Do unto others as you would like done to you." Even though I've never been rewarded for such a belief. I can count endless times when I've been disappointed in the results, but in this scenario, I'm sure that ballerinas spinning back and forth into each other would be dangerous.

Marney gives me a conspiratorial look like; *See? Girls rule and boys drool.*

I smile to myself at the small battle line she's drawn. I've never had another girl to stand tall with against men and their

‘fight fire with fire’ way of thinking.

Marney spins around, satisfied. When she does, she spots three white poodles running around at the water’s edge. She quickly dashes forward after them.

“Great,” Dillon sighs, stopping in his tracks.

“What?” I ask, doing the same.

“That’s Dante.” He nods toward the owner of the dogs.

It’s an older man with graying chest hair on display. Dillon turns around and dips his head as if avoiding him.

“Him and his wife live around the bend of Padaro Lane,” he says.

“So?” I look over his shoulder to make sure Marney is okay with this so-called Dante. Is he a pervert?

“Normally, Eloise walks the dogs.” He cringes. “Guess that’s not gonna happen anymore,” he says the last bit mostly to himself.

“Why not?” I still haven’t taken an eye off Marney, who is now on her knees in the sand, scratching behind the ears of the slender poodle.

“Long story, but short version is I’m not Dante’s favorite person right now.”

I snort at his tone. “What did you do, sleep with his wife?”

I take my eyes off Marney when Dillon gets quiet. His lips are pursed and he’s rubbing the back of his neck like he has a sudden bad kink.

“You didn’t, right? I mean that guy’s wife has to be like fifty years old.”

“She’s forty-eight and you’re one to talk,” he snaps back quickly.

My mouth falls open. What in the rich suburb?

I give Dillon another once over. He's not my type but he's good looking all the same. Fit and tanned, blonde hair with blue eyes to match, and only twenty-one. What would possibly possess him to sleep with a married woman? He could probably get any girl he wanted. And younger too. Not that there is anything wrong with older women but I just didn't expect it from Dillon.

"You're not even legal." He sneers. "Julian and Cape are twisted. You think Margo is going to protect you? She lets them do whatever the fuck they want. Do you even know what they do?" The question seems rhetorical because he doesn't give me a second to answer before he's towering over me, his face so close to mine that I can smell the remnants of a smoothie on his breath. "Cape's fiance ended up dead because of it, but let's bring another girl around to get killed. Oh, and make her a fucking child."

I shrink back, my eyes darting past him to see if Marney has noticed the way her brother has advanced on me, but she's still playing with the dogs. I don't know what I expect from her, she's only thirteen, but maybe if she came back he would calm down.

"Are you...?" He narrows his eyes at my trembling hands. "Are you fucking scared of me?" He steps back casually and laughs.

I take the opportunity to breathe and back away from him.

"Me?" He motions to himself and laughs some more, but it's a bitter sound that makes my skin crawl. "You're sleeping in the lion's den but you're afraid of me? You have no idea—"

"Hailey! Come see!" Marney hollers, cutting him off.

Everything in me wants to bolt straight to her but I'm afraid that Dillon will reach out and try to stop me. I can't even process what he's said, only that he invaded my space and snarled, his face twisting into a familiar aggression that always leads to one thing. Pain.

Yet I can't move—like a petrified lamb. Any resistance I show could tip him over, feel the need to knock me down and prove I can't get away. I'm waiting for it. That or the look that tells me I'm free to go.

“Wow,” he says and shakes his head. “I'm out of here. Watch Marney.”

I breathe in relief as he walks back the way we came, leaving me clutching my stomach.

Chapter Nineteen

Margo announced a family dinner earlier, and my hands are shaking under the table as Dillon takes a seat across from me. He smiles politely at me like nothing happened on the beach, and if I didn't know better, I would take his aloof baby face as non-threatening. But, now I know.

My stomach twists at the realization that he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. Everything about him has the ability to lure you in unassumingly. His blue eyes are large and his blonde hair is light and inviting. I would have no idea that his face could twist into malice. I need to be careful with him.

Marney is helping Margo in the kitchen. I can hear her giggling, but Julian is not here yet, which leaves me and Dillon alone at the elaborate table. When he catches my eye, I look away.

"Attending the family dinner?" He sinks back in his chair. "You sure you want to know all the family secrets?"

His tone is harmless but his words unsettle me. I take a shallow breath, one he won't notice, and keep my head down.

Do I want to know the family secrets? Considering what he said earlier, I'm not sure. I've already wracked my brain for what Julian's profession could be. I've exhausted myself with everything illegal and everything legal and yet dangerous at the same time. Yet, I can't figure out how any of it would get Cape's fiancée—ex-fiance?—killed. Unless being a part of the family means doing whatever it is they do.

There's only one idea in my head that worries me. Everything else I can deal with but I will not be a *product*. I will drown myself in the ocean before I have to endure one more man hurting me. The last few days have been such a reprieve that I think it's given me the strength to meet Death's sweet embrace if ever faced with the option again.

Margo billows into the dining room with an ice bucket full of cold beers and heaves it onto the table. She lets out a huff and flings her hair back.

"At least one of the boys can be on time." She smiles appreciatively down at Dillon. She grabs his head and pulls it against her chest, giving a squeeze and pats him on the cheek. "Don't tell the others, but I think you're my favorite." She laughs.

Dillon's mouth cracks into a wide smile, a flicker of a blush at his cheeks. "I would never keep a beautiful woman like you waiting." He sits up straighter as she lets him go.

"Hmmm." Margo muses. "I don't know about beautiful anymore."

"You're a fine wine, Margo." He hollers behind him as she goes back to the kitchen.

My lips perk at the small exchange and I bite my lip to hide it. Did he just flirt with Margo? He turns back in his seat, a self-satisfied smirk on his face as he smooths his hands over the tablecloth.

I'm choking back a snort when Julian appears in the archway and leans against the frame, crossing his arms.

"Something amusing?" he purrs.

I shake my head, my cheeks heating as I remember the last time I heard his voice. He called me *his* from the other side of my door.

"I don't think I would like it if anyone else besides me made you smile." He holds my eyes as he pushes off the frame and grips Dillon's shoulder. Dillon winces but clicks his tongue.

“Possessive much?” Dillon’s nose crinkles.

“Only when something is mine.” Julian’s eyes sparkle at me.

“Don’t see how you can—” Dillon starts but then Marney comes skipping in.

“Margo says I can open the beers!” She has a bottle opener in her hand and her eyes are bright with excitement.

Julian gives Dillon a small shake and makes the trek around the massive table to sit beside me. He ducks his head down and his breath tickles my hair.

“You look beautiful,” he says in my ear, and I can feel the heat from the palm of his hand hovering over my thigh. He doesn’t rest it there but he might as well have the way my body stiffens in anticipation.

My body is responding to him in ways I’ve never felt. Normally, I would have to fight the urge to recoil from such a movement, and it’s confusing to actually want a man’s hand on my thigh.

Without taking his eyes off mine he reaches out for a beer, the ice clinking, and holds it up to me in offer.

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“I get to open it!” Marney rushes around the table. “Please. Please. Please.” She reaches out.

“Here. Here. Here.” Julian chuckles and hands her the bottle.

“Marney, be careful,” Dillon warns.

I notice the genuine worry in his eyes as she fumbles with the opener. I’ve been opening beer bottles since I was eight-years-old and my dad didn’t even bat an eye.

“She’s got it.” Julian brushes Dillon off even though his face is saying he’s worried too.

Marney tucks the bottle into the crook under her arm, standing on her tippy toes, and struggles to latch the opener

around the top. After a moment, she angles the opener and it slips off without catching.

“I can do it.” Dillon stands up.

“Just tilt it the other way.” Julian makes the motion with his hand and Dillon stops while she tries again. A hiss finally permeates the air and Dillon sags back into his chair.

Maybe he’s not that bad if he can care so much for Marney. Maybe he’s just concerned for me the way the woman at the restaurant was. They would be wrong, but I can see where they are coming from.

With a big grin, Marney hands the beer to Julian who then sets it in front of me.

“Want to do another?” Julian asks and she nods eagerly.

We are twenty minutes into the dinner of fajitas when Cape finally shows up. He’s wearing black jeans, boots and a tight black henley that shows just how muscular he actually is. So far, no one has discussed any family secrets but I think that’s about to change with his presence. My stomach ties itself into a knot.

Marney, seemingly unaffected, jumps up when he pulls a beer from the ice and she offers to open it.

“With that?” He motions to the bottle opener in her hands.

When she nods he shakes his head. “Let me show you how to really open a beer.”

Margo sighs. “Not on my table.”

“I’ll buy you a new one.” Cape smirks before positioning his beer cap on the edge and slamming a fist down.

Marney’s eyes light up when the top flies off. “Let me try!”

“No,” Margo and Dillon say in unison.

They share a small smile before Marney slinks back to her seat.

“Are you going to buy her a new table when you haven’t even been pulling your weight?” Julian turns to Cape, who has taken a seat at the head of the table.

I set my fork down, anticipating another scuffle.

“If I carry anymore weight, little brother, I might be crushed under it all.” He takes a swig of the beer, leans back and puts a boot on the table.

“Are you drunk?” Margo snaps and leans over, smacking his foot off.

“I prefer to call it numb,” Cape drawls, smiling.

I eye him cautiously. He may think he’s numb but I can see a rage brewing under his calm demeanor. Something similar to how my dad would stumble in the front door, singing a tune and walking on water, until something would set him off, and give me whiplash.

But I have to give it to Cape. His eyes aren’t swimming around in their sockets and he looks clear and aware. Especially so, as his gaze lingers over me. I try to make myself smaller, as if that will protect me from whatever he’s thinking as his eyes roam me up and down. Which must be something sinister if the way he’s biting his lip says anything.

Suddenly, Julian’s fingertip is under my chin, tilting my head up, his face close to mine.

“Don’t be afraid of him.” his words come out like a spell, authoritative and eliciting.

I scoot closer to him in my seat and straighten up, not wanting to disappoint him.

“Good girl,” he hums and grips my hand under the table. The infliction of pride in his voice makes my lungs feel a little bigger, and I take a needed breath.

When I look up, I see that Dillon is paused mid-chew with a look of disgust. I have to resist the urge to sink in my seat again.

“I can tell this dinner isn’t going to last long.” Margo pushes her plate away. “So let me make some things clear before you all dissolve into children.”

“Hey!” Marney says.

“Not you, Dear. I know you’re more mature than anyone else.”

Marney smirks and reaches for another tortilla. I can’t help but agree with Margo. Marney doesn’t seem to have a single qualm about sitting at a table with three warring men, yet I’m eyeing the exit like a caged rat.

“Hailey, Peach...” Margo singles me out. “We’re a tight family, tighter than most, but we aren’t about excluding anyone. Julian has made it clear that he wants you here.”

I look up to Julian, who nods assuredly, and my heart skips a beat.

“But I think you need to know what you are getting yourself into first.” She somberly flicks her gaze to Cape. “Just because Julian wants you here doesn’t mean you have to stay.”

“I want her to stay too,” Marney pipes in.

“I know. I know.” Margo bats her hand at Marney and then studies me. “Julian said you were with him when he delivered a package.”

I’m not sure if I’m expected to lie or confirm. Everyone’s eyes are on me, and I feel a heat creeping up my neck. I knew I was witness to something sketchy but I didn’t see much, so why do I feel like I’m being tested?

“Dumbass,” Cape says, and I know he’s talking to Julian.

“It’s okay,” Margo says. “I’m just curious what you think you saw.”

I tear at my bottom lip with my teeth. “Nothing. Not really,” I say. “I mean...” I look up to Julian for help and he nods. “I just

saw a gun. But it was really dark, and I don't even know what they traded."

Margo raises a high brow. "And you didn't go running at the sight? I'll give it to you, Peach. You're braver than me."

"It was Julian holding the gun. I didn't see the others with one," I say.

"Oh, believe me, they had guns." She chuckles. "But you weren't scared of Jules?"

Was I being stupid? Probably. A stranger pulled out a gun from a hidden compartment, and I didn't even flinch. But I didn't feel like Julian was the threat. I had left that back in Bridgerock.

"No," I say.

"Because you aren't scared of guns or you aren't scared of Jules?"

My palm is sweating in Julian's hand under the table. I don't want to tell her that I have no reason to fear guns, that they are just one of Death's toys. The past few days the urge to find her painless embrace has waned, but hasn't left my mind entirely. Why fear a gun when it's one and the same?

"Both," I finally say, realization hitting me in the chest. I'm not afraid of Julian either. With or without a gun.

Dillon rolls his eyes.

"Okay then." Margo blows out a breath. "The thing is, there's just no possible way for you to be here and be in the dark. I won't whisper in my own home. You understand that right?"

I nod.

"So I'll tell you what we do. But only if you want to stay."

The air clogs in my chest. Whatever they do got Cape's fiance killed. Do I want to stay knowing that? Death may not scare me but what if there is more pain involved? The only thing more worrisome than that, is not having Julian. His hand in mine. The look in his eyes when I slapped the woman at the restaurant. The

utter lack of fear he causes in me. Would there ever be another man I would feel safe with?

“I want to stay,” I say.

Chapter Twenty

Despite how comfy the bed is, I can't sleep. I tiptoe down the staircase and slip out the back, pausing to take a blanket from one of the chairs.

It's probably close to two a.m. and I dig my feet into the cold sand. There isn't a single other person in sight, and nothing but inky darkness as far as my eye can see. The only way I know the ocean is there is because of the waves curling up the shore.

I just couldn't stop replaying what Margo had said. *International. Guns. Hundreds of thousands.* I know that's a thing—legally, I mean. The gun trading industry is something the government controls and contracts out for, but Margo didn't mention if what they did was legal. But she didn't say it was illegal either. Though, I'm guessing it was implied since she said they typically don't get their hands dirty, and have others in their network that handle most of the coordinating.

Dillon kept his head down for the rest of the meal as if he couldn't bear hearing about it. If it bothers him so much, why doesn't he just leave? He's old enough. I think with how mature Marney is that she would understand.

It must not be common knowledge how much he disapproves though because he didn't seem compelled to bring up Cape's fiancée, and now that I think about it, neither did Cape. He sat there, sipping his beer, eyes dissecting a notch in the table. Julian was the only one who seemed interested in the little reveal, smoothing his thumb over my hand and elaborating about the deal in Florida.

It was apparently a means to establish a rapport. He didn't say what kind of gun, or guns, that he gave them but did say it was a special, and they paid a pretty penny for it. One of the unique occasions where their hands get dirty.

I take a deep breath of the salty air. I tell myself that it doesn't matter what they do, as long as I'm safe, which Julian makes me feel. I don't see how Cape's fiancée was killed though, unless Dillon was lying.

A shadow suddenly blocks the moonlight. I clutch quickly at the blanket, twisting to look behind me. A figure in black looms over me, arms crossed over their chest.

"Thinking of running?" Cape asks.

I suck in air at the sound of his voice.

"No." I make to stand, wanting to hurry past him and back into the safety of the house.

"Sit back down." He puts a firm hand on my shoulder and it prevents me from standing.

"Uh..." I crumple back to the sand.

"What? Scared of your boyfriend's brother?" his voice takes on a taunting edge as he lets go and lowers himself beside me. "I don't bite," he says as he dusts the sand from his hands. "Unless you want me to..." He raises his brow in question, a playful quirk in it.

I crane my head around at the house, hoping someone else is coming out or sees that I'm alone on the beach with Cape.

"I'm kidding." He plants a hand on my head and turns it back to face forwards. "Shit, you're skittish."

"I should probably go to sleep. It's getting cold," I lie. My heart is beating so fast that the blood in my body is flushing my skin.

Cape straightens up and shrugs off his jacket. "Here." He drapes it over my shoulders.

I stiffen. The jacket envelops me in the scent of rum, a touch of masculine cologne, and a bit of sweat. It's musky and heady, an intimate smell that makes me gulp.

"So, you want to run?" He massages the stubble on his chin as he squints out at the black ocean.

I try to clear my throat. "No."

"Shame. Thought I might come with you."

In surprise, I really look at him then. His lips are turned down, all the typically etched anguish on his face is slack and he almost looks his age—maybe early thirties?—less severe, and dare I say, less dangerous.

"You want to run?" I risk asking.

"Run, die, cease, whatever."

My heart pangs for him. I know what that feels like. Even if it comes from a different place. I've never lost anyone like he has. I can't imagine what it feels like to lose someone you love. I want to ask him what her name was but I don't think I should let him know that I know, in case that sets him off.

"I think I'm too much of a coward, though," he says.

His words are so familiar that I can't help but agree, and my response slips out before I can stop myself. "Me too."

He dips his head and looks at me, his eyes prodding and suspicious. "I don't think you understand what wanting to die feels like."

A fluff of anger runs through me. He doesn't know me, doesn't know what I've endured. I narrow my eyes at him. "I know what wanting to make the pain stop feels like."

He studies me for a moment before his lip slowly quirks up. "Yeah, what do you know about pain?"

My nostrils flare. "I know what it feels like when your teacher's dick is too big, so he has to dig his fingers inside you to claw his way in."

I quickly look away, shocked that I said that, the words feeling like someone else's venom on my tongue.

Cape doesn't say anything, but I can feel his eyes on me and hear a bone grinding in his jaw. I expect him to laugh, scoff, or accuse me of lying, but after a quiet moment, he looks away.

"You're not a coward," he says.

I whip my head back to him, a fight at my lips. Of course, I'm a coward, buried under so much pain and unable to make it stop. But he keeps talking.

"It makes you brave, choosing to continue living with that gnawing away at you. I'm just a selfish coward. I deserve to die but can't face it."

I frown, not understanding. Death has always been a face I look into for comfort, the idea that he fears it confuses me.

"You can face her," I say. I don't mean to encourage him, but I feel like he needs to know he's not a coward, that he just doesn't understand, that Death is nothing to fear.

"Her?"

"Death," I clarify, embarrassed that I let that slip.

He laughs. "Of course death is a woman."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "Just that would be a cherry on the top of a karmic sundae."

"No," I say fervently. "Death isn't vengeful." I turn my body towards him, desperate for him to understand. "She doesn't care about karma or what you've done. She welcomes everyone, offering peace, a home where pain and suffering don't exist."

He slowly turns his head toward me. "If that's the case, then I don't think I deserve death."

I cock my head at him. "Everyone deserves Death." The words are morbid but only if you don't understand. Everyone

deserves to finally have the pain stop, for the memories to vanish, the struggle to cease.

He looks me over, studying my face and I think he's starting to understand.

"You're a little fucked up in the head, aren't you?" he finally says.

I rear back and turn to the ocean. I think I'm less fucked up in the head than most people. At least, I don't add to anyone's tally of living struggles. Kyle was fucked up in the head—my dad, my teacher, and every man I've encountered besides Julian.

"Don't take offense. So is Julian, and Dillon, and probably Marney most of all," he says.

"What?"

"You think it's normal to bring home a seventeen-year-old girl and claim her as yours? And you think Dillon running for three hours every morning is normal? And Marney was born into this, she doesn't even know what normal is."

"But you're normal?"

He barks a laugh and his eyes darken. "No, I'm the most fucked up of them all."

"How?" I ask with a shaky voice, scared of what he might reveal.

"I wouldn't wait till you are eighteen to fuck you." He leans in. "But I'd go slow, no clawing my way in, you'd blossom for me, beg for it."

This is the part where I'm supposed to slap him or run, but in true form I sit there, my mouth making a little 'o', caught like a deer in headlights as he continues.

"Have you ever even orgasmed?" He tilts his head. "Do you want to know what it's supposed to feel like? I could give you a taste right now. Or should I say, I could take a taste. Run the tip of my tongue over that little bud of yours."

His face is so close to mine that I can imagine what the stubble on his face would feel like. I can feel the heat of his tongue as he licks his lip, make out the small dimple in his cheek as he stares down at me.

If I don't move, he's going to kiss me. But my brain isn't working, no alarms are going off. Nothing is yelling at me to protect myself. The only thing I can feel is a throbbing, an ache, a dizzying sense of yearning. Do I want this?

Part of me knows that Julian isn't going to touch me, not yet at least, and I appreciate that, but Cape is offering something I've never had. Something I've always wondered about.

"I won't even ask for anything in return," his husky breath floods my senses. "I'll just give. I won't take. You want that?" He pauses, waiting for an answer but I can't find my tongue. "You have to give me consent, baby. Say the word and I'll drown myself in your pussy."

Consent. Consent. I've never given that, never been asked for it. Never even been given the chance to say no. The notion that this could happen or not depending on what I say gives me a thrill. I can, for once, say no, and it's the first time I don't want to say no. I want the orgasm. I want to know what it feels like to have a man's head between my legs, to hold the power.

I'm torn between both powers. The power of saying no and the power of looking down at him as he licks me, gasping for breath as I wrap my thighs around his neck.

"Tick tock. tick tock. I'm getting hard just thinking about it." He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear and I shiver. "You probably taste like innocence," he groans. "Fair warning though, I might not be able to stop licking you, long after you've come on my chin."

My body jerks involuntarily, a need pushing me closer to him, the idea of his mouth on me.

"That's it, let me make you come."

I suck in a breath, my muscles tightening. I want it desperately, but the power he's giving me is intoxicating and addicting. The ability to walk away and take something he wants with me.

"No," I whisper, and adrenaline courses through me.

"Are you sure about that?" He slips a hand to the side of my neck, thumb running along my jaw. "I don't think Julian would mind."

"No," I say louder, raising my chin. I can't help the satisfied smirk playing on my lips.

Cape drops his hand. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure." I slip off his jacket and stand, holding it out to him a fingertip.

Chapter Twenty-One

I'm wide awake at eight a.m., waiting for anyone to wake up, my body energetic and antsy. Finally, I hear pop music, distant and matching my mood. I'm giddy, high on power as I follow the music down the hallway. Marney has a blow dryer running and the smell of citrus conditioner wafts my way as I round a corner.

She's in a fuzzy robe, beauty products scattered on the counter, as she whips a funny looking dryer around her head.

"Oh, my god. Feel!" she yells when she sees me and points the dryer at me. "It's not as hot right? It's less damage to your hair!" she exclaims. "It's totally worth the five-hundred-dollars."

"I thought Margo said no?" I try to stop my hair from flying all over.

"She just gave it to me, for my recital." She beams.

"It's tonight?"

"Yes! You have to come." She throws the five-hundred-dollar blow dryer onto the counter with a clatter and runs out of the bathroom. "Margo!! We need a ticket for Hailey! She says she's coming!"

I try to stop a smile as I hear her thumping down the hall. Poor Margo.

I dip my head down, examining the endless products pooling in the sink, and reading the brands—Farmacy, Estee Lauder, Dior, Inkey List, so many names I don't recognize. What about Covergirl or Loreal?

I sigh at the things I've missed out on.

When I turn, Julian is standing in the doorway, watching me.

“Do you want to go shopping?” he asks and motions to the mess. “We can get you whatever you want.”

I snort. “I don’t need these things.” That’s not an offense to Marney, I just wouldn’t even know how to apply most of them.

“I said want, not need.”

A melancholy comes over me as I come down from my power trip. Maybe I am supposed to want makeup, skincare and pretty scented conditioner, but I’m too broken. Fucked up in the head like Cape said.

He said Marney is fucked up too, but from what I can see, at least she didn’t grow up in fear and doesn’t ever have to go through what I went through. She gets worried about things like ballet blow dryers, and who celebrities are dating. I never had that luxury. And I’m not jealous. I’m just sad, suddenly and inexplicably. There was never the time to be sad, to notice the things I was missing out on, when I was constantly trying to survive.

Julian’s brow’s draw together, reading my face, and he steps forward. His arms come out and then hesitate “May I hug you?” he asks.

I nod.

It may seem wrong, stupid, and naive of me to want his embrace, to entertain the idea of being with him, but am I supposed to be with someone my age? Another seventeen-year-old who can’t comprehend what I’ve been through? The only thing on his mind; what college he’s going to go off to. Peppy and full of hope, while I rot beside him, ten lifetime’s worth of pain bearing down on me. How am I supposed to relate to that?

I sink into Julian, letting myself not worry about how much older he is and how stupid that makes me look.

If I’m being honest though, even Julian doesn’t seem weathered enough, broken down enough. But Cape, he may have

tried to deflect, but I could see the same shattered pieces in him that I see in myself. And even more unsettling is that he's older than Julian. Is my *normal* older men? Condemned to them by growing up faster than I should have?

Julian rests his chin on my head and I can feel the vibration of his voice on my cheek that's against his chest when he speaks. "Is there anything you want, anything at all? Let me do something for you."

I want to tell him that there's nothing he can do, nothing he can give me or buy me that will make me less broken, but instead I just shake my head and grip tighter onto him. I let myself have the one thing that's brought me comfort and resist feeling wrong for it.

"Gee, I don't think you've ever been here this much." Margo appears at the door.

I try to jump from Julian's arms but he snares me like a wild rabbit, clutching me against him.

"That's not true," he says, turning us around.

"Uh huh." Margo rolls her eyes and then focuses on me. "Listen, we have about one minute before Marney catches up. Do you really want to go to the recital, because if not I can tell her there are no seats left."

"Um... I mean..."

"Today, Peach."

"I don't mind going, but if the seats cost money then I'd rather not." I spit out.

She waves a hand through the air. "The money's for a good cause. I just need to know if you want to sit through an hour of twirling tutu's."

"I—"

"Get us both a seat, Ma," Julian interrupts me.

Margo drags her eyes to Julian and puts her hands on her hips. "You've never wanted to sit through twirling tutu's."

He shrugs. "It's for a good cause." He gives her words back to her.

"Uh huh." She glares at him before Marney comes running in and slips under her elbow.

"She wants to go! She told me!" Marney says, wide eyed.

"I was just checking." Margo puts her hands up in surrender.

"So you're coming?" Marney spins to me and I glance up at Julian.

"We both are," he says.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Margo and Marney have to be at the venue two hours before the scheduled show, which leaves me with no choice but to let Julian take me shopping. When I tried to protest, even Margo backed him up, saying that I needed something to wear to the recital.

A devilish grin appears on his face as he holds out his wallet to me in the car, one hand on the wheel. When I don't immediately take it, he sighs.

"Every cent, of every bill, on every card, in this wallet, is free money." He continues to hold it up. "I have everything I need. You can spend without worry."

When I still don't take it, he takes his eyes off the road, focusing on me, sincerity in his tone. "I want you to."

And when I still don't take it, he laughs. "I see I'm having trouble convincing you, but I've been biting my tongue here. Maybe the truth will get through to you." His eyes darken as they focused on the road. "Watching you spend money, using my wallet, is as close as I can get right now to fucking you."

My stomach flip flops as I sit there, stunned, my mind trying to catch up. Typically Julian keeps so reserved, but after a moment I snatch the wallet from his hand. I have never wanted any man before, and yet the idea of him inside me excites me. I'm just not sure how to feel about it or go about it. If holding his wallet is close to that, then I'm down.

But now I'm second guessing my decision. Every store we go into along the line of boutiques has price tags in the triple digits

and up. The current one I'm standing in is one that Julian recommended. *For fun*, he said.

"These are *gowns*," I whisper to him, not trying to draw any attention from the snooty women running the place.

"Just try something on. It will be fun."

"If I was going to the red carpet," I hiss, slipping a tag between my fingers.

My eyes bulge when it says eighteen-thousand dollars. I immediately drop it and turn around, determinedly heading towards the exit.

Firm hands clasp my shoulders and march me back around. "Live a little," Julian whispers in my ear.

There is no appeasing him. It doesn't matter how many times I walk in circles around the store, he wants me to try one on. After ten minutes of refusing, he plucks a dress from a rack, one of a kind, and grabs my hand.

In the back, a cylinder of mirrors and tufted benches circle a podium that I assume is for tailoring. He lays the dress in my arms and positions himself in a seat, hands clasped behind his head.

"If it makes you feel any better, we won't buy it."

I huff and whip back a curtain to change.

The dress fits like a glove, as if it were made for me. I stare at myself in the mirror and despite myself, do a small twirl. The ends flare out, trailing after me. I lift my hair above my head and raise my chin, thinking if Marney was here she would be snapping pictures. I feel like I'm going to the Oscars or a gala, or the white house for crying out loud.

"Are you really going to deprive me?" Julian says from the other side of the curtain.

I bite my lip, pick up my train, and pull the curtain back.

Embarrassment instantly burns my cheeks. I feel like a girl playing dress up. But Julian's eyes glimmer, slowly soaking in my body. Without taking his eyes off of me, he stands, closing the space between us and brushes the hair back from my shoulder.

"Gorgeous." He spins me around to face the mirror. In awe, I take us in. Between the dress and his chiseled jaw hovering above me, his lean arm latched around my waist, we look like a celebrity couple.

With a fever in his eyes, he whispers, "Isn't this fun?" He tucks his lips next to my ear. "I would never steer you wrong."

My knees grow weak feeling his breath in my ear, and as if he expected it, his arm tightens around me. His cheek brushes against mine and I lean into him. The feel of his solid body pressed against my back makes me lightheaded and I can't help myself as I turn my head, tilting my chin up.

Julian's eyes smolder as they sear into mine. His face is only a breath away from mine. With the proximity I can already imagine what his lips will taste like and if I don't get to find out exactly, my heart might explode.

His head dips and my eyes flutter closed in anticipation, my body giving out as he holds me tight. I feel the faintest touch of his lips on mine, like velvet and sin, but he doesn't press them, just grazes, parted and teasing, his breath seeping through, tickling my tongue.

A tiny squeak of desperation escapes me, and I feel his lips shift. I open my eyes to find a wicked smile.

"Not yet, baby." He speaks into my lungs and then pivots, kissing my cheek.

* * *

I'm left wanting as we grab a bite to eat. Well, it was supposed to be a bite to eat but Julian has ordered me three different things. A

club sandwich, chili cheese fries, and chicken strips. The place is a quaint outdoor area, and despite the menu, still costs a fortune.

With a self satisfied smile, Julian sips his iced tea as I swoop between dishes, shoveling it all in, trying to fill the void that his lack of kiss caused in me. That, and everything is so good, and I'm starving. The last few meals I've had have stretched my stomach, putting all the years of surviving on scraps behind me.

"I'm not that hungry," Julian quotes me.

"Not yet, baby," I counter, just a touch of bitterness in my voice.

I'm not used to being rejected, having never been the one to go for it. It's not a good feeling. Couple that with the small amount of power I gained from shutting down Cape, and then having it devastated by the kiss on my cheek, I'm feeling annoyed.

What's even the point of waiting till I am eighteen? A made up number by society when in actuality our brains aren't even fully developed till we are twenty-five anyways.

I think I should get to make my own choice. I've never wanted a kiss, not a single time I can ever remember wanting one, instead having them forced on me, and for once I finally, *finally*, want one and I'm turned down. The injustice of that alone puts a scowl on my face as I take a bite of the sandwich.

"Does that upset you?" His tone is playful.

I don't answer, since he knows damn well it does.

After a moment he fills the silence. "It upsets me too," he says thoughtfully.

"Then why?" I drop my sandwich on the plate.

He seems to mull over my question, stirring the ice cubes in his glass with the straw.

"I could say because you need time, or because Margo would kill me, or because it's just the right thing to do—to make sure

you actually want me and not because you think you're supposed to..." He pauses, capturing my eyes. "But maybe." He leans forward. "Maybe I want you begging, starving for it by the time you turn eighteen, absolutely *crazy* with it."

My heart speeds up in trepidation, imagining it. I already feel crazy with it, how out of my mind will I be by the time I'm eighteen?

"The idea that you'll want me that badly..." he lets out a soft groan.

I want to tell him that I already do want him that badly but I don't think it would change anything. I also think that he would like it. So I narrow my eyes and pick back up my sandwich. If I have to suffer, then so does he.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We make it back to the house with only ten minutes to spare before having to leave for the recital. I have to rifle through all the bags filled with everything Julian insisted I wanted, and I have to do it quickly. I fling on the knee length dark green dress, the matching shoes that the sales associate recommended, four-hundred dollars—I wanted to strangle her. I dig out a perfume I barely sniffed before Julian ordered it to be purchased. It really does spell heavenly and even though I'm rushed, a glimpse in the mirror has me gawking.

My god, what a little money can do. My hair, slightly wild, still looks sultry, thanks to the new cut, and the dress doesn't have a single awkward bit. Even if I wanted to feel out of place at the recital, full of pristine moms in chignons and fathers in pressed pants, I can't. I look every bit the part and I feel it too, especially with Julian's arm hooked in mine.

My eyes have now adjusted to the dark venue, I see Margo waving us over from the center aisle.

"Come. Come." She herds us into our seats in a flurry once we reach her. She's dressed in a nice black maxi dress, a long golden chain nestled between the fabric and her breasts, and her hair is done up not too similarly to the other women. She may be older and a little rounder than she wishes, but she's absolutely stunning. She out does all the other women with their botox and face lifts. There's a realness to her that is easier on the eyes.

I shimmy past Dillon, who seems to be admiring her beauty as well, and cringe. Isn't she supposed to be like a mother to him?

When he notices me he blinks a few times and runs a hand down his shirt.

“Full house tonight,” he says absently.

I’m not sure what he means until I take my seat and give an awkward glance to the man sitting next to me.

Cape.

He doesn’t acknowledge me as I choke back my surprise. Unlike the rest of the attendees, his attire does not match the event. He’s wearing a leather jacket, dark blue jeans and his boots. His hair is slightly in his eyes, clearly not putting in the effort that Dillon has, who slicked back his hair in an old school style.

Julian takes his seat on the other side of me and pulls out his phone. I notice the tic of him turning it to silent but also the numerous notifications.

He frowns as if surprised by them and then flicks his phone open. I quickly avert my eyes, not wanting to seem nosy. I try looking ahead at the still closed curtains, fiddling with my hands in my lap.

The room has taken on a hushed quality and I hope it starts soon because I feel uncertain. I’ve never been to a ballet show, even if it is for thirteen-year-olds, and I’m not sure how I’m supposed to be. I’ve never even been to a movie theater. The one that Bridgerock had sat shuttered since before I was born.

The seniors used to take projectors out to the mountainside and let movies play out on the smooth side while they got drunk and hooked up. But that was long over by the time I was old enough. The person who probably owned the projector went off to college and got out of Bridgerock.

At least, that’s what I convinced myself. It probably just broke, but the idea of someone getting out gave me hope. A hope that dwindled when I realized college wasn’t going to happen for me.

I try to squash the sudden melancholy, focusing on the fact that I did get out of Bridgerock, and here I am, dressed up, waiting to watch a ballet show of all things.

I look to Julian, hoping for a little guidance, but he still has his phone out and the frown has turned into a hardened line. His jaw is locked as he narrows his eyes at whatever he's reading.

Taking a deep breath, I sneak a glance at Cape. He may be under-dressed but he's exuding a confidence I hope to copy. Apparently, it's not so sneaky because his eyes catch mine and gone are the soft edges from last night. Back in place are the two little lines between his brows, and the intimidating presence I'm used to is front and center.

"I'm not the brother you should be looking at," he says, not whispering, and drawing attention from the woman sitting in front of us. She shoots us a high brow when she notices the source of the words. In addition, Dillon cranes his neck back with a scowl on his face.

Jeesh.

Luckily, Julian is still intent on his phone and doesn't see my cheeks burn.

I face forward, accepting I'm on my own when, thankfully, a man steps out from the curtains.

* * *

There were several different sets of young girls gliding across the stage. Most had sad music, and while I don't know a thing about ballet, there were apparently a few mess ups which were only brought to my attention by a gasp here and there from over obsessed mothers.

I was a little disappointed in Julian, who didn't once look up from his phone and was more than surprised by Cape's rapt attention. He even sat forward and smiled—a genuine smile—when Marney's set took place.

I knew right off which girl was the one that Marney thought of as her sworn enemy. The girl had a turned up nose and very well did command much of the stage, but it was Marney who really shone. She was elegant and lithe and even though she stuck to her area, it was clear she was more talented than the other girl.

When her set was finished and soft claps filled the room, Cape stood—the only one in the room—and clapped more forcefully than anyone else. I noticed Marney break restraint and beam at him right before the curtains closed.

Julian is still sitting, hammering at his phone when the rest of us stand.

“Bro...” Cape says, reaching around me and waving a hand at him, signaling that he’s holding up the line by not getting up.

Julian looks up, blinks a few times and then stands, shoving the phone in his pocket. He looks like he wants to say something to Cape and then thinks better of it. He grabs my hand and yanks me past Dillon towards Margo.

“We have a problem,” he says to her after she’s done chatting with another woman in the aisle.

“Don’t we always?” She forces a smile at another woman who passes by.

“I’m serious.”

“Well whatever it is, it will have to wait till we get home.”

Julian’s jaw flexes as Cape pushes past him.

“Meet back at the house,” Julian says to his brother’s back as Cape stalks away, gaining disdainful looks from people.

“Not my problem,” he hollers back without turning around.

I feel Julian’s body tense and his hand go rigid in mine.

Chapter Twenty-Four

We make it back to the house first and Julian gets right on the phone.

“Break it down again,” he says to whoever is on the other line. No hello and no small talk.

My own body has become rigid with tension from the drive back, mirroring Julian as if I have any idea what’s going on. I hover at the island while Julian paces around it. Nothing he says gives me any clues.

“You know what that means. Don’t make me spell it out.”

“If that was the case then he wouldn’t be.”

“That’s what Denny is for.”

“Keep him for now.”

“No. Alive.”

The front door finally sounds, echoing through the house and Julian slams the phone down on the counter. I jump, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

Margo is laughing as she rounds the corner with Dillon in toe, his arm hooked through hers.

“Did you not hear the part about a problem?” Julian says. “You guys took your sweet time.”

Margo waves a hand through the air, untangling herself from Dillon. “I wasn’t the one driving and we dropped Marney off at a friends.”

“Took the scenic route,” Dillon says, leaning against the archway, arms crossed over his chest.

“They’re building a new home at the north end. I wonder how they got the permit. Must have been expensive,” Margo muses as she fills a glass with water. “Enough money and you can just buy the permit, no respect for the waters edge.”

Julian grinds his teeth as she continues, and I wring my hands together. My mind only focused on the fact that Julian said the word ‘alive’. As in keep the person alive? As in, it was an option to not keep them alive? I don’t know what I expected when it came to being arms dealers but... I thought maybe it was a smooth thing.

Although, what about Cape’s fiance?

I feel the walls closing in, my breath stuck in my chest. Margo said ‘don’t we always’ when Julian mentioned they had a problem. Truly? Always? Maybe I made a mistake. Is it a regular occurrence to have to be explicitly clear to keep someone alive?

I clutch my stomach. I’m not cut out for this. I thought I was friends with Death, in the inner circle, no need to fear her but now I’m second guessing that. What if I can’t be friends with her? What if I don’t really want to toe the line everyday?

“There is a half-a-million dollar shipment sinking into the tourist waters of El Cuco,” Julian cuts harshly into Margo’s rambling.

She stops and slowly turns her head. “Say again?”

Her demeanor changes, and even Dillon pushes himself off the wall and comes forward.

“They tried to commandeer it, in the fight the cargo went under.”

Margo pierces her tongue in thought. “The authorities?” she asks after a minute.

“Swarming.”

“Denny?”

“Shot.”

She narrows her eyes. “Inside job?”

“I don’t think so. They have a guy but he—”

“Stop.” She shakes her head. “Kill him.”

“But he could have—”

“No. He’s a scapegoat. Get rid of him. We need to focus on the authorities.”

“Denny can’t—”

“This is going to be expensive. They’re not going to just...” Margo squints and twirls her fingers. “Who was our connection?”

“Bilalou. But even he can’t make this go away.”

“You’d be surprised what people can get done when their life depends on it.”

“Okay, but again, Denny isn’t in any shape.”

My mind is spinning. Who even *is* Margo? Ordering people killed, making threats. A half-a-million dollars? In what, guns? Where is El Cuco?

And should I be hearing this? Do they even notice me here? I can’t fathom that I’m suddenly privy to this. Unless... I’m disposable? Every illegal action movie I’ve ever seen is running through my mind.

“Sounds like you have a real problem, little bro.” Cape appears from around the wall.

I slink away from the island, stepping lightly on my heels so they don’t click. If I thought the situation was dire before, now that Cape is here, I’m thinking I don’t need to get knocked down in the crossfire again. This time in a dress where everything could be put on display.

“We have a problem,” Julian says.

“And there’s another one.” Cape points a finger at Julian. “Thinking I’m a part of this.” He shakes off his jacket. “Also, where do you think you’re going?” Cape spots me at the edge of the stairs.

“Uh…” I look to Julian for help.

His head tilts at me, a frown on his lips. “It’s okay.” He nods. “Go ahead.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Cape throws his jacket on a barstool and loops around the island. He’s in my bubble faster than I can think to run. “Julian wants you to be a part of the family, then this is a great time to show you what we’re all about.”

“Oh we’re a ‘we’ now?” Julian says but he doesn’t make a move to rescue me.

Cape steps beside me and wraps a warm arm around my shoulders, walking me back. He leans his head down in faux whisper. “Should have ran when you had the chance.”

“That’s real nice, Cape,” Margo sighs.

“What? She’s too soft for this shit, better to rip the band-aid off now.” He plants me back at the counter and lets go. I release the breath that was clogged in my chest. I try to straighten up, realizing that Cape can smell fear, and I don’t want to be targeted again.

“She’s fine,” Julian says.

“Sure she is,” Cape sneers.

“Boys, now is not the time.”

“Just because you fucked up—” Julian’s voice raises and I flinch.

Fuck. I need to get a hold of myself.

“Yeah. I fucked up and got Madison killed. It had nothing to do with the nature of the business.”

“If that’s what helps you sleep at night.”

Dillon has taken a seat, head whipping back and forth, looking like he wants a bowl of popcorn for the show. Is this routine?

“We need a liaison.” Margo tries to take back the conversation.

“We also need to make up the shipment,” Julian says.

“Cape, you go to—” Margo starts.

“Cape isn’t going anywhere. Cape is done,” Cape says, pulling out a barstool.

Margo looks to the ceiling in an exasperated prayer.

“Done?” Julian leans on the counter. “Just done?” He shrugs his shoulders. “You think you can just get out? Like that?” He snaps his fingers.

“Jules, leave your brother alone.”

“No, Ma. He wants out. We’re going to have to kill him.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Cape laughs.

“Shouldn’t be too hard since you don’t have much of a fight left in you.”

“I don’t have fight left in me?” Cape stands. “I wonder why the fuck that is.”

A tremor rolls through Cape’s shoulders and it takes everything in me not to step back again.

“Jules,” Margo warns, but he acts as if he doesn’t hear her, pushing up off the counter.

“We have a real fucking problem here, Cape. One that we have limited time to solve and you want to wallow in your pity.”

“Wallow?” Cape roars. “She’s fucking dead. Dead! Gone!” He charges around the counter towards Julian.

“And I’m sorry. I’m truly fucking sorry. I loved Madison. She was like a sister to me. But you have to man the fuck up.”

“Oh, no.” Margo shakes her head.

A vein pops in Cape’s forehead and then he’s got a hold of Julian’s shirt, yanking him towards him. Julian raises his chin, going slack in his hands. I clasp a hand over my mouth but Julian doesn’t flinch, no fear in his eyes even though Cape’s are burning with murder.

“Man the fuck up? Man the *fuck up*?” He shakes him. “I should fucking rip your throat out. Then you’d know what it feels like. No. No. A *fraction* of what it feels like.”

I feel myself clutching my throat, gaping at Margo, Dillon, someone to stop this, but neither of them make a move.

“Maybe you need to know what it really feels like.” Cape shoves his brother away, and for a second I’m relieved, until he rears back, crazed eyes landing on me, and my stomach twists.

“I could kill her.” He points a finger at me. “For your fucking disrespect. You can know what it feels like to lose someone because of *your* choices.”

He charges towards me, and I freeze up even though the heat radiating off his body feels like the rage of hell.

“Or should I wait? Give it more time. Let you get used to her, her being there every fucking night and then rip her away from you.” He side steps behind me and suddenly his arm is locked around my throat, a hand planted on the side of my head.

My heart stops and I have to will blood to pump to my legs to keep me standing, keep my neck up so my own weight doesn’t choke me against his arm.

“That’s enough. Now. Let her go,” Margo yells.

“He’s not going to do anything,” Julian spits.

Tears start leaking from my eyes involuntarily. This isn’t like me. I’m supposed to be numb. I’m supposed to be used to this.

I'm not supposed to be scared. If he snaps my neck then it's peace, it's bliss. But my body is starting to shake and the tears overflow, pouring down my cheeks.

"Won't I? If I'm out, I might as well go out with a bang," His voice isn't steady, it's ragged and unstable.

I don't know who to believe. There's not a hint of worry in Julian's eyes but I know Cape's tone. I know it like the back of my hand. One wrong word, one wrong move and he could explode.

"Don't be scared, baby," Julian says to me. "He's just making a show."

"I don't know, brother. I already fucked up once and got someone killed. I could fuck up again. I don't know my own strength sometimes." He tightens his arm and a whimper rips from my lips.

Through the blood rushing to my ears, Margo mumbles something and stalks out of the kitchen, flouncing past Dillon who looks to be enjoying himself.

"Now you've done it," Julian says, rolling his eyes. "Let her go. We got shit to handle."

"No. *You* got shit to handle. I said I'm done."

"That's not how this works and you know it."

"You don't get it," he laughs but it's a bitter sound that sets goosebumps out on my skin. "I don't give a fuck. I don't give a fuck about anything anymore."

Julian sets his jaw.

"She's dead, Julian," Cape says through his teeth. "Because of *me*. Because of what *I* did." He takes his hand off my head and jams a finger into his own shoulder.

"I know—"

BANG.

The shot echos through the house, slamming into my skull causing me to flinch in Cape's grip. My ears immediately start ringing and I stumble as he releases me.

"You're patching that," Margo's voice is a far away buzz as I see her slide a gun onto the counter and take a seat.

"You didn't have to do that," Julian says, and then he is suddenly at my side. "You're okay, baby," but his voice is muffled.

Before I can even get my bearings, I'm swept off my feet. One of Julian's strong arms is under my legs and he's cradling me to his chest.

"He's a dick but he was never going to hurt you," he says to me. "I told you that you don't have to be afraid of him."

"If hurting her hurts you, then she might want to be a little afraid," Cape says from somewhere. Gone is the seriousness in his voice, his regular drawl in its place. My ears are still ringing and I don't want to look up from Julian's chest, but then he speaks again.

"Maybe it's your girl that needs to *man up*," he chuckles.

All my fear dissolves, nothing but a fiery rage suddenly coursing through me, and I will myself to look up. Finding him, I wait for him to feel my eyes on him, and when he does, I glare. I channel every bit of injustice that's ever been done to me and I direct it at him. *I hate you*, it says. *I hate you*.

A slow smile creeps up on his lips as he gets the hint, a glimmer in his eyes.

He *likes* it.

And I hate him even more for it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Julian kisses my forehead as he lays me in my bed. I'm still in the process of wiping away the tears, embarrassed that I had fallen apart.

"I got you, baby. I got you," he says as he slips off my heels.

He's got a hard knot between his brows but his hands are gentle as he holds my ankle. I see a side eye slip between my legs and I redden, trying to seal my thighs.

"Have you ever been around when a gun went off?" He clears his throat and sits next to me.

I shake my head.

"Your ears will be okay."

I nod.

He sighs and looks up at something on the ceiling, in thought. His fist flexes over and over again, making the muscles in his arm perk. I've never been around a man that can so easily contain his emotions, resigning them to delightful sneak peeks. I want to say I'm relieved, even a bit shamefully aroused, but more so, I'm confused. Because I don't know what he's feeling. Is he angry at me? Cape? The situation in El Cuco? Margo for firing the gun?

The uncertainty, and his restraint, has me leaning up on my knees to get closer to him. I suppose you can't fear what you don't know. He sits down beside me and lets out a breath.

His hand absently lands on my bare thigh, the dress hiked in my position. It's warm and comforting, giving me even more

courage to scoot closer.

God, he smells good. Like the heated blood in his veins is amplifying the scent that is distinctly him. I can't help myself when I rest my chin on his shoulder. I don't know if it's the whirlwind of emotions I just went through and I'm seeking comfort, or his magnified pheromones that I'm drawn to. I just hope I'm not mistaken, and that any second he'll show me his control only goes so far.

"Do you want to run?" his question is etched in sadness as he turns his face, his cheek pressing against mine.

My breath catches. I was hoping he didn't hear that little bit from Cape about how I should have ran.

"No," I say, not wanting to shake my head and lose the contact of his cheek.

Despite what just happened, I came out unscathed. Shaken, but without a bruise to add to my collection and the idea of running seems painful when running would mean leaving behind Julian.

"What did Cape mean when he said you should have ran?" His warm breath intoxicates me.

Dizzily, I suck in my lips. If I tell him about being on the beach with Cape, will his control dissolve? But if I keep it a secret will it eventually come out and he'll look at me differently?

"I went to sit on the beach," I whisper. "The night after family dinner."

"And Cape?"

"He sat with me." I don't say that he forced me to sit because if I had any backbone I would have left. Saying he forced me would be an excuse.

"What else happened?" there's no suspicion in his voice, just curiosity.

I mull over the truth. I did finally leave, but not without hearing Cape out and entertaining the idea of Julian's brother's head between my legs. Even now a sudden throbbing appears between them.

"He offered to go down on me." I figure the truth is better than lying, and having Cape take the narrative from me and say something else.

Julian's stubble scratches my cheek as a surprising, wry smile appears.

"Did you take him up on that offer?"

Despite how nice his cheek feels on mine, I pull away, wrapping around him to face him. I understand where he's coming from and I'm not mad at his insinuation, but I shake my head viciously, holding his eyes. I want him to know I didn't succumb, that I didn't let his brother take advantage of me.

Julian grabs my chin and quickly wraps an arm around my back. Before I can even gasp he's got me on my back, his thigh between my legs, his body pressing down on me. I don't even have time to worry because he's smiling down at me, eyes fevered. Instead of apprehension for what he's going to do, I'm thrilled.

Do it, I think, surprising myself with how little reservations I have. I've been used more times than I can count and never by someone I didn't fear. Whatever Julian could do to me would be welcome.

"Did you want him to?" Julian's eyes flash.

My breath is caught in my throat but I manage the truth, hoping he'll feel the need to show me I'm his. "Yes."

He growls but it's a sensual sound that has me arching my body into his. He runs a hand down my waist, gripping and tugging at my dress. His hand finds the end and it expertly slips under the hem. He pushes his fingers under the seam on my underwear and I whimper. His touch is like a flame that ignites

my skin. His face comes down, lips hovering over mine as he breathes into me. I suck as much of his breath as I can into my lungs, crazy with want.

His fingers still before touching me, and I jerk to get closer to them, but he pulls them away.

“Uh, Uh.” He touches his forehead to mine. “You’re still underage.”

“Please,” I beg.

He smiles wickedly, enjoying my desire, and it only makes me more feral. I clasp my hands around his neck, trying to pull him down to me, desperate to know what his tongue tastes like. But he easily resists me, stronger than me, and laughs.

“Soon, baby girl, soon.”

I give another tug but he doesn’t budge and it takes everything in me not to scream in frustration.

“Tell me again how you wanted my brother to lick you?” he teases and I grind against his thigh at his words.

“I should have let him,” I seethe, mad with arousal.

“Oh, no. I want you to save up all that juice for *my* tongue.”

I let out a sound of frustration. If I thought I was strong enough, I would pin him down and straddle his face, show him just how wet I am and make his tongue lap up every drop.

He laughs again at something I’ve revealed on my face. “That’s it. Get angry, baby.” He licks his lip. “Do you want to know what my tongue feels like inside you? Or do you want Cape’s tongue?”

I grind harder. “Both,” I grit out, hoping to get a rise out of him.

“Turn eighteen, baby, and we’ll both take turns making you cum.”

That does it. My fingers scramble at the buttons of his shirt, beside myself with need, but he lifts himself up, suddenly untangling himself from me. Within a second, he leaves me panting on the bed with my dress around my waist, his eyes marveling over me.

“God,” he groans and runs a hand down the front of his pants, where I see he’s grown. “You’re making this hard.”

I glare at him, feeling how cold it is without his body against mine.

He chuckles and makes to leave, pulling open the door. “By the way, I meant what I said.” He turns, his face serious. “You were never in any danger with Cape. I trust my brother with my life, and yours.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

At breakfast the next morning it's as if nothing happened. If you don't count the bullet hole in the ceiling, Cape sits wolfing food down next to Marney and Margo is at her station by the sink drinking coffee. Dillon must be out running, I think, as I saddle up next to Julian. He slides a full plate to me as if he was waiting for me. It's laden with hash-browns and eggs, and my mouth waters.

After spending the night in a dissatisfied state, tossing and turning and replaying what it felt like to have Cape's arm around my neck... and what it would have felt like if Julian's fingers stretched just a bit farther, I think I've worked up more of an appetite than I've ever had. Not being numb takes it out of me, apparently.

I take a tentative bite, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I don't know what happened after Julian put me to bed, but I'm curious as to what is going on with the situation in El Cuco. I don't see how it could have just gone away. They need someone to, I guess, pay off the authorities? And what of the man, Denny, who had been shot? Did Julian give the order for the man they had hostage to be killed?

Somehow I'm not put off enough by the idea to refrain from eating, and after the first bite, I dig in.

"Katie's dad was so embarrassing," Marney says, continuing a conversation I wasn't here for. "Like we are thirteen, not five."

"When you get to be my age, you'll wish you were five," Margo says

“I doubt it.”

Margo hides a smile behind her cup and turns to Julian. “Shouldn’t you get going?”

“Almost.” He pushes his plate away and rummages in his pockets.

“These are for you.” He huddles over me and I try to choke down the massive bite of eggs I just shoved in my mouth.

He’s holding out a set of keys with a leather band. There’s two normal keys and then a shiny fob with buttons.

I look up to him in question.

“My house keys. You remember which one is mine, right?”

I nod, confused.

“And the key to the McLaren. It’s in the garage.” He pushes the set into my hand. “I shouldn’t be gone more than three days.”

I glance around, unsure what he’s getting at, but only Cape is looking at me, his food abandoned and an arm slung over the back of the barstool.

“Um?”

He leans in, attempting a whisper but I’m sure everyone can hear him. “If you get scared or if something happens, you can go to my house. And if you need anything, you have the car. And, oh.” He shifts and pulls out his wallet.

He slips out a card and then the whole wad of cash, pushing it into my other hand. “That should be good but if not you can text me.” His brows furrow. “We have to set you up with a Venmo or bank account or something.”

“But...” I stand there, dumbfounded, and blurt the only excuse I can think of. “I don’t have a license.”

“I don’t care. If you need to use the car, use it.” His tone is firm.

“But where are you going?”

“El Cuco,” he grits his teeth when he says it. “Apparently I do everything now.” He throws a side eye at Cape, who doesn’t even flinch. “But three days, max. And we’ll get you a license when I get back. I’ll set the appointment on the flight.”

“Am I chop liver?” Margo scoffs. “I think I kept you boys alive didn’t I? She’ll be fine.”

“She’s my responsibility, Ma.”

Margo puts a hand up to fend off his sharp tone.

“Are you going to be okay?” Julian leans down, grabbing my chin and searching my eyes. I go a little weak in the knees as I get lost in the honey brown color but I try to blink it away.

I don’t know what he’s expecting these three days to be like. I’ve gone seventeen years without a car, a wad of cash, or a modern mansion on the beach. He could drop me off at a gas station and I would be fine till he got back.

I just nod, noting the worry in his eyes. I don’t think I should mess with him right now.

“Good. Now remember what I said last night?” He straightens and puts his wallet back in his pocket.

I wrack my brain. That both him and his brother will make me cum? That’s the only thing that comes to mind and my cheeks heat. I quickly cast my head down.

“To not be afraid of Cape,” he clarifies when I don’t answer and then glowers across the island.

“Her funeral,” Cape says, and I can’t help but snap my head up and shoot daggers at him.

“Jesus, don’t talk about funerals when your brother is about to board a plane.” Margo slams her coffee onto the counter.

Cape rolls his eyes and pushes out his chair. “Let’s go,” he says to Julian. “Before the superstition spreads and I change my mind about dodging around airport assholes.”

My bottom lip falls open as Julian pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head. Cape is giving him a ride? I thought he wanted nothing to do with the business.

“Three days,” Julian says again and untangles himself from me.

“Today, lover boy,” Cape drawls.

I turn to watch them leave the kitchen as Cape throws an arm over Julian’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of your girl,” Cape says, throwing a wink over his shoulder, and I’m not sure if I should shudder or melt.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I thought Marney had been casting me odd glances all afternoon and through dinner, but I couldn't tell, seeing as how I haven't known her long. Now there's a buzz to her that I'm sure I'm not imagining.

She's cuddled up next to me on the lofty couch while the final scene for the second movie we've watched plays out. Dillon is kicked back on the corner chaise section of the couch, and Margo is sitting in a sea of papers in the decorative chair by the window. She keeps checking her phone every five minutes and then sighing.

Cape never came back after dropping Julian off at the airport, and while I'm relieved, I'm also suspicious, waiting for him to pop up around a corner. I would be lying though if I didn't admit I was a little sad when he didn't. Which only fuels my new theory that I don't know how to let go of being dominated by men. And even further supports Cape's statement that I'm fucked up in the head.

I snuggle up closer to Marney, tucking the blanket she coated over us tightly, trying to get out of my head and enjoy the moment. Margo has the french doors open and the cool sea breeze is the cleanest air I've ever breathed. The couch is also the most heavenly thing I've ever had the pleasure of curling into. And despite Dillon's presence, it feels nice to just watch a movie, comfortable with Margo's motherly vibe and Marney's innocent enjoyment. It's like the life I've always dreamed of. A mother, a sister, women to feel safe with. No fear of impending abuse, at least if I can trust Julian's assessment of his brother.

“Hey,” Marney whispers to me.

I look to find her cheeks bunched up and bright, vibrating with barely contained excitement.

“Don’t go to sleep when you get back to your room.” She leans into my ear. “I have an idea.”

I pull back, trying to figure out what she’s getting at.

“It’s going to be so much fun!” She throws a look at Margo but she’s checking her phone again, unaware of Marney’s whispering.

I glance at Dillon but I think he’s dozed off, still in his running gear.

“What is it?” I whisper back and she puts a finger up to her lips.

“Just don’t fall asleep.” She turns back to the TV, quickly pretending to be engrossed.

I frown. I don’t have a clue what idea she could have. Especially one that she would feel the need to be conspiratorial over. Are we going to watch a horror movie? Does Margo let Marney watch horror movies? Stay up late and paint each other’s nails? No. She gets hers done at the salon.

What could it be? I have no experience, not even my own experience, with tween ideas of fun.

By the time I’m in my pajamas and in bed, I’ve thought of a hundred things Marney could be thinking and none of them seem plausible. I find myself sitting up, wide awake even without her hint to not fall asleep, surging with excitement. I’m trying not to get my hopes up because we do have an age difference, but I think I’ve missed out on thirteen-year-old experiences and whatever she has in mind could be fun.

The clock on my phone, which has three texts from Julian checking in on me, says it’s just after eleven. I don’t think Marney has a bedtime, but I know that Dillon could barely keep

his eyes open after the movie and resigned to his bed an hour ago. All that running must keep him sleeping deeply. Margo I'm not so sure about, but Marney probably knows her better and wouldn't get us into trouble.

While I wait, I text Julian.

I miss you.

And then I backspace it. That sounds so cliché. Do I even really miss him? Yes. I miss what it feels like knowing he's nearby and I didn't even realize I had grown accustomed to it in our short time.

Waiting for you.

I backspace that too. I'm not good with this. I've never had another person that I wasn't either indifferent to or afraid of. I've also never gotten to text before. Maybe I should send him a picture?

The idea sends a thrill through me. Maybe if I can get him bothered enough while he's away, he won't make me wait till my birthday to experience him.

I slide through the phone's different screens trying to find the camera app and when I do, I flinch. It's faced forward and the angle is awful. I get up and flip a light on and then unbutton two of the pearly beads on the silky pajamas. I tug it to the side and let my shoulder free. I hold the camera above me and frown. It doesn't look good. God, how do girls do this?

I flip my hair to the side and try to smile.

Ew.

I click the phone off quickly and sigh. What am I even doing? I don't know how to entice a man, unless you count just existing. But is that enough to keep a man like Julian? To make him want to hurry home? He could have any girl he wants. Was I too eager when he was in my bed? Will I be easily conquered and tossed to the side?

My body sags. I like it here. I like Margo, and Marney, and all the safety that comes with them. Dillon might be annoying, but nothing is perfect. And as long as Julian is right about Cape, then I have nothing to fear. I may even have something to be excited about... both of them?

I have no idea what twisted game I've gotten myself into but on par with being fucked up in the head, I like it.

I snap my head up when the door cracks open. Marney slips her head in, and I quickly pull up on the collar of my shirt to cover my shoulder.

She grins and speed tip toes to me after shutting the door behind her. She's wearing little black sneakers and a black hoodie over her black silk pajama bottoms. She looks like a very fashionable ninja.

She cannonballs onto the bed, grinning ear to ear. "We're breaking and entering," she giggles, throwing her head back like a little maniac.

"What?" I gasp.

"Well, like, it's not really breaking in because we have the key, but we are definitely entering!"

It takes me a second for my mind to catch up and then my eyes bulge.

"Julian's?"

"Yes! We can go out the back. Margo is asleep in her room."

I bite my lip. Of all the things I thought this could be, raiding Julian's house was the farthest thing from my mind. I eye the drawer of the nightstand where I tucked the keys and money.

"But... But for what?" I ask.

"Just because! It'll be fun. We're like bandits, or criminals."

I resist the urge to tell her that she—we?—are already criminals, being in the arms dealing business.

“Will he get mad?” I ask stupidly, realizing that I don’t actually know Julian. Does he value his privacy? Did he only give me the keys to make me feel better and not actually go over there?

“Not at you.” She deadpans.

“But you?”

“He won’t find out! He doesn’t even have cameras.” She makes a face. “He thinks that anyone can access them.”

I wring my hands together, not knowing if I should be entertaining this idea. I *am* the older one. Shouldn’t I direct Marney back to sleep?

“It’s too dangerous,” I try to tell her.

“He gave you the keys! It’s three houses down. And think of all the juicy secrets we can uncover.”

Juicy secrets? I’m hard pressed to think he has any, and if he does, I don’t think he would be stupid enough to leave them lying around.

At my hesitation she grabs my shoulders and shakes. “He. Gave. You. The. Keys.”

“Yes, but...”

“If he finds out you can say you were feeling scared, like he said.”

He did give me the keys. But it feels wrong to go rooting through his house in the middle of the night, with basically his little sister in toe.

“Pleaseeeeee. It will be fun. I promise. Julian has a tanning bed and it’s about to be winter.”

“A tanning bed?” My nose scrunches up.

“It only takes like five minutes.”

I think of the salon we went to and the big contraption labeled UV GOD.

“But so does the salon.”

“Margo won’t let me!” she whines. “*It ruins your skin, blah blah, you’ll end up looking like me if you make a habit of it.* Besides, juicy secrets! Don’t you want to go through his underwear drawer?”

I snort a laugh. Do I want to go through his underwear? Maybe. Are they folded up neatly or thrown in randomly? Does he have food in his fridge? Is the place devoid of personal effects? God, am I falling for a sociopath and don’t know? He could have a red room of pain.

“I don’t know...”

“You totally do.” She beams and hops off the bed. “Get dressed.”

Against my better judgment, I’m leading us down the stone steps to the beach as Marney clutches at the back of my jacket. Her weight throws me off and I accidentally kick a pebble. It ricochets off the metal railing and tumbles to the bottom, making what feels like an explosion of noise.

I freeze and whip my head around, waiting for a light to come on in the house.

“We’re good,” Marney whispers.

“If we get caught, you have to take the blame,” I hiss, my heart in my throat. I know I’m the older one but I’m new here. I imagine Marney will just get a sigh out of Margo and then another new six-hundred-dollar blow dryer. Me? I could end up out on my ass for leading the baby of the family out into the middle of the night.

“I will. It’s fine.” She nudges me forward, and I grip the railing for dear life.

God, this was a bad idea.

We bob down the rest of the steps in unison, looking like two burglars making off into the sea.

“See? Fine,” she breathes when we reach the bottom. She grins at me, her nose already starting to turn red from the cold air. She glances up at the house but the only part we can see from this point is the upper most room on the right and the lights are still off.

“We should go back.” The keys in my pocket feel like a hot boulder, weighing me down and searing my hand that is tightly wrapped around them.

“No! We’re almost there!”

I chew my lips, glancing around the beach. It’s completely desolate. All the homes are completely dark and not a soul out to see. The only sound is the lazy night waves crawling up the shore.

I shiver at the ridiculousness of what we are doing, feeling exposed, and my stomach twists. We just need to get it over with.

“Okay let’s go.” I make to the right and Marney quickly jerks me back.

“This way.”

“Fuck, you’re right.” I cringe at my language, frustrated that I’m turned around.

Marney giggles like she doesn’t have a care in the world and latches onto me. I try to relax my shoulders and convince myself that we have the keys, that this is fine, that it’s supposed to be fun.

We shuffle down the beach together, sticking close to the little half walls that dictate private property from the public beach. When we reach the house before what I believe is Julian’s, a light comes on. Bright and assaulting. It illuminates every grain of sand all the way to the water, including us.

I freeze and immediately Marney pulls me down to the ground.

“It’s a motion sensor,” she says, hands clamped over mine in the sand. “We crawl the rest of the way.”

I blink several times, trying to make out if she’s serious.

“We’re almost there!” she whines and lets go of my hand to shoo me forward.

At the most ridiculous pace, I drag my silk covered knees through the sand with Marney’s fingers grasping the hem at my ankle. By the time we reach the edge of Julian’s house the security light has gone dark, and I have sand in sleeves. I glance back to see if it’s okay to stand and Marney nods.

She quietly claps and then shakes the sand out of her jacket. “We did it. We’re super stealthy.”

I clamp my mouth shut to stop from smiling. It did feel kind of stealthy, even if I’m pretty sure I ruined the expensive Bella Luna pajamas.

“Almost there.” She turns me around and reclaims her grip on the back of my jacket.

We come up to a similar set of stone steps like Margo’s, and I usher Marney in front of me, feeling protective of leaving her behind me, exposed to the dark beach.

“Are you sure there are no cameras?” I whisper, eyeing all the edges of the glass mansion.

“Positive.” She grabs my hand and pulls me up the stairs at breakneck speed.

The deck is nice, with patio furniture and cold heaters but it’s level with the other homes, and I find myself pulling my hood lower like an actual thief.

“This way.” Marney pulls me around to french doors lined in cool black metal. There’s a matching handle with a lock that makes my skin heat.

“Keys.” She puts a hand out, and shakily I pull them out, giving them over as if getting rid of them will exonerate me in

court.

Without hesitation, she slips one in and turns. The sound of the deadbolt opening is like the sound of a jail door slamming shut.

My heart is hammering as she opens the door and pulls me inside, clicking it closed behind us.

“Piece of cake!” she exclaims, her voice returning to a normal level and she skips over to a light switch.

I’m gripping my chest, gapping around the sleeping kitchen we’ve burgled our way into. It’s all black marble with stone gray cabinets and white geometric back splash. There’s three laptops stacked on the counter and a bundle of chargers next to them.

“Catch!” Marney tosses the keys at me and I’m pulled out of my head, stumbling to grab them before they hit me in the face. “I’m going to the tanning bed,” she says.

“Maybe...” I clear my throat, trying to get a grip. “Maybe you shouldn’t. Margo’s right about the sun damage and isn’t she going to notice if you are tanner?”

She shrugs, and I regret what I’ve done. But one time isn’t going to hurt her, right? God, I’m stupid.

Marney prances off down a dark hall, and I’m left by myself in the pristine kitchen. After a moment of getting my breathing under control, I run a hand over the cold counter. I imagine Julian making coffee by himself but then I’m assaulted by images of him not alone, having sex with a beautiful woman, their naked ass planted on the counter, and I jerk my hand back.

He may say I’m his, but is he mine? It puts a bad taste in my mouth and I suddenly want to find out if I even want him to be mine. A nosy bit of indignation slithers inside me and I find myself pulling open a drawer. And then another, followed by a third.

It’s all just kitchen utensils and pens.

I'm drawn down a hallway, bold enough to flick on the lights as I go. When I find the bedroom though, I hesitate in the threshold. Do I want to encroach on Julian's privacy? A privacy he so graciously offered me? But then again, if he's going to claim me, don't I have a right to know if he's keeping anything from me? At least to protect myself?

I step inside. The room is everything you would expect a single rich guy's room to be. Navy sheets, sleek furniture, a seventy inch TV mounted above a dresser, but then I look up and see the beveled mirror above the bed. A salacious thought runs through my mind but then I narrow my eyes at it, suspicious of other women's reflections in it.

I pick through all the drawers and then snort when I come across one with underwear. A mix of some being neatly folded and others tossed in recklessly. Best of both worlds? I sift for a second more but don't find anything.

In the nightstand are condoms—of course—and it fuels me into what I assume is Julian's office. I'm about to give up, not being able to make heads or tails of business expenditures and stock projections. Until I pull open the bottom drawer with a file name I can make sense of.

CONFIDENTIAL PROPERTY OF THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIONS

My fingers still, but then my curiosity gets the better of me. The folder has a few blank pages before my eyes land on familiar names.

Julian Rossi

Caperson Rossi

Dillon Matthews

Marney Matthews

Margaret Baker

Madison Johnson

But then there are names I don't recognize.

Luca Rossi

John Matthews

Macala Esparedo

The folder is manuscript-thick and chock full of information. Death certificates, previous employers, names of banks and phone records. I pause at Luca Rossi's death certificate, assuming that is Julian's father. It's issued from Italy and states two gunshots to the chest and one to the head, dated nine years ago. I flinch when I turn the page and there is a full photograph of a dead man, sprawled out in a bed with gunshot wounds and blood.

I clasp a hand over my mouth.

I quickly turn the page to what looks like a police report, but it isn't in English. There's a call log, known alias, and what seems to be coordinates lined up next to times.

I fan through and land on Dillon's section. There's a comprehensive evaluation from a psychiatrist.

Anger. Displays acts of heroism for his injustice.

Prozac, max dosage.

Dozic, max dosage.

There's numbers next to the word 'tape' and documents session one, two, and so one until it stops at twenty three.

Aren't medical records supposed to be confidential? Or does the FBI always have access?

Marney's section is small but lists the schools she attended, and every hobby she's engaged in. There is one psychiatrist report and all it says is:

Coping well, medication not needed.

I'm fascinated and I flip to Margo's—Margret's—section and I find a marriage certificate with Luca's name on it. There are at

least ten pages of phone records and copies of flight tickets.

Shaking my head, I go back to the first page and skim the content. This is a comprehensive file on what is called the Mimic Operation, resulting for the movement of illegal weapons, murder, falsifying documents, forgery, tax evasion, and a few legal codes that I'm not sure what they mean.

I dig back in and find a page on Cape. My heart starts to thump when I read that he's suspected of being responsible for the deaths of thirty people. Thirty? And he has his arm around my throat?

I flick past the call logs and locations to Julian's section. I hold my breath, a bead of sweat forming under my jacket. He can't possibly be suspected of the same, right?

Julian Rossi has a criminal profile done by someone named Erica Janseson stating *control issues, extreme intellect, charming, deadly*.

My stomach twists.

I flip and find a summary of suspected involvements, dated only six months ago. The FBI apparently sees him as the head of the business. He's suspected to be responsible for four deaths. One of which is a woman's name.

My hand starts to shake and I have to smooth the folder on the desk to keep reading.

Body disposal methods, dismemberment? Incineration? Framing?

What?

My mind is spinning as I fly through the folder. Back and forth, to and from, becoming increasingly horrified until I suddenly can't breathe.

I land on Macala Esperedo, who I am assuming is Marney's mother. Suspected involvement in death is Margeret Baker. I flip to the death certificate but it says Macala died in a car accident with John.

Huh? How could Margo be suspected of murder if it was a car accident?

I'm flipping to John's section to cross reference when I hear Marney call my name. In a flurry, I try to tuck the pages neatly back together when one gets caught on my sleeve and tears.

Shit.

I smooth it out and shove it back in with no time to worry about it as I hear Marney's footsteps getting closer. I just slam the drawer shut as she rounds the corner.

"Anything juicy?"

A nervous laugh leaves my lips. "No. Uh. Nothing. Just stocks. Boring stuff."

I stand and shove my hands in my pockets. I have no idea how much Marney knows, but I doubt she should know that anyone suspects Margo of having a hand in her parent's death.

"Did you find any sex toys?"

"What?" I blurt, unable to fathom the ridiculousness of her question and how absurd it sounds coming from her.

"I don't know. Whatever you guys use when you have sex."

A sound like a wheeze comes out of me. "We aren't having sex. How do you know about sex?" I'm rambling, god.

"I'm thirteen, not ten. I know what sex is." She folds her arms across her chest.

I shake my head, unable to process anything but the list of deaths. "We should go."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I was queasy all night as I tried to grapple with how naive I've been. Of course the FBI would have a file on Julian and the whole family. Of course there would be lots of deaths. You can't sell guns and not have blood on your hands. I guess, I just wasn't thinking of the in-between. The part where people in the middle need to be handled. And with all the blatant money surrounding me, of course those funds would have to be altered. You couldn't just put on your taxes that your income comes from selling illegal guns.

"Not hungry, Peach?" Margo eyes the plate of breakfast I've been nudging around with my fork.

She looks as normal to me as any other woman. Not the queen of illegal gun trading. She's wearing a floral muumuu for crying out loud.

I shake my head and avert my eyes, thinking of how she got sucked into all of this with Luca, which the files made clear. She was only twenty when she married him and apparently he was already involved in shady affairs, eventually leading to the empire that exists today.

I had no idea how big this was. I kick myself again for being naive. The house—*house(s)*—the cars, it would have to be big to sustain it all.

The french doors swing open and I jump, followed up by gritting my teeth. I can't seem to get a grip. At least, in Bridgerock everything was expected. I knew what was coming for me, but here? I have no idea what's coming. Is the SWAT

team going to crash through the ceiling, suspended by rappels with little laser pointers bouncing around the room?

Dillon kicks the door shut behind him and throws himself against the counter, dripping in sweat despite the head band on his head.

“Ew.” Marney flicks her hair back while Margo pulls open the fridge and grabs a water. She rolls the bottle across the counter to him.

“You’re going to kill yourself.” Margo clucks her tongue.

Dillon smiles triumphantly. “That’s the idea.”

“Oh, stop that.” Margo bats a hand.

“I’m kidding.” He cracks the lid and chugs the whole bottle within a second.

I can’t help but wonder if he’s still taking the Prozac and if he is, how he isn’t a zombie at max dose. Despite the altercation on the beach, I find myself softening towards him with the words of the file. fresh in my mind. He really did/is having a hard time about losing his parents. So badly in fact, that he needed the max dose and therapy. And the harmless quip about him running himself to death isn’t lost on me.

Does he know about Margo’s suspected involvement in his parents death and that’s why he was so passionate about me getting away from the family? But he doesn’t seem upset with Margo. If anything, he seems taken with her.

I squint at him, trying to figure him out. Why hate the business? The files say his parents were involved too, that Margo and Macala were friends. Was he really just trying to warn me about how serious the business was, using a scare tactic to get through to me?

I’m studying him so intently that I don’t notice the wrist band being flung at me till it’s sweat soaked fabric slaps against my chest.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” Dillon says, before tossing the second one at me. I manage to dodge that one but it doesn’t help me not frown at the wet mark on my silk pajama shirt.

“Ew.” Marney laughs.

“Ew is right, Dillon. Go take a shower.” Margo snaps.

“I’m just playing.” He puts his hands up.

“And get those sweaty bands off my floors.”

He clasps his hands together and bows. “Your wish is my command.”

He seems in good spirits, despite whatever demons he’s battling. And despite the fact that I now have his sweat on me, I decide to give him a break. He’s just been through stuff. Just like me.

* * *

I’m still pushing around my food when I realize Margo has inched closer to me and Marney has left. She’s leaning on the counter with her cup, edging it in little circles.

Feeling conspicuous, I take a bite of the cold eggs.

“Peach?” She makes a sympathetic face.

“Hm?” I try to press on a smile.

She shakes her head, hair fluffing around her. “I’m not a beat around the bush type person,” She says with her eyes closed and then takes a deep breath.

Oh, no. Does she know? I drop my fork and sit up straighter.

“I know, better than anyone, that people like their privacy.”

Oh, god.

“And I don’t go rooting around in people’s lives.”

Was Marney wrong? Were there cameras? Did she see me devouring the FBI folder? Am I about to get *whacked*?

I try to speak, ready to say anything I need to, but words don't come out. I want to tell her that I won't tell Marney about what I read, or Dillon. That I'll just leave, forget it all. Or pledge allegiance to her, just please don't kill me in your muumuu with your hazelnut coffee nearby.

She pushes up and sighs. "But I feel like I don't have a choice."

My lip starts to tremble.

"Peach," she repeats, the sympathy coming back. Does it make me feel better that she feels bad about what she has to do?

"Are you on birth control?" she asks.

I have to blink several times, as if that will make me understand what she just said.

In my stupor she starts to ramble, "Look, I don't condone whatever is going on, or whatever's going to go on, and I really don't want to know, but I know I wouldn't forgive myself if you got yourself into trouble because of my Jules."

"We're not," I stutter.

She puts up a hand. "I don't need to know. Can't say I believe you anyway." She gives a huffy laugh. "And lord knows I'm trying to keep it from happening, but I don't have eyes in the back of my head." She pauses and shrugs. "Well, not all the time. And I'd like to believe I raised my boys right but..."

She blows out a breath. "God, I didn't think I would have to do this for a few more years with Marney." She levels her eyes on me. "Look, no need to be embarrassed," she says, but I think she's trying to psych herself up more than me. "We can go and get something. They have all types these days, arm plants—"

"Margo." I stop her. "I have an IUD."

The one and only time someone took pity on me was a doctor.

I had no choice but to go to a clinic, in fear that Mr. Canes had left a part of himself inside me. The doctor was a man but he

was ancient and kind, and I think he knew what had happened. I was only fourteen, but he offered me the IUD, in fact, he pushed it on me. He was sweating bullets when he put the thing in, mumbling about losing his license but that God would see his good deed. He didn't try to charge me for it and made a point to walk me past the nurses desk, hurrying me out and whispering I have ten years.

I had never been more thankful in my life and I hadn't even met Kyle yet.

“Oh.” The tension in her face relaxes. “Well then. Okay.”

“But we're not—”

She puts a hand up again. “I hope not. Otherwise, I have to kill Jules.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I'm bored out of my mind. I have no idea where everyone is—tucked in the corners of the massive house probably, but I don't know where that is. I'm used to surviving, hiding, fending, dreading, and enduring, not being bored.

I already neatly folded up all the shopping bags and arranged everything on the dresser. I found hangers in the closet and hung up the few dresses I now have to my name. Julian even made me get bubble bath and body oils that I set in the bathroom.

I then fiddled around on the phone, *my* phone. How would I even know what apps I want if I don't know of any? Julian has texted me, checking in and telling me that he set an appointment for me to take the driving test. I backspaced several texts before just saying 'thank you'. I don't know the first thing about driving. Everything in Bridgerock was within walking distance and I had stopped riding in my dad's truck when I was seven. And of course, Kyle didn't have a car. I'm anticipating failing and wasting Julian's time.

I make my way down to the kitchen and then drift through the living room. There's a staircase going to a level lower that I haven't been down, and I inch towards it.

What do rich people even do all day? When they aren't ordering people killed, I mean. I frown, remembering the name of the woman on Julian's rap sheet. *Melissa Lauder*.

I take the steps slowly, running my hand along the banister of warm waxed wood.

Maybe the FBI is wrong. They can't have all the facts right. I'm assuming that's why they haven't taken the family business down. It would need to be more than suspicion to bring charges, and the folder didn't have anything concrete.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, there's a second living room with tiny slits for windows, dotted around the ceiling, and a wide hallway with dark doors that end with a curve, probably with more house.

Apparently, now I'm just an all around snoop because I start cracking doors, peeking inside. There is what looks to be a book room with a velvet chaise, a bathroom, another guest room and then the last door opens to a short hallway.

Stepping inside, I round the corner and freeze.

It's a work out room, laden with mirrors circling the room and the most state of the art equipment I've ever seen. This isn't Planet Fitness. Every machine has a screen and there is every kind of weight stacked around the room. But that's not why I freeze.

Cape is laying on a bench press, shirtless. And oh, my god, I had no idea he had so many tattoos. They cover his chest and down his arms. They glisten with sweat, rippling along his very taut body. Does he even need to be working out when he already has all those muscles? No wonder thirty people didn't survive him.

I can't move even though I don't want him to notice me. I'm transfixed, watching him pump and grunt. God, no one in Bridgerock looked like this. Does Julian have the same under his shirt? My stomach swoops.

"You know I can see you in the mirror right?"

Shit.

He heaves up the weight and sets it on the rack before pulling himself up.

“Sorry. Sorry.” I back up to leave and then bump into the wall. My god.

“Thinking of working out?” his tone is lax, absent, like he didn’t threaten to kill me just the other day.

“No. I just...” What? Was snooping around?

“Well you should.”

Excuse me?

He stands, whipping a towel off the bench nearby and dragging it across his face. “Come here. Let me size you up.”

What?

“That’s okay. I’m okay,” I say.

“Get the fuck over here.” He rolls his eyes, and before I can run, he takes two strides and I’m in his clutches.

He pulls me by the arm over to a scale and nudges me up, fingers prodding at my lower back.

“There you go.” He starts tinkering with the weight.

Is he really weighing me right now? *Sizing me up?* I’d be embarrassed if I cared about things like weight, but I don’t. I’ve been trying my whole life to eat as much as I can get my hands on. Now that I’m here, besides this morning’s breakfast, I’ve been inhaling all the food. If I gain weight, then it’s because I need it.

“Pathetic,” he drawls.

I snap my head towards him. Is he really shaming me for my weight? I’m *too* skinny. Does he honestly think I’m overweight? He’s scowling, squinting at the little numbers that mean nothing.

“I could snap you like a twig. You need to bulk up. Get some muscle. Maybe then you’ll get a backbone.”

Oh. I frown. I *could* be a little stronger. But I have a backbone. I just don’t use it.

“Do you at least know how to use your size to escape?” He leaves me standing on the scale and laughs. “I’m sorry, never mind. You clearly don’t or you would have been able to get out of my headlock.”

I step down, a little agitated. Do I really need to know how to get out of a headlock or should people maybe not put me in a headlock?

“You’re just mean.” I slap a hand over my mouth. God, where did that come from? Am I stupid, just blurting things out to a murderer?

He narrows his eyes at me, dragging the towel down his chest before throwing it aside.

“I’m mean?” He comes back to me, towering over me and I can feel the heat radiating off his body. “No, Hailey. I’m dangerous.”

Against my better judgment, I sneer. “Isn’t that the same thing?” I try showing a little bit of that backbone that I keep hidden. I don’t know what I’m thinking, provoking him. I have to fight my body’s instinct to shake in his presence, the names in his section of the file screaming in my head.

A wry smile creeps up on his left cheek. “Sure.”

And then he hooks one of his legs behind both of mine and I’m falling backwards. I brace for impact, anticipating hitting the hard marble and getting more bruises when I was just getting rid of the ones I have left.

Instead, strong arms latch behind my back and I wheeze. I’m half an inch from the ground, and Cape is hovering over me, holding me up.

“I could have let you fall, but that would be mean.” His face is an inch from mine.

“You could have not tripped me,” I say, eyeing the floor.

“You could be better on your feet.” He lets go and I softly thud to the ground. He’s standing over me, one leg on each side. “Get up, let’s try again.” He puts a hand out.

“I’m good.” I ignore his hand and awkwardly roll to my side, but I realize half way into my fetal position that he’s got me trapped between his legs. I wait in my inconvenient position for him to move but he just laughs.

I glare up at him.

“Enjoy slithering around on the ground?”

“No.”

“Then take my hand.”

“So you can trip me again?”

“Yes.”

I let out a grunt of frustration and take his damn hand. I’m yanked up like a doll and my feet scramble in the air before he lowers me back. Jeesh, guess he *doesn’t* know his own strength, I think to myself, remembering his warning when he was threatening to snap my neck.

“Alright, turn around,” he says.

I stare at him in disbelief. Does he really expect me to turn my back on him? I may freeze up like a deer about to be eaten but I’m not stupid enough to look the other way.

“Come on. I caught you, didn’t I?”

I roll my eyes and turn around. I guess I am stupid enough.

He comes up behind me and presses his bare chest against my back. It’s solid in all the right places and warm through the fabric of my shirt. I lick my lips, trying to quell the salivating. *Dangerous* doesn’t seem to be getting through to me.

He wraps his arms around me, pinning mine against my sides. Great. I walked right into this one. Is he going to pick me up and throw me?

“Now, get free,” he says.

Surprised, I push my arms out a little but his grip tightens.

“I can’t,” I say.

“You can.”

“Ugh.” I push harder, wiggling in his grip, but it’s useless. He just commented on how I’m pathetic and that I don’t have any muscle. Does he just want to beat the point in?

“Why are you trying to fight me with strength? You know I’m stronger than you, right?”

I go slack. “Of course, I know you are stronger than me. Hence, why I’m stuck.”

“Wrong.”

He drops his arms and I spin around, suspicious, but I’m looking at his back. Covered in more tattoos, one of which is the silhouette of a woman’s face. It’s too realistic to be generic, and very beautiful. Madison maybe?

“Wrap your arms around me. Unless you’re afraid of a little sweat.”

I stop focusing on the tattoo. “What are we even doing?”

“I’m going to show you how to escape when you need to.” He looks over his shoulder. “Unless you prefer to be a victim.”

I’ve never thought of myself as a victim. I just think everyone else is a predator.

I stand up on my tippy toes and reach my arms around him. I try to lock them over his chest but I can’t even touch my fingers.

He sighs. Good to know he has that in common with Julian. I drop my arms.

“No. Come on. Just hold them there.”

With a huff I try again.

“Alright. Keep your arms there and pretend you’re stronger than me.”

I snort.

“Attractive,” he drawls.

“That’s the point,” I snap.

He then leans down and drives an elbow into my rib.

“Ow. Fuck.” I let go and rub the spot. I’m being dramatic though. He didn’t put any pressure behind it, but it was still pointy. And at least it’s not my sore rib.

“Why did you let go?” he complains.

“You got me.”

“No. You think if you elbow me I’m gonna let go?” He quickly whips me around and grabs me from behind.

Once again, I’m stuck.

“Elbow me. Come on. Give it all you got.”

With a pent up vengeance, I do just that. I lean down to the right and jam my elbow at him, a satisfied smirk already on my face.

But then my mouth falls open and I’m squealing in pain. It’s like I hit my elbow against concrete.

“Ow. What the fuck.” I cry but he doesn’t let go. All I want to do is rub my funny bone that feels like it got shattered but I can’t reach my other arm around.

He chuckles. “For the record, that wasn’t me being mean.”

I screech, thrashing against his grip, seething and spitting. I don’t want to do this. I’ve been held down my whole life. Why is he torturing me?

“I hate you!” Rage bubbles inside of me. Again, I’m at a man’s mercy and I know all too well that they don’t have any.

“Oh, now you’re angry?”

“Why are you doing this?!” I stomp and try to jump out of his arms, failing and then lifting up my feet, sinking my weight onto his arms. I hang from his grip like a rabbit in a cruel toddlers grasp.

“Why am I doing this?” something in his voice has changed, it’s sharp and calculated. He somehow grips tighter, jostling me. “Because you need to know how to survive.”

“I know how to survive!” I spit, hair sticking to my face.

“No. You know how to play possum.” His lips come down to my ear. “Are you going to wait till you’re dead to get angry? Fight!”

“I am!” I thrash, throwing my measly weight against him, thinking I can make him fall backwards, but it’s like he’s mounted to the floor.

“You’re panicking and maybe if you listened to me you would know what to do.”

Angry tears burn my eyes. I don’t know what he wants me to do. He’s clearly stronger than me. There’s no way to get free. He’s right when he says I play possum. It’s easier. Easier than this, easier than letting the fury take hold of me and being too weak to expel it.

“You have to turn your disadvantages into advantages.”

“Why do you care?” I wriggle but I’m losing stamina.

“I don’t need another death on my hands.”

I still, panting. Another on top of the thirty he’s suspected of, or another like Madison?

“Julian thinks he can protect you but he can’t. You need to be able to save yourself. You need to know how to fight, how to escape, so you can come home, so you can live,” he’s ranting but his voice is far away. “So Julian doesn’t have to know what it feels like to lose someone he loves. So he doesn’t end up like me.”

He releases me and I fall to my knees, not realizing I was letting him hold me up.

“Let’s do it again,” he roars. “Get up.” He turns his back on me, waiting for my obedience.

As much as my knees are singing in pain, and as angry as I am that they are going to bruise, I stand up and push my hair back.

He’s not doing this to hurt me, he’s doing this to protect his brother. Even if he’s going about it all wrong. At least he knows he’s fucked up in the head.

I sigh and wrap my arms around him.

For the next hour he demonstrates how to escape with a series of moves that leave me winded and sore. I can’t tell how much of the sweat on my body is mine or his. In one way or another our bodies have been pressed together, whether that be him holding me from behind, pinning me on the ground, or me climbing on his back.

I did in fact slip off, but surprisingly, he caught me before I could shatter my hip and hoisted me back up, looping an arm around my waist. He didn’t flinch when I had to use my nails to hold on and he didn’t laugh when I wormed away on the marble as he scrambled for my ankle. He even encouraged me, saying, *whatever it takes*.

We’re finally back in the original position and his chest is heaving against my back.

“The whole thing now,” he reminds me. “Just uh... go easy on my balls.”

I smile wickedly. The endorphins in my blood have me flying high and I can’t make any promises.

I dive down and pierce him with my elbow, quickly twisting and stomping on his foot. His body shifts to flow with my actions even though I’m sure I’m not actually hurting him. His movement gives me the opportunity to whip a palm at his face

and then on a roll, I'm able to grab his shoulders and shove my knee between his legs.

He lets out a choking sound but then grinds his teeth and raises his chin. "Good."

I beam up at him on the balls of my feet. I'm free from his grip and I can't help but clap.

"Alright. Calm down, Jackie Chan. You need to worry if you're going to be able to remember that in a moment of panic."

I roll my eyes and twirl away from him. My heart is pumping with excitement. I don't think I've ever had that much fun and I'm not going to let him ruin it.

"What's next?" I ask, thinking about all the moves I could have used on Kyle, or my dad.

"That's enough. I need to go ice my balls."

I smirk. "I hit hard?"

He laughs. "Don't flatter yourself. It doesn't take much for balls."

"Uh huh." I laugh. "Well, since you can't take it anymore, I'm going to take a bath."

That fifty-dollar bubble bath Julian made me get is going to be so nice. I prance towards the door.

"Was that an invitation?" he asks.

I freeze, resisting the urge to turn around and gape. If he thinks showing me a few self defense tricks will let him in my pants, he's wrong. If it's my choice, truly my choice, then I'm going to hold out as long as I can.

Chapter Thirty

The bath was so good that this morning I decide to take another. I'm sore in a way I've never felt. Typically, the pain I experience comes with a depression that twists the knife in me every time I shift. This though, is like my muscles want more.

I stretch out in the massive tub, unable to reach the end with my toes. It's filled to the brim with vanilla bubbles that make skin feel slippery and moisturized. I used a little more than I probably should have, considering its price, but I couldn't resist. I've also made the water hotter than I should have, even though I think you are supposed to use cold for sore muscles, but the lavish amount is something I'm soaking up.

I never would have taken a bath in Bridgerock. The enamel on the tub was peeling, revealing a rusty basin, and even if I was brave enough, the water only reached a lukewarm temperature that trickled out and took forever.

Feeling luxurious, I roll onto my stomach in the water, lord knows the tub is big enough. I actually think it's a jacuzzi if the little knobs are any indication. But I don't know how to turn them on and I'm just happy with the faucet.

I dip my face into the water and relish the burn on my skin. I'm up earlier than usual, having slept so well, and I don't expect to smell breakfast for at least another few hours. I can stay in here the whole morning. I come up for air and smile. I highly doubt the hot water will run out.

I twirl onto my back, slipping around like a dolphin and sink my whole head under. I'm in heaven.

I come back up and scream.

"Get dressed. We have to work on your attack." Cape is standing over me with two pads on his hands. His face is deadpan and he's not ogling me, if anything he looks annoyed, but I panic.

I scramble at the bubbles, trying to get them clustered over my chest but then I realize I'm taking them from my lower half. I fluster. Is he not the least bit ashamed? What if I walked in on him taking a bath?

"I'm a little busy," I snarl. I was having such a nice time.

His eyes darken. "If you want to practice in there, I can get in with you." He tugs off a pad and steps forward.

"No," I blanch, not seeing a hint of a bluff on him.

"Then hurry up." He tucks the pad under his arm and scowls.

* * *

It only takes ten minutes of punching for me to forget about the embarrassment and find anger. I'm slamming into the punching pads attached to Cape's hands with everything I have.

"Harder!" he shouts at me. "You aren't grounded!" He reminds me, sounding like a drill sergeant.

He showed me how to stand and how to aim, but every few swings I end up messy and chaotic. I have fresh sweat snaking down my chest, soaking my shirt. I cringe, feeling like the bath was for nothing. All that pretty vanilla scent is being replaced by pure savor.

"Come on, are you even trying?"

Jesus. I feel like my arms are going to snap like twigs, how much harder can I go? I pause to re-situate. Mimicking the stance he demonstrated and shaking out my arms.

“Your opponent isn’t going to wait for you to get it together.”
he sneers.

What opponent? I feel like I’m being trained for war. What exactly even happened to Madison? The FBI folder didn’t have a section on her. If she had known how to fight would she have survived? That’s what I’m getting from Cape. I wonder if I can get any information from Marney.

I start punching again. No matter how ridiculous Cape is making this, I enjoy it. Even if he did show up in the bathroom at seven a.m. and force me into it. I want to be stronger, better prepared. Do I think it would have helped me just a month ago? No. I wasn’t ready to be this person, didn’t know I could be this person. I’m surprised that all it took was a few moments of safety to realize I never want to be hurt again, that the mode of numbness wasn’t numb, it was defeat.

“Good. Good,” Cape says, and I realize he has a look of confusion. My next swing comes even harder and I lean into it.

Yes. I don’t want to be defeated. I want whoever has the audacity to touch me without my permission to bleed. Similar to how Julian made Kyle bleed.

I picture Mr. Canes face, panting over me, his stale breath, and I scream, throwing my fists into the pads as fast as I can.

“Woah. Woah. You’re losing your footing again.”

I don’t care. I wail harder, aware that my fists have become little more than just the sides of my hands, berating against the soft cushions. I don’t want the cushions. I want flesh and bone, I want Mr. Canes face to feel my fury.

“Hailey,” Cape tries.

I was fourteen. Fourteen the first time. I didn’t stand a chance. I was used to pain, thanks to my dad, but not like that. Not pain that went deep inside me, tearing me apart and leaving me in pieces.

“Hailey.”

It didn't matter that I had graduated, that I knew I never had to see him again. I sat on that bridge and I *wanted* to die. Because of him, because of Kyle, because of my dad, because of every guy who ever looked at me funny, because of fear and pain.

Suddenly, Cape drops his hands, but I'm not done. I bang my hands into thin air, losing my balance and stumbling into him. I hate Cape too. Using his male strength to hold me in fear, threatening to kill me, as if I'm not the *only* one who should get to decide that.

I pound against his chest. His rock hard chest that makes my knuckles split and radiate shocks up my arms. But it doesn't matter because it feels good. It's the good pain, pain that *I* choose.

I know he's saying something yet I can't hear him over the sobbing. My sobbing. Mixed with frustration and anger. I tighten my fists, trying to form them again and sock, really sock with everything I have. I want him down. I want him on his knees. I want him to say sorry for what he did. And then I want him to say sorry for what everyone else did to me.

I want the roles reversed. I don't want to be the begging victim, begging, *stop, please, don't*. I want the predator at my feet, pleading for mercy, pleading for my body that I refuse to give them because it's *my* choice.

Cape lets me throw myself at him, again and again. He doesn't waver or stumble. Part of me knows I can't really get him on the ground, but he doesn't stop me from trying.

The blood on his bare chest from my knuckles finally stops me. I suck in a breath, a real one, and push off of him. My hands shake in front of me. Bloody and raw. The breath I take doesn't satisfy me though, and I start to gasp and choke. I can't get any air. I can't.

I keep backing up and gasping till I hit the mirror behind me. The cold on my skin jolts me but it's welcome. I slide down it, thudding onto my ass.

Within a second, Cape is kneeled in front of me.

“Breathe. You’re hyperventilating.”

I want to tell him, *no, I’m not*, but I can’t catch my breath to say so. His broad chest is front and center, smears of crimson blotting out his tattoos and I have to turn my head and look away. I can’t.

“If you die, Julian is going to kill me. Breathe.”

I keep staring at the ground, my head swimming, refusing to look at his chest and failing to get a proper breath.

“For fuck’s sake,” he snaps and grabs my jaw, twisting me to look at him. His eyes are a black abyss and I focus on them, falling into them like Alice in Wonderland and her rabbit hole. I think I’m going to faint.

“Breathe!” he yells at me, but I don’t really hear it, just see his lips move. “In.” He makes a dramatic show of sucking in oxygen. “Out.” He blows, and his breath, like fresh peppermint, blasts me. He’s making it look so easy.

I focus back on his eyes, on the darkness in them. Do my eyes look like that? Have I been consumed by all I’ve been dealt? All I *let* happen to me?

He shakes my face and I come back to where he’s still repeating the ‘in and out’ but I can hear him a little better.

“Good girl. In... out. In... out.”

After a moment, I slump, enjoying the sweet feel of air in my lungs. I don’t get a second to relax before Cape lets go of my chin and scoops me up, hauling me over his shoulder.

I want to wriggle, ask him what he’s doing, but I’m spent. He probably just wants to dump me back in my room and go about his workout. Which is fine with me. I’m done and embarrassed with myself for bloodying his chest.

He carries me up the stairs and I’m expecting another flight shortly, but then he tosses me onto the couch. I let out a huff.

“Stay there,” he barks and stalks off.

For what? Let me go wallow in my misery alone. I shift to cradle my hands above me so I don't get blood on the couch that probably costs a fortune and glance around. I'm glad Margo isn't here to witness my stupidity, or Marney to ask me what happened. What would I say? I cut my knuckles on Cape's chiseled chest in a fit of insanity?

God, I've never lost it like that.

Cape reappears with a bundle of bandages and bottles in his arms and he kneels before me. I shrink back, eyeing him suspiciously. Why is he being nice?

“Oh, now you're skittish?” He lays the stuff out beside me and motions for my hands.

I cringe and give them to him.

He twists my right hand this way and that, admiring the mess. “You really fucked yourself up.”

He grabs a cloth and pours something on it before wiping at my knuckles. His big hands are gentler than I expect, but whatever's on the cloth burns worse than my embarrassment, and I can't help but whimper.

“Don't be a baby,” he says but blows on the cuts.

I narrow my eyes at him.

“If you knew how to hit, they wouldn't be this bad. But *A* for effort, I guess.” He shrugs.

A for effort? I lost it on him. He should give me an *F* for failing to keep it together.

He moves onto my other hand, and I bite back a hiss when I realize he's actually kneeling between my legs. He needs a wide berth and I'm spread to him, exposed and vulnerable. He still has the blood on his chest and something about it is carnal.

He blows again and my body reacts, tensing and pushing me closer. I don't care if it proves how fucked up I am, I want to

wrap my legs around him.

He moves on to a tube of ointment, squeezing some onto his fingertip. He starts dabbing at my raw skin, his face in concentration with a few locks of his dark hair falling into his eyes. He's tender with his touch and methodical as he makes sure every knuckle gets an even amount.

Confused and shamefully aroused by his care, I scoot a little closer. I'm intrigued by his soft side. I guess it had to be there, somewhere. I mean, he *was* engaged. A woman wouldn't have committed herself to him otherwise, right?

"Julian's going to kill me," he says, reaching for the gauze.

"It's not your fault though." I frown. I don't want him in trouble when he was just trying to help me.

"Pretty sure it was my rock hard body you split your knuckles on." He chuckles, and I roll my eyes. He may be being nice, but he's still cocky. It doesn't stop me from shifting closer though. My ass is barely on the cushion at this point.

He cups my hand, unwinding the gauze around my palm and I lean into him.

"Pretty sure it was my fault," I say, a little breathy.

"It's fine. I can handle my brother." He turns to grab another roll and freezes. I'm a little close to his face. "Well, hello. Interested in the art of bandaging?" A wry and cocky smile on his lips. "If you take off your clothes I can show you a full body wrap."

I feel my skin flush and lean away. Without missing a beat, he picks up the gauze and starts on my other hand. I take the opportunity to try and get a hold of myself.

When he finishes, he dusts his hands off and then shoves them under my ass. Before I can protest, he lifts me up and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist. I'm so caught off guard that I don't say anything, just accept it and wrap my arms around his neck, relishing the care.

He carries me all the way up the stairs as I suck in his scent, not caring if the blood on his chest gets on my shirt. It is my blood, after all. A sick bit of satisfaction comes over me, as if I've marked him. I don't know what's gotten into me.

Cape pauses in the hallway, his body going rigid beneath mine, which is odd, because I assumed he was taking me to my room. I pop my head up and crane around.

Dillon is standing in the way, a look of disgust on his face when he flicks his eyes to mine.

"Problem, bro?" Cape says.

"I thought she was with Julian."

A bit of shame washes over me, killing my satisfaction and suddenly I feel so stupid. What *am* I doing? I'm not in any position to wrangle *two* older men. I barely know if I would feel comfortable getting what I want from one of them.

It just feels so nice and there's something comforting about Cape, like he knows the darkness. I bite my lip. I blame Julian for taunting me with the idea of both of them.

"Jealous?" Cape's voice is mocking, not hostile like his body feels.

"You guys are sick."

Cape laughs. "Yeah, so is fucking the housewives of Beverly Hills. Get over yourself."

Dillon's eyes widen before narrowing. I guess he didn't expect Cape to know his dirty little secret.

"At least, they're legal," Dillon spits.

"Since when do we give a fuck about what's legal?" Cape's tone takes on a harsh edge.

"I thought better than anyone you would get what breaking the law causes."

Oh, no. Even in my short time here, I know that it's not a good idea to bring up Madison.

"What's your problem?" Cape lunges forward even though he's still holding me.

Dillon steps back, opening his mouth but Cape cuts him off.

"You need to keep your fucking mouth shut. Unless you don't appreciate living here, reaping the benefits of breaking the *law*." Cape hoists me higher and then steps around Dillon, shoulder slamming him as he does.

I unfortunately turn my head back around and see Dillon's face as Cape walks us away. It's not the look of family animosity that will be forgotten tomorrow, it's the look of contempt and promised vengeance. I turn my cheek into Cape's neck to get away from it.

Chapter Thirty-One

At dinner, Margo eyes my hands but doesn't say anything. I can tell that Marney is dying to know but even she keeps her questions to herself. Which makes me wonder what gossip went around the Rossi grapevine.

Both Cape and Dillon are absent and I try to not let it concern me. They are both adults, but I hope they aren't off breaking each other's faces. Though, I think Dillon would be the only one with a broken face in that fight.

"Cape always used to dress up for Halloween," Marney whines to Margo. "Madison was really good with special effects." She looks at me. "She taught me some. Will you let me try it on you?"

I nod, surprised that she's brought up Madison.

"I think he should still have the party," she says to Margo.

"I don't know if he's feeling up to it this year."

Marney pouts and aims her attention back on me. "Cape has the top floor in a building in the city. He used to throw a Halloween party every year and everyone would be super dressed up."

"That sounds like fun," I say.

"It was. Way better than going trick or treating." She frowns. "But he hasn't done it since Madison died."

"So he has his own place?" I ask because I feel like he spends all his time here.

Margo is the one to answer. “Oh, yeah. Real nice but now it just sits there it seems.”

When I look confused, she elaborates. “I think it reminds him too much of Madison.”

I nod in understanding and she looks at Marney. “That’s why you aren’t going to pester him about Halloween.”

“I won’t!” She puts up her hands. “I was just saying.”

“Mmmhm,” Margo hums and then checks her phone.

I wonder if it’s Julian, if the worry on her face is any indication, even though I think he’s okay. He texted me again to check up on me and I made a point to not tell him about my hands.

* * *

The next day Cape doesn’t come for me, and finally I grow so anxious that I check the workout room. When he isn’t there, I can’t shake my disappointment and spend the rest of the day walking along the beach.

I got the occasional odd look from jogger moms and shirtless old men when they noticed my bandaged hands. I had replaced the gauze myself and did a terrible job, wrapping them too thick so that it looked like I have boxing gloves on.

At least, the beach wore me out to the point where my eyes are closing as I watch another movie with Marney, this time just us. It had to have been rated R and I kept waiting for Margo to come in and scold her but she never did.

When I finally make it back to my room and rest my head on my pillow, I’m anxious. Julian is supposed to come back tomorrow and I still don’t know how to explain what I did to my hands. I also don’t know how I feel about him being suspected of murder for a woman.

All the names toss and turn through my mind with me. I think I fall asleep for a few hours but in a twilight state.

Frustrated, I finally throw back the covers, glancing at the clock. It's almost four a.m.. Maybe something to snack on will help. There were so many nights where my stomach ached for food and I couldn't fall asleep, now I'm pretty sure I'm still full from dinner, but I know there's a pantry full of treats downstairs.

I slip out of bed and go to the door, pulling it open and then I jump.

Julian falls backward at my feet when I open the door. He catches himself and stands. I feel like my cheeks are going to break with how bright my smile is.

"I got an earlier flight," he says when he sees my face. He straightens his cuffs and clears his throat. His eyes are a little heavy and I think he was asleep.

Outside my door?

"What were you doing?" I ask as he wraps me in a hug, and I'm surprised when I don't hesitate, stepping up on my tippy toes to reach around his neck. He smells like him, fresh and expensive. I breathe it in, realizing how much I've missed it.

"I think I fell asleep," he says. "Where were you going?"

"You fell asleep outside my door?" I ask.

He makes a sheepish grin but raises his chin. "I missed you. I would have come in but Margo caught me." He eyes me up and down and then freezes when he notices my hands.

"What the fuck happened?" his voice raises, echoing down the hall.

"Nothing. Nothing. Shhh." I tug at his shirt, pulling him in my room.

"I leave for three days and you have new wounds?" he growls, grabbing at my hand as I try to shut the door, cringing at the idea of Dillon hearing him.

"It was an accident," I say, avoiding his eyes.

“An accident?” he scoffs and starts unwinding the bandage once I click the door shut.

He’s quick at it, and my heart thumps, trying to come up with an excuse.

“Did you burn yourself?” he questions, and that sounds like a good excuse, but once he sees, he’ll know my hands aren’t burned.

My god, I have nothing as he pulls away the last piece and his jaw drops.

“Hailey...” His eyes are big but his jaw is ticking. “What happened?” He grabs at my other hand, unraveling it even faster than the first.

I try to speak but I don’t know what to say. That his brother let me wail on him? And why? How am I supposed to say I lost my mind for a moment?

“Baby... These...” He eyes my other hand which looks just as worse. “What did you punch?” Of course, he would be able to tell what kind of wounds they are.

I chew my lip and squirm, feeling caught and out of time. “Cape...?”

His head slowly comes up and cocks to the side. “My brother?”

I suck in my lips and nod.

Something in his eyes shifts. “What did he do to you?” he growls.

“Nothing! He didn’t do anything!” I pull my hands away, reaching for the gauze littering the floor.

“I swear to God, Hailey, I will fucking kill him. If you think I’d choose him over you then you are mistaken. Tell me what happened.”

“Nothing,” I say again, floundering with the gauze and nervously trying to get it back around my hands. His tone is

making me jumpy and I picture the names under his section of the FBI folder.

“Give me that.” Julian rips it out of my hands and tosses it aside. “Tell me. Now.” He turns me towards him. “I want to make sure when I rip my brother’s fucking throat out that the crime fits the punishment, or if I need to get more creative.”

Oh, my god. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that he would, not with the way he’s talking or looking at me.

“He didn’t do anything,” I plead. “He was helping me.”

Julian’s eyebrows raise in question.

“He was teaching me how to punch,” I explain, a little embarrassed.

Julian shakes his head. “My brother?”

I nod.

“This is the story you’re sticking with?”

“It’s not a story.”

“Did he get drunk and you had to fight him off?”

“What?! No! He was teaching me how to fight and I got carried away and I kept punching and then I hyperventilated and he took care of me.” I say in a quick breath, embarrassed but desperate for him to believe me.

He searches my eyes, looking for the lie, but after a moment I can see his muscles uncoil. He glances at my knuckles and then takes both of my hands in his.

“But what were you practicing on? A tree? A brick wall? It doesn’t make sense.”

I look away. “There *were* punching pads...”

“Were?”

“But then I got carried away...”

“Uh huh. On what?”

I try to pull away, but he holds me in place, so I give in. “On Cape.”

The silence is so defeating that after a second I look up from underneath my hair and find Julian smirking. “You busted your knuckles on my brother?”

I give a tiny shrug and Julian starts laughing, bellowing over. The sound is so wonderful and it releases all the tension in my body.

After Julian re-wraps my hands he kisses me on the cheek and brushes my hair behind my ear. The gesture is so sweet and welcome that I snag his hand as he gets up to leave.

“Wait. Don’t go,” I say.

He makes a pained face and shoves a free hand in his pocket. “It’s probably better if I do.”

“For who?” I’m genuinely curious.

“Baby, I can’t lay in that bed next to your body and not touch you.”

I pause. I want him to touch me but am I being naive? Am I so broken that I don’t see how wrong it is for me? And I’m still not sure how I feel about what I read in the folder hidden in his office.

“Then just...” I flail. I don’t know if I’m ready for it but I don’t want him to go. I eye the chair in the corner of the room. “Just stay there.” I nod my head towards it.

He gives a sidelong glance at it. I would worry about the comfortability of it but I’ve tested it myself and it’s as comfy as it is probably expensive. It has a wide bottom and a plush back with floppy arm rests. It’s not a warm bed, but I really want him to stay.

“And you don’t think that would be creepy?” His lip twitches and it dawns on me that Margo asked him the same thing when she blocked him outside my door the night I overheard them.

“I would like it,” I say.

A wicked smile slowly curls his lips and he makes his way to the chair, flicking the light off on his way. I can just make out his silhouette as he takes the seat and stretches his legs out in front of himself.

Feeling content, I scoot back in the bed and cover myself. “Thank you,” I whisper into the dark.

“No, thank you. This is much better than the hallway floor.”

I picture how he fell in when I opened the door. Was that the first time he had done that or had he been there other nights?

“In the future, you can always come in,” I whisper.

“Don’t tempt me,” His voice is little more than a rasp. “Sleep well, baby.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

My foot is on the brake, and we're still in the driveway, but my underarms are damp and my heart is thumping against my rib-cage.

"Julian, this is a bad idea," I say.

"It's fine. Just ease off the brake," he says from the passenger seat. He's got an arm slung over my headrest as he leans towards me and he doesn't seem the least bit worried about the McLaren.

I've tried to tell him that I've never driven before—have never even sat in a driver's seat, and don't know the first thing about road laws but he herded me into the car anyways.

"What if I crash?"

He lifts his shoulders. "Only one way to find out."

"That's not funny," I snap my head in his direction, and he sighs.

"We're just going down the street. There's hardly ever any traffic along here."

"Unless, I accidentally run over someone," I grumble because I know that I'm not winning this.

"If she doesn't want to, can I try?" Marney butts her head in from the back.

"Pretty sure you can't reach the pedals," Julian quips back.

Marney was so excited when she heard that Julian was going to give me a driving lesson, that even though I wasn't sure I was going to do it, I let her come with us.

Now I'm second guessing my choice. The last thing I want to do is get Marney killed.

"I want to drive the convertible anyways," Marney huffs and sits back.

"Actually, that sounds like a better idea," I say. "Marney can show me how it's done."

"Will you just take your foot off the brake?" Julian says.

With a whimper, I do just that. The car rolls forward on its own and I slam my foot back down. The car jostles, lunging us all forward.

Marney giggles as I grimace up at Julian.

He sighs, "Well, that was a start."

After another ten minutes, I got us out of the driveway and onto the street. I'm cruising at a nice five miles per hour while Julian tries to explain the blinker, lights, and windshield wipers. I have no clue what he's saying though, all my concentration is on the steering wheel and keeping us on the right side of the road.

From the rear-view mirror, I see a car come up behind me and my hands tighten on the wheel.

"Ignore them. They can go around." Julian puts a hand on my thigh, reassuring me.

I nod and continue my snail crawl, and after a moment, the car zips around me. Feeling a little better, I listen to Julian when he says to go a little faster.

We make it to the end of the street and Julian instructs me how to make a U-turn. When I ace it smoothly, I find myself smiling, enjoying myself.

"Is that a smile?" Julian pokes me in the side, and I swerve a little, the smile falling off my face. He laughs like it's not a big deal.

If I was in an open field in an old truck with someone like Kyle, I wouldn't be so worried. But I have Marney in the back

watching videos on her phone, and Julian who I would never forgive myself if injured. Kyle on the other hand, I might have purposely ran us into a tree. If it killed us both, it would have been worth it.

I go up and down the street a few times, and at this point I give in to Julian's urging to turn down a different road. It's a short curve and I freeze up when I realize we've come to a stop sign before a busy road. Cars whiz past and my palms start to sweat.

"Turn on your blinker."

Absently, I flick it to the right.

"Good. When it's clear you just turn."

"Julian, I don't know about this..."

"You got this. I trust you."

My gaze travels to the rear view mirror, looking at Marney who is oblivious. Does she trust me? Because I don't trust me.

"It's clear," Julian says, pulling me back to the road in front of me.

I lean forward in my seat, craning my neck to see a car coming five hundred feet away.

"You can make it," he adds.

But what if I don't? I want to listen to him. I want to believe what he's saying, and believe in myself, but what about Marney?

I don't turn, letting the car reach us and go by. Other cars appear, making the turn impossible now. I frown.

"It's fine. We can sit here till you're ready." He gives my thigh a squeeze.

And we do sit there. Every time the cars thin and an opportunity presents itself, I can't bring myself to take my foot off the brake. There's always a car coming, even if it is far enough away to safely make the turn.

After a bit, Julian has me nudge forward, the wheels edging past the sidewalk. I'm going to do it. I really am. I crane my neck, hands tight on the wheel, and wait for a singular car. When it passes I don't move.

Fuck. And now there's more cars.

"I can't do it."

"You can. There's no rush."

I nod. Determined to do it at the next opportunity, but then a car pulls up behind me. A little red sports car with a man behind the wheel and a bluetooth in his ear.

Shit.

I lick my lips, trying to quell my dry mouth. I'm too far out to make a U-turn now and I have to make the right.

Every time it's clear though, my chest tightens and Julian notices.

"Fuck him. Take your time," he refers to the car behind me.

But I can't take my time. I feel the little red car's impatience behind me. I can see him squinting and sighing from the rear-view mirror. In a haste, I let go of the brake but then jam my foot back on it. There's a car down the way. What if they speed up?

The car behind me honks, and I jump in my seat. Looking in the mirror, I see Marney has taken notice and has turned in her seat, glaring at the red car.

Getting a hold of myself, I look again to see if it's clear, and it is, but nope, I don't move. Oh, my god. What am I going to do?

The car honks again. This time laying it down and dragging it out.

"Asshole." Julian swivels in his seat. "Ignore him. He can go around."

Right. Right. Yes, he can go around. I forgot that. Feeling a bit better, I take a breath and re-situate. But when I miss the turn

again, the man doesn't go around. He starts rapidly beeping his horn and I can suddenly hear yelling.

"Are you serious?" Julian scowls and rolls his window down. The man's voice comes in clear and is laced with profanities.

"Don't you know how to drive, you stupid bitch?" he bellows. My cheeks burn and my hands start to shake.

"What a douchebag," Marney says.

Julian opens his door and gets out. For a moment, I'm relieved, thinking he's going to come around and switch spots with me, but then he doesn't turn towards the McLaren, instead heading to the driver's window of the red car.

"Oooh," Marney squeals. "That guy is in troubleeee." She scrambles onto her knees and turns to look out the back window.

My eyes are glued to the side mirror and I watch the man's eyes get big as he scrambles to roll his window up. When Julian reaches him he doesn't face the window and instead angles his body beside it, his back to us, and before I can registrar what's about to happen, his elbow juts out in a smooth movement.

The man's window spider-webs and then shatters. The man jerks back, flinching against the glass that litters his chest. With slow and controlled movements, Julian turns and lowers himself to the sill covered in shards. He doesn't hesitate as he rests his arms on the mess and tucks his head in the window.

He's saying something I can't hear, but his face is calm, a contradiction to the action he just took, and if not for the broken glass, I would think they were just having a civilized chat. Julian doesn't look like a person who would go around knocking out peoples windows. He's dressed in slacks with a crisp button down and an expensive watch on his wrist.

I note that he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. I knew this but seeing it is another thing. It's kind of sexy and I can't help but

feel a little pleased. That man had me in a tizzy, anxious and panicked. I'm glad Julian broke his window.

The second I think it, a knot forms in my chest. What about the woman he supposedly killed? And here I am admiring his violence.

The man starts nodding nervously, and I wish I knew what Julian was saying. When he's done, he reaches a hand in and pats the man on the cheek. The man freezes in horror at the contact, and then Julian uncoils himself from the car, straightening and adjusting his cuffs.

With an unhurried gait, Julian comes back to the McLaren and slips into the passenger seat. As soon as he does, the red car burns rubber, the tires screeching on the pavement and going around me. The man pulls out at full speed and nearly clips a car in the process.

"Now." Julian leans back over me, hitching a hand behind my seat. "Where were we?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

Over dinner Marney tells Margo and Dillon what happened but with added exaggeration.

“He pulled the guy out of the window by his collar and held him up in the air!” she exclaims, shoving a bite of mashed potatoes into her mouth.

“I doubt it, unless Julian is Superman,” Dillon says, rolling his eyes.

“I do get told I resemble Henry Cavil.” Julian gives a modest smirk, and it makes Dillon’s eyes roll into the back of his head.

“I hope the guy wasn’t one of the neighbors,” Margo gravels. “We don’t want a reputation.”

“The guy was a total jerk, he deserved it,” Marney says, and I can’t help but agree with her.

The spread for the night is two whole roast chickens, parmesan brussel sprouts, mashed potatoes with gravy, and strawberry cheesecake that is sitting at the end of the table.

I eye it with shame. I’ve already had two plates and both of Julian’s drumsticks that he set gently on my plate when he noticed me looking at them. I tried to give them back but he feigned like he was full.

I’m hoping that everyone is rapt with Marney’s story and doesn’t notice me engorging myself.

“Speaking of people who deserve it.” Margo takes a drink, of what I assume is a cranberry vodka, and looks over the rim at Julian. “Explain to me again why you let our El Cuco friend go.”

My fork hovers in the air as my ears perk up. I didn't get any details about what happened in El Cuco and I'm surprised to hear this new information. He let the guy he was told to kill go?

"Ma," Julian sighs. "He was a nobody. A bottom feeder. Not worth getting my hands dirty over."

A part of me relaxes. Maybe the names in the folder aren't accurate.

"He's a loose end now."

"He won't be a problem. We have the authorities. What's he going to do?"

"It sends a message, Jules, that we're weak."

Julian scoffs. "That's the last thing we are. Denny's back on his feet and when he gets whoever's in charge, we'll send a message then."

Margo shakes her head.

I'm surprised they are talking about this in front of Marney. I wonder how much she knows about the business. Does she know about the list of names I saw? Or how Margo is suspected of her parents' deaths?

The way she carries on eating and simultaneously checking her phone makes me think I'm overreacting. Even Dillon doesn't say anything or make a face when Julian insinuates sending a message. I may not have had a picket fence life, but surely this isn't normal. Unless, it is for them and if I want to be a part of the family, it needs to be normal for me too.

Making a point to put it out of my mind, I go back to salivating over the strawberry glaze on the cheesecake. I know I don't have room for it but I'm going to try. A sneaky little thought enters my mind. If it doesn't get finished then it will be in the fridge and I can come down later tonight and have some. God, what's wrong with me, already fantasizing about what I'm going to eat in the night?

“Ma...” Julian speaks, and I snap my attention back. “Let the girl have some cake.”

Mortified, I shrink into my seat. “Me? I’m okay.”

“Stop, you want some.” He pushes out his chair.

“Peach, if you wanted some you could have said.” Margo leans over the table and pushes it closer to Julian who comes up beside her.

“I’m fine. Really.”

“No. No.” She waves a dismissive hand. “Let Jules cut you a piece. I made it myself.”

She made that delectable thing? How she pulled that off with murder on her mind, I’m at a loss for. If she’s worried about their reputation, she doesn’t need to be. Between the recital and muumuus and cheesecake skills, I wouldn’t be none the wiser.

Julian cuts the cake and slides a plate in front of me before he takes his seat. I can’t decide if I’m embarrassed or grateful when I take in the slice. It’s huge, practically a quarter of the whole thing.

“Thank you,” I whisper, digging in even though everyone else is still eating chicken.

“That reminds me,” Julian says, and through an orgasmic bite I see that he’s got a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile on his face. I swallow slowly, waiting for what else he could embarrass me with as he eyes Marney.

“We need to figure out what you want to do for your birthday.”

Oh, no. No. No. No. Marney’s face immediately brightens and she drops her fork. I give Julian a glare, but he just smiles, pleased with himself.

“When is it?!”

“November second.” Julian answers.

“Oh, my god, why didn’t you say anything?” Marney snaps at me. “We need time to book flights or make reservations or get a DJ.”

Margo slowly pushes out her chair, raising her brows and avoiding eye contact. “I think I have something... I need to do.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Dillon stands. “You’re not leaving me in this.”

Margo laughs and scurries out of the room with her glass in hand. I scowl at Julian but he just shrugs with amusement as Dillon puts his napkin on the table and follows Margo.

“Okay. What are we thinking?” Marney pulls up her phone and pushes her plate aside. “Bora Bora is—”

“Bora Bora? Why can’t we stay here? What if we just go to dinner?”

Marney drops a hand on the table and gives me a flat look. “No.”

“Go easy on her,” Julian warns Marney.

She levels him with a stare, but Julian wins, and her shoulders slump.

“Fine. We can stay local,” she sighs. “But dinner isn’t going to cut it.”

I consider that a small win and go back to eating my cake while she prattles off ideas.

Chapter Thirty-Four

With Julian back, I haven't seen much of Cape, even though I ache to get back in the workout room. I've passed it a couple of times but it's been empty, and I wonder if Cape went back to his penthouse.

During the day, when Marney is at school, the house can feel a little empty. I'm not sure where Julian goes when he says he has work to do, and Margo is always in and out, running errands that I'm sure she could get someone else to do.

Thankfully, I don't see much of Dillon, who I now think of as a cartoon character, since I've never seen him in anything but running gear, as if that's his character outfit. He's always out of the house training before breakfast and only appears after everyone has dissipated. Margo saves him a plate that he scarfs down with an appreciative eye thrown her way, and then he's gone again, doing what, I don't know.

A content feeling has started to creep up on me and I find myself sitting on the back deck. I make a point not to check the workout room like an adrenaline junkie and instead enjoy the peace and sound of crashing waves. It's oddly warm for late fall, but I guess that's normal for California. In Bridgerock, I would have been freezing my ass off.

I picture the bridge Julian found me on, how it's probably coated in black ice and the river flowing below it with icicles here and there. If Julian hadn't showed up would I have jumped? Would anyone have looked for me? Would my battered body be wedged between rocks, lifeless and still?

The imagery is like a dream. It used to be so real, so vivid. I pictured it every night, hoping to someday have the courage. I thought it was my only way out. What if I had gone through with it? I never would have known that peace could be found elsewhere.

I breathe in the salty air, relishing it and then the doorbell rings. A little confused, I stand up, unsure if I should answer it. I don't recall Margo ever having any visitors and I don't feel like it's my place to answer her door.

But then it rings again, followed by knocking.

I make my way through the house and as I grow closer to the door, I realize the knocking is more like banging, and the bell is being repeatedly hammered on. I hesitate near the door, not remembering if I saw Margo leave today or not, and hoping that Dillon might appear.

The banging becomes more insistent, and in a haste I flip the lock and pull the door open. It's definitely not my place, but whoever it is seems insistent.

I blink against the person standing before me and my whole world tilts. I have to grab the frame to stop from falling over. This can't be real. It can't.

"Fucking whore." My dad steps forward, and on shaky legs I get out of the way, instinct kicking in. "I thought, there's no way, but low and behold." He stretches out his arms, voice booming.

How did he find me? *Why* did he even bother finding me?

He shuts the door behind him and sneers at the brass handle. "Guess that shithead Kyle had some good info."

My mind scrambles to figure out how he's standing here right now. His mud caked boots and holey cargo pants sully the foyer. He looks so out of place, like a monster in a ballroom. His face is blotchy, a telltale sign he's been drinking and I skirt against the wall, instantly remembering how to act in his presence.

Why did I open the door?

He looks around and laughs, the sound making my stomach twist. Did Kyle tell him about Julian? The McLaren? Is that how he found me?

“Who’re you spreading your legs for to stay here?” He stomps past me as if I’m a dog he doesn’t expect an answer from.

In a panic, I follow after him. My heart is thudding in my ears and my legs feel weak.

When he cuts a corner towards the kitchen, I realize I’m not breathing. I shouldn’t have answered the door, or at least looked out the peephole. What was I thinking?

He’s got his hands on his hips when I spot him taking in the kitchen. He sways a little but stays standing. That’s not a good sign. It means he has his bearings but is drunk enough to harness that inebriated strength.

“Where’d you go?” he shouts and turns. “Oh. There you are.” He frowns, his eyes bobbing around in their sockets. “You really got yourself a sweet deal here.”

I back up when he comes towards me, wondering if I can somehow lead him outside. Whatever’s going to happen, cannot happen inside this house. It would feel wrong, like a stain on a shirt.

“You know you made me look like a fool? Had the damn sheriff running plates,” he yells, lunging at me.

I dodge to the left, my heart racing, and he stumbles.

“Bitch!” He straightens out and his face turns red with anger. “When I get my hands on you...” He points and advances again.

I shrink out of his reach again. I know it’s a bad idea, thwarting him, it only makes it worse, but I can’t help it. The bruises have healed and my rib has started to feel better. I don’t want new ones. I’ve been enjoying my painless existence, my reflection in the mirror, my new found peace. If he hurts me, I

don't think I could take it. I don't have my walls up anymore, I'm not numb anymore. The switch is dead.

"I'm sorry," I plead.

"You're gonna be." He lunges again, but I've backed myself against a wall.

"Please," I beg, trying to push off, but he slams his hands into my chest and I bang against the wall, my head bouncing against it. For a second, I'm stunned, little black dots popping in my eyes and then I'm on the ground. My elbows cracking on the marble as I cry out. How did I end up on the floor?

"Get up," he demands. "We're fucking leaving."

The tears come quick and hot as I try to slither away.

"You fucking stupid?" he bellows and then his boot connects with my rib.

I squeeze my eyes shut, and my body curls up like a dead spider in pain. It's the same rib and it hurts even worse than the first time. I'm lost in agony, waiting for the next blow, unable to do anything but stay shriveled.

There's no numbness, nowhere to float away to. There's only pain and fear. I can't look, can't see what's coming for me. Will he drag me out by my hair? Is his boot coming for me again?

All the dread I used to carry returns with a fury. And I won't be able to hide from it this time. He'll never stop. I'm going to end up back in Bridgerock with all of this life as nothing but a memory.

"Who the fuck—" My dad starts, but then a resounding crack echoes through the kitchen followed by a hard thud right next to me.

I fight to open my eyes and confusion outweighs the pain for a second. I see my dad on his back, not more than a foot away from me. I scramble away, not sure what happened, till I look up and see Cape. He's shirtless and dripping in sweat, but that's not

what holds my gaze. He's seething, his eyes black and feral as his fists clench at his sides. The veins in his neck and forehead are throbbing and look about to burst. His whole body looks like it's about to explode.

I grab my side and push out of the way. It's not the same look he had when Julian brought up Madison, this is worse, scarier. I don't see a single shred of the man who wrapped my hands for me. H

He careens forward and grabs my dad by the shirt.

"Bastard..." my dad slurs as he withers in Cape's grip.

With that, Cape snaps his head forward and bashes it into my dad's face. Blood immediately pours from his nose and soaks his shirt.

The air clogs in my chest at the sight but I can't close my eyes. I'm stunned into the horror like a train wreck that I can't look away from.

Cape shakes him, trying to get him to stand on his feet but his head falls back as he cups his nose. Instead, Cape drops him and my dad crumples to the floor with a huff.

My dad peers up, his eyes suddenly sober and he ambles back on his hands, trying to skitter away from what he sees. Bloody prints smear the white marble besides him. A quick glance at Cape tells me what my dad sees, a terminator on steroids, a fight he can't win. But I see Death, in the form of a man for the first time in my life.

He may be messy, chaotic, but he's serving me peace, just like I thought Death always would.

My dad isn't quick enough, or agile enough to get away as Cape kicks him, void of anything but fury. The sound is sickening and destructive. I hope it breaks his bones the way he's broken mine.

Cape follows it with another and then another. My dad's body curls around in the fetal position as Cape changes to

stomping. His foot comes down on him like a hammer before Cape straddles him and grabs him by the shirt again.

With a hand over my mouth, I back up to the wall, flinching every time Cape's fist connects with my dad's face. I watch in horror as my dad becomes unrecognizable. His nose has flattened, blood spraying out and his eyes instantly swelling shut. But Cape doesn't stop, like a broken program he continues caving in the face of the man who tortured me my whole life.

After what feels like hours, Cape peels himself off my dad's body. Cape's chest is heaving and splattered in blood as looks to me. I'm still huddled against the wall, tears streaming down my cheeks as I clutch my side. I realize though, that he's not looking at me so much as through me. His eyes are still black, irises gone, and I don't think he's really here with me.

I glance at my dad, the bloody pulp on the floor, and freeze. Is he not breathing? I try to stop shaking to be able to tell but I can't tell if there's movement.

Oh, god.

I look back to Cape but he's in a catatonic state, a terminator malfunctioned.

"Cape?" I whisper, needing him to snap out of it but afraid of what will happen when he does. "Is my dad dead?"

Chapter Thirty-Five

I'm wrapped up on the couch with an ice pack on my cheek as I listen to the bickering coming from the kitchen.

"How did he even get in the house?" Julian's voice is barely a comfort.

"In my house, Caperson? My *house*?" Margo is snapping.

"Good riddance," Julian mumbles and I hear what sounds like a pat on the back.

"You two get this cleaned up before Marney comes home. And use the enzyme cleaner after the bleach. I don't want a speck of blood overlooked."

"What about Dillon?" Julian asks.

"I'll handle Dillon," she says.

"We can't trust him," Cape speaks for the first time since they walked in and ushered me into the living.

"What do you mean?" Julian asks but no response comes.

"I'll handle it," Margo repeats. "He doesn't need to know about... this."

This being the dead body that is my dad. I don't know what I'm supposed to feel. Relieved? Sad? Horrified? Cape literally beat him to death in front of my eyes. I just feel sick from the sight and I can't get my hands to stop trembling.

I drop the ice pack and tuck my hands between my thighs.

I always pictured killing my dad. If I somehow got a hold of a gun, and what it would look like if I shot him in the head. If I put

rat poison in his whiskey, and watched him foam from the mouth. If I smothered him in his sleep, struggling to hold him down as the life faded from his eyes and he looked into mine, knowing how much I hated him.

But none of those are as graphic as how it actually played out. And it wasn't even my hands. I also don't think I ever believed it would happen.

Why would he even come here? He never gave a fuck about me. He was always screaming about how much of a burden I was and, *why didn't I just get lost?* There would be many times when I was battered and broken that I slept in the back corner of the park while I licked my wounds. He never looked for me then and he never said anything when I showed up back home, desperate for a soft surface and meager shelter over my head.

I guess it makes sense though. His rage could only build up for so long until he needed someone to take it out on. I was that person. Whether it be holding my head under dirty dishwater, or weekends of being tied to the radiator while he watched me wither.

He was an awful man, the bottom of the barrel, and yet I always returned like a loyal dog, starving and afraid, but loyal all the same.

I'm glad he's dead.

But I'm not okay. I don't feel the throw that was wrapped around me and my eyes are unfocused, gazing blankly. I don't even feel the pain in my rib and I can't tell if I'm cold or the shaking is something else.

After a few more minutes of bickering, Julian appears. He kneels at my feet and stuffs his hands under the blanket.

"Sweetheart?"

I blink against my scratchy eyelids, my cheeks tight with dried tears.

"I'm going to carry you upstairs. Is that okay?" he asks.

Julian is always considerate but he must see something on my face that makes him double check.

I want to say yes or nod, but I can't bring myself to.

His face crumples. "You don't want to stay here. We have to clean up and move the body. Can I pick you up?"

The *body*. My *dad's* body. He's so nonchalant about it. Does this happen all the time?

"Okay, Buttercup. I'm going to carry you. Everything's going to be okay. Don't worry about anything." He then shifts and scoops me up, blanket and all. I wince against the pain in my side, but it's nothing compared to what it should be.

I angle against his chest, burying my face in his scent, trying to blot out the smell of coppery blood. I hate that I left the back door open and it's mixed with salty sea scent, tainting it.

Julian doesn't take me to my room, instead setting me gently on the chaise in Margo's room.

"I'll be back in a few hours. Just rest." He presses his lips to my forehead and holds them there, tucking a hand under my hair and cupping the nape of my neck.

He goes to leave the room and I croak, surprised by the sound of my own voice. "What are you going to do?"

He turns, his brows pulled down.

"With..." I stammer. "The body..."

He tilts his head, a soft and reassuring smile on his lips. "Don't worry, no one will find it."

A little while later, Margo positions herself next to me and I flinch. I hadn't even noticed her come into the room. She's got a small stack of clothes on her lap with a plate on top. There's buttered toast with peanut butter and a few strawberries.

"How you doing, Peach?" She sets the pile next to me and puts her knuckles under my chin, lightly tilting my face. Her eyes examine the throbbing place on my jaw and she frowns.

“Bastard,” she says, shaking her head. “Let’s change your clothes.” She moves the plate. “We can’t have any evidence. You’d be surprised how far microscopic blood splatters can go.”

I don’t get a say as she starts unfurling the blanket from my limbs, pushing it aside. She’s resolute, sure in what she’s doing as if this is protocol, and I’m a mental patient. I guess I am though, as I just let her do what she wants, no clarity of mind.

She sweeps my hair back, giving it a few loving strokes before lifting my shirt over my head. Her eyes are business-like until they freeze on my side. Her lips screw up in anger and she takes a deep breath.

“Well, that doesn’t look good.” She scoots off the chaise, pushing herself up from her knees. “Stand up, Peach. I’m going to have to wrap that.” She leaves me and goes into the bathroom.

I obediently get up and look at the damage. The bruise that was once yellowing and healing is now fresh again. Blue to the point of black and encompassed by a deep red. It hurts to breathe all over again, but I tell myself this is the last time I ever have to hurt again. I hope.

Margo comes back with a thick roll of brown elastic bandage and slips her arms under mine. She wraps it loosely around me, huffing with exertion and I feel bad for her, having to do this for me.

If I had never come here then she wouldn’t have a dead body in her kitchen and she wouldn’t have to bother taking care of me.

When she finishes wrapping me, she pulls a shirt over my head and makes me switch pants, even my socks.

She motions me to sit back down and urges me to eat. I pick up the toast to appease her but I don’t take a bite.

“Listen.” She grabs my knee and catches my eyes. “You’re young. Which means you’re resilient. You’re going to bounce back from this. But in the meantime, you have to remember that. I wasn’t much older than you when my late husband had to pull

me out of a similar situation.” She looks away as if remembering something but recovers quickly, tapping my knee.

“I know what it feels like for you right now, but you don’t have to worry. You’re with us now and we’re going to take care of you. At your age, I didn’t have anyone and I think I managed pretty well. You’ll be okay.”

I picture Margo at my age. Was she really broken like me? Did Luca have to kill whoever was hurting her? Did she have to worry about a body and the implications that go with it? My dad was my baggage and the suitcase spilled out all over. The last thing I want is for my new family to have to carry my weight. What about Cape? He may already have thirty names on his list but I don’t want him to go down for my weakness.

“Margo,” I find my voice. “I don’t want Cape to get in trouble.”

A knowing smile plays on her face. “Oh, Peach. He’s not going to get in trouble.”

“But—”

“It’s not like the movies. There’s only three things that could take us down.” She straightens and counts on her fingers. “DNA, imagery, and testimony.” Her eyes flicker on the last word, and I can tell what she’s thinking. That my testimony could ruin everything. But she doesn’t need to worry. All Cape did was protect me, and I would never condemn him for that.

“Also, they need a body for murder. And they won’t find one.” She dusts her hands and I realize that Margo too is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The whole family operates on the guise of normalcy but they are far from it. Which makes them even more dangerous. At least I’m on the inside, I think.

I spend the night in Margo’s room, hidden away from Marney who whined at the door, begging to watch a movie with me, but Margo shooed her away. She then rummaged through a drawer in her bathroom and gave me a pill. *For the pain*, she said, and I didn’t hesitate to take it. Within twenty minutes, the

searing ache in my side that I battled with at every breath subsided to a dull annoyance. My mind got hazy. It definitely wasn't a run of the mill Tylenol.

There's a C-PAP machine attached to Margo's face that fills the dark room with a continuous rhythm that feels like white noise and it's comforting. I don't know if Julian came back in a couple hours like he said he would, or if Margo redirected him as well, but I'm grateful to not be alone. Every time I close my eyes I see the mangled face of my dad splayed out against the white floor.

It's like it's tattooed to the back of my eyelids, and I wonder how long it will be like this. I try to believe in what Margo said, that I'll be okay. That I'm young and resilient. The words get stuck in my head and I repeat them over and over again mentally. I think that's the pill though.

I try so hard to keep my eyes open but the medication is making them heavy. I'm forced to see the lurid blood while chanting the word 'resilient' as I fall asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Six

At some point in my drug induced coma, Julian carries me back to my room. He smells like fresh soap with a hint of bleach. I'm vaguely aware that he stays in the room with me, taking up residence in the chair in the corner.

When the sun finally rises, I feel tense and groggy but I can take him in more clearly. He's asleep with his head resting on his shoulder. He's in different clothes than last night, a more comfy attire of gray joggers and a black long sleeve henley.

Knowing he's right there, sleeping like everything is okay, relaxes something in me and I snuggle deeper, tucking the comforter under my chin. I keep my eyes on him, fighting my eyelids and their stupid visions. If I can just keep them open and on Julian, I feel okay. Even though my mind runs wild with what he did with the body.

Did he bury my dad in the middle of nowhere or dump him in the ocean? But Margo said the body would never be found, and those possibilities seem risky. Did he burn the body? Cut it up into tiny pieces? Did Julian rip out my dad's teeth with a pair of pliers and his bare hands? I can't help but squint at his fingernails, looking for dried blood, even though I know he wouldn't be stupid enough to leave any behind.

Every part of me logically knows I should be afraid of him, of Cape, of Margo, of the whole nasty business spelled out in the FBI folder, but I'm just not. As terrifying as Cape was, he saved me. Another kick and my dad would have drug me out by my hair and forced me back to Bridgerock to suffer until I grew the courage to throw myself off the bridge. And Julian, no matter

what he did to clean up, was only cleaning up a mess that followed me here.

I'm more grateful than I've ever been. If I had somehow managed to kill my dad, I wouldn't have known what to do with the body, or wouldn't have had the stomach to do what needed to be done. I would have sat with it till the police took me away where I would have spent the rest of my life behind bars.

Even Margo, how can I fear her when all she does is feed me, clothes me, and check to make sure I won't be a teen mother? In the short time that I've known her, I've never felt more cared for. She's the woman I always needed in my life, leading with strength and telling me that I too can be strong.

They may *send messages* and illegally sell guns, but every family has secrets, at least with this one they protect and care for me.

Julian twitches and then his head snaps up, eyes wild and searching. He scans the room, sitting up with urgency. And then when his eyes land on me he sags, relief evident as he lets his grip on the arms of the chair relax.

I don't mean to but my eyes well up, my lip instantly trembling under his gaze and I start to cry.

"Baby, baby, baby." He stands and comes to my bed. "You're okay. Everything is okay."

"I know," I croak, as he sits and pulls my head into his lap.

"Then what's wrong? Everything is taken care of."

I don't even know. I don't care that my dad is dead and I'm not worried about Cape getting in trouble, not after hearing what Margo said and how she said it. But I know I need to just cry, even if it makes me look like a headcase.

"Are you in pain? I can get you another pill," he sounds so sincere, and it would be so easy to just say yes, at least that would make sense for my sudden onset of tears.

“Yes, but that’s not what’s wrong.” I let myself be honest.

“Then what? Tell me and I’ll fix it.”

I giggle. And then I giggle again. And again a little hysterically. Does that mean he’s a *fixer*? It’s just so perfect. I can’t help it.

“Hailey?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” I try to stop.

“You must still be loopy from the pills.”

“No. I’m fine. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay if you aren’t. Cry or laugh or whatever you need to do. I’ll be right here.”

His words make me cry harder. “I’ve never had anyone.”

“I know, babygirl.”

“I’m glad he’s dead.”

Julian stills in his stroking of my arm. “Well, I’m glad we agree on that.”

“He’s really dead right? All the way dead?” I worry that I was just mistaken, that we were all mistaken, and at this moment he’s digging his way up from the ground and will be coming for me.

Julian chuffs. “Well, if he wasn’t, he is now.”

I wince. Maybe he did cut him up into tiny pieces. I have to resist the urge to check his nails again.

“You aren’t mad at me at all?” I raise my head.

“What?! God, no.” Julian tucks me back into him.

“But I let him in. I didn’t know it was him but I opened the door and I didn’t have a chance to stop him,” I sob.

“Shh.”

“And Margo’s kitchen is ruined.”

“It’s all cleaned up.”

“And Cape. I feel so bad that he did that and he probably hates me. I didn’t fight like he showed me and now he has another name on his list.”

“His list?”

Oh, no. Did I just let that slip? I sit up and note Julian’s confused expression.

I might as well reveal it all, if I really want to be here.

I tell him about how I snuck out and went through his house, leaving out Marney because I was the older one and going over there was on me. I even tell him I went through his underwear drawer, which gets an amused eyebrow raise, but he doesn’t seem upset. And then I tell him about his office and the bottom drawer.

He nods as if he already understands.

“I’m really sorry.” I hang my head.

“Hailey,” He draws out my name and I brace for a scolding. “While I didn’t expect you to go snooping, I wouldn’t have given you the keys if I was trying to hide anything.”

“You aren’t mad?”

“No.” He pulls me against his chest. “But do you have any questions about what you read?”

I chew my lip. I would like to know if Margo had anything to do with the death of Marney’s parents, but that seems rude, considering how she’s handled recent events for me.

“Did you kill a woman?” I ask instead, not sure I want to know and not sure why it’s more important to me more than any of the other names.

“You do know that those lists are extremely errored right?”

“But did they get that one right?”

I feel Julian’s head bob one way and then the other. “Ehh. Technically. But you should know I don’t feel good about it.”

My heart sinks.

“In this line of work there are always casualties and the specific person you are referring to was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A wife who thought her husband was cheating but found him being taught a lesson instead.”

“Oh,” Is all I can say.

“We really can’t have loose ends,” he says. “Not in this business.”

“I understand,” I tell him and I really do understand, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

“I typically make it a point not to hurt women,” he continues. “But if it comes down to them or us...” he trails off.

“I understand,” I repeat.

“Do you? Or does it make you afraid of me? Cause I would never hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then why do I get the idea you are lying.”

I pull away and look up at him, trying to will him to believe that I’m not afraid of him. It’s so the opposite in fact. I feel safer with him than I ever have. It’s just the woman’s name in my mind, helpless against him.

“I just feel like it’s not fair. How it was never fair for me. She couldn’t protect herself against you... It just wasn’t a fair fight.”

“You’re concerned with the *fairness* of it?” I watch as he tries to tamper down an amused twitch in his lip. “Sweetheart, I don’t think anyone who goes against me has it *fair*.”

I can’t help it when my own lip twitches, and he pulls me back against him.

“That a girl. Don’t worry about it right now. Just rest. I’ll bring you something to eat. I think there’s something sweet down there that I can rummage up.”

“I think I’m okay.”

“I’ll get you something anyways,” he says and kisses me on the forehead.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I haven't left the bedroom for three days and I'm disappointed in myself. I really want to be strong and resilient but I just can't bring myself to go into the kitchen. I know it's probably spotless but just knowing forms a knot in my stomach. What if I'm not cut out to stay here? If I don't have it in me will I rot in this bed till eventually Julian becomes sick of me and I end up me against them? It's a vicious thought, one I don't believe but dwell on anyways.

I also don't want to run into Dillon. Julian made it clear that Dillon isn't to know, and I wonder if that has anything to do with what Cape said. The *only* thing I've heard Cape say since he saved me. What if Dillon can see it on my face? What if he uses it against me, twists the knife and tells me he told me so? I couldn't bear it right now.

Besides Julian bringing me food and staying each night in the chair, I have only seen Marney. She snuck in yesterday while Julian went to 'check on somethings'.

"I'm not supposed to be in here," she said but she smiled like the idea was fun.

I told her it was okay, and she sat on the bed with me asking question after question about birthday stuff until Julian caught her, and she flew out of the room like a hummingbird. Thankfully, it seemed she had no idea about what happened and was considerate enough not to ask. Surely, that had to be Margo warning her against pestering me. But honestly, her company was nice and normal, if not for the extravagant ideas she has for my birthday, making me nervous.

On the first night, I did hear Margo chastise Julian outside my door about sleeping in my room but she quickly let it go when he claimed extenuating circumstances. Otherwise, the only thing I've heard from Margo is when Julian relayed that she thought I should have another pain pill. Which I took even though I didn't want the loopy state it put me in, just to get rid of the pain in my side.

My jaw isn't so bad, though it is bruised. It wasn't until last night that I realized it was the fist to my face that put me on the floor. It came so fast that I didn't even think to block like Cape had shown me.

The back of my head is tender, but I suppose if I had a concussion I would have died by now. It's odd how all these ailments feel so tortuous now when I used to deal with them on a daily basis. It was just a constant state, and the few short weeks of bliss have softened me to feeling every ache.

I stretch out in the bed and then quickly fold myself back into the fetal position, letting myself sink in and hide. Julian isn't here right now, but I think I'm okay. I can't expect him to stay holed up in here with me forever. He has a whole complicated business to run, which I've learned he's taken on with grace.

There isn't a TV in the room, and a whole lot of talking has been happening. He told me that everything used to be evenly split between Cape and him after his father passed, but that stopped when Madison died. I tried to ask what happened to Madison but he said it wasn't his business to tell. I was too ashamed to ask what happened to Luca, his father, even though I desperately wanted to know. I just don't understand how he was shot, and if that same fate could happen to Julian.

Suddenly, the bedroom door swings open, and taking up the whole frame is Cape's wide shoulders. My heart hits my stomach and I scramble to sit up.

I haven't heard him in the house and Julian hasn't brought him up at all. I nervously back up against the headboard and then

regret it when a flicker of hurt hits his eyes.

He's dressed as he always is, to kill, no pun intended, and looks just as he had when he bandaged my hands. The annihilation version of him that I witnessed when he beat my dad is tucked away somewhere deep inside. I try to uncoil as his eyes scan the room, not wanting him to think I'm afraid of him.

He makes a face at the bed that is clearly the place I haven't left and then at the half nibbled plate of food on the nightstand. My appetite is completely shot and back to its shrunken size that I used to live on.

He comes in and stomps past me into the bathroom. With my brows raised, I try to peer in but I can't see past the edge of the counter. I don't make to move though. He didn't offer me to follow and maybe he just needs something, though the only things in there are the girly products Julian bought me.

I'm surprised when I hear the bath water start running and then a clatter like bottles falling over. I'm so curious but I have no idea how things are between us. Is he mad at me that I couldn't protect myself? That he had to do what he did for me? Am I just weak in his eyes now or is he going to make a joke? I have no idea and I suddenly feel very unprepared to break whatever ice we've been skating on.

I lean back into the bed, wishing I had a few more days to hide before I needed to think about this. Maybe Margo tasked him with cleaning the bathroom? But then I have to stop myself from snorting. I can't see Cape cleaning the bathtub. Although if he was, that might be something I want to see.

He comes to the threshold, pausing, and I see it. The disappointment. But I can't tell if it's because of my state or what he had to do for me. With two long strides and no hesitation, he throws the blanket off of me.

"What are you doing?" I panic.

"Enough wallowing. You need to be better than this," he grunts and grabs my ankle. He slides me to the end of the bed

and then shoves his arms under me.

I'm cradled against his chest before his words even register. "Better than what?" I ask, even though I know what he means. I think I just need the distraction from how nice his chest feels.

"I'm not going to feel bad anymore. You aren't going to lock yourself in here and try to bury what happened. You need to grow a pair," he huffs.

I wriggle against him, suddenly angry, because he's right. I've endured so much, so similar to the display in the kitchen, albeit without death, and I'm suddenly put off when it happens to someone else? Someone who deserved it?

I need to get it together because the way Julian made it sound, this isn't some shocking event. Margo only seemed pissed off because it was in her house. The sentiment of *don't shit where you eat* comes to mind.

"You won't last long here otherwise," he says, as if reading my mind. "And I'm not going to baby you like Julian."

At the end of his sentence he lowers his body and drops me into the bathtub, clothes and all. I gasp, expecting ice water but I'm met with a warm hug and bubbles seeping up around me. I'm quickly soaked and partially stunned.

"So take a bath, clean yourself up, and get your shit together." He starts to stalk out and my own voice surprises me.

"Wait!"

He freezes and then slowly turns. "What?" His eyes burn into mine and my mind turns to mush. What *do* I want?

I sit forward in the water and grab the ledge. "I'm sorry."

He narrows his eyes and raises his chin. "For what?"

I open my mouth and then snap it closed. I don't know how to tell him how I feel.

He groans and walks back over. "What could you possibly be sorry for?"

I look away from his gaze and stare at the bubbles. “For what you had to do.”

He makes a balking noise. “*For what I had to do?* What the fuck are you talking about?”

“If I hadn’t...” I start but I can’t bring myself to say *if I hadn’t been so weak.*

“Woah. Woah. Woah. You think you need to apologize for *me* killing your dad?” he sounds incredulous and I look up to see a similar expression.

He sits on the edge of the tub and smirks. “I mean if you want to take the blame...”

I manage a little eye roll and he grows serious. “You are more fucked up in the head than I thought. You do know that what happened was in no way your fault right?”

“But if I hadn’t—”

“Shut up. Nothing you could have done would have stopped me from losing my shit. Even if he hadn’t laid a finger on you, I probably would have done the same. Just one look at that piece of shit and I would have been able to tell. He had it coming, and I’d do it again if given the chance. Men like him don’t deserve to live. The sooner you realize that, the better off you’ll be.”

His lips pull down suddenly. “Now, if you’re mad at me, you better get over it.”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Afraid of me, whatever.”

“I’m not afraid of you either.”

“Then what’s your problem, why are you hiding up here?”

I bite my lip and absently push at the bubbles, realizing the real issue.

“No one has ever...” my voice cracks. “No one has ever done something like that for me and I don’t know how to accept it

and..." God, here comes the tears again. "How to say *thank you*."

When Cape's silence becomes too much, I finally look up and find him staring down at me with a hard gaze. Great, he probably thinks I'm even more fucked up in the head. I just want him to know the weight that he's lifted off my shoulders.

Suddenly, he leans down and grabs my jaw, his expression never changing as he presses his lips to mine and kisses me.

My body turns to jelly and he holds me up by my face, cupping a hand to my cheek. His lips expertly slips between mine, mingling and tasting. With a fever, I kiss him back. Gaining my senses, I grip onto him, pulling at his shirt with a strength I didn't know I had. He tastes like Death and I didn't know how bad I wanted this.

He chuckles between my lips, cocky as ever, but then abruptly stops as he slips. He splashes into the tub with me and water flows over the edge. His feet stick out of the basin and I realize I think I accidentally pulled him in.

He looks up and smirks, eyeing his wet clothes. "I think you got me wet."

I duck my head and blush. I can't believe I just pulled him in with me. And why did I kiss him back? Where did that come from? What is Julian going to think?

As if reading my regret, Cape pulls my face back to him. "For the record, you don't have to thank me. I'll kill anyone who even looks at you wrong."

I gulp.

"And don't worry about the kiss." He lets go and pushes himself up, dripping water and suds like a dark god in a bubble storm. "I don't think Julian will mind. We're brothers, we were taught to share."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Later that night I gape at Julian when he doesn't flinch as Cape carries a decorative chair over his head. He plops it next to the one Julian has used as a bed the last few nights and breathes a satisfied breath. He dusts his hands and falls into the chair, settling in and checking the comfort level.

"Um?" I question from my fluffy spot in the middle of the bed. I ended up stripping my clothes and lounging in the bath for at least two hours so I'm fresh and clean in my Bella Luna set, all ready for bed.

Julian gives me an amused shrug and Cape smirks. "Oh, was you kissing me back not an open invitation to watch you sleep?"

My mouth falls open.

Julian slowly turns to look at Cape and narrows his eyes. I bite my lip, afraid of what's about to happen. Cape made it seem like it was no big deal, and Julian did tease me with both prospects. Yet, I worry I crossed a line.

"I was waiting till her birthday," Julian says, surprising me.

"Yeah, well, I don't have the same moral code as you."

"Clearly," Julian growls and turns back to me.

I don't know what my face is saying but Julian's expression softens. "It's okay, baby. I'm used to being the good one."

That makes Cape laugh, really laugh and the sound fills me with a giddy energy.

“Do you disagree?” I ask Cape, feigning incredulity, wanting to be a part of it.

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” he howls.

“What? How is he not the good one?” I have to refrain from saying that Julian isn’t the leather jacket wearing, broody and cocky one.

“Well, I didn’t bring home a minor to fuck.” Cape smacks his thighs.

“Sue me!” Julian cries. “She’s fucking gorgeous and you know it.”

“Also,” I jut in. “He didn’t murder my dad.”

The room falls silent and the two share a look before leveling their gazes on me. Oh no, was that too much? They stare at me like I’ve grown a second head and I’m about to say sorry when Julian speaks.

“She’s funny too,” he adds, nodding at Cape who starts to burst out laughing again. “When she isn’t stuck in her head.” He gives me a side eye.

I sigh in relief and lean back into the pillows.

I don’t know what to make of Cape deciding to sleep in here, but the two being playful puts me at an ease that I don’t think I’ve ever felt.

As if on cue, Julian gets up and turns the light off. I hear him sink back into his chair, and the room is nothing but soft breaths and moonlight. After a moment, I close my eyes, and thankfully, there are no visions.

“So this is really all you two do in here? Sleep?” Cape breaks the silence.

“Yes,” Julian hisses back, and I giggle.

“Doesn’t seem very fun.”

“We’ll have plenty of fun when she turns eighteen.”

Their voices bounce back and forth in the dark and smile to myself, a little pleased with his promise.

“That’s two weeks away,” Cape complains.

I’m surprised he knows my birthday and I speak up. “How do you know?”

“Because that’s all Marney has been talking about. It’s either that or begging me to throw a Halloween party.”

“You should,” Julian says.

“Margo told her not to bother you about that,” I say.

“We’ll do something, but I think I’m going to sell the loft,” Cape says.

“Really? But you love the loft,” Julian, and I hear him turn in his chair.

“Madison—” Cape’s voice cracks and he clears his throat. He doesn’t finish whatever he was about to say. “Not anymore. Think I’m going to move in with you, little brother.”

“Excuse me?”

“What? I’m not moving back in with Ma, and you don’t even use your house.”

“Just buy yourself a new place.”

“Nah...” he draws out the word with a dark edge. “I think your place is going to be a lot more fun in about two weeks.”

I feel a heat between my legs as Julian chuckles and I’m grateful we are in the dark, and they can’t see me blush.

“If we can’t do anything, can we at least talk about it?” Cape asks, and my ears perk up. “Prime the pump,” he adds.

“I may have already given her a little tease. I’m not all moral code all the time.”

“So, she knows we’re going to savor those little pink lips of hers?”

I feel myself tingle at his words.

“She probably needs the reminder,” Julian purrs, and my whole body heats up.

“Okay, then let me tell you a bedtime story, baby.” Cape’s voice turns husky.

Oh, my god, *so* grateful for the dark.

“Once upon a time,” Cape chuckles darkly. “There was a poor and broken girl who found herself pinned between two handsome brothers.”

Julian snorts but I’m so ready for this.

“One was *good*—” he says pointedly. “And the other was bad, and the broken girl didn’t have a clue what she was in for. She looked to the good brother for help, but he was easily influenced.”

Julian sighs.

“Shut up. This is my story. Anyway... The bad brother knew the girl had never had a real orgasm, at least not one worthy of her tight pussy. The good brother would agree and his job was to hold her down, spreading her legs wide and displaying her to the bad brother so he could deliver what she deserved. He’d run his tongue through her slit, lapping up the sweet juices she made for him.”

I start to throb, imagining it.

“His tongue would explore her pink pouch, putting his lips on her clit and sucking. Her back will arch and she’d be desperate to wrap her legs around his head, but remember, the good brother is holding them open.”

“The good brother would be gentle by the way,” Julian inserts.

“But the bad brother wouldn’t.” Cape covers up his brother’s words quickly. “He would push his tongue inside of her,

searching for the spot that made her whimper and jerk. He'd lick that spot until he thought she would cum but then stop."

My brows come together. He would stop?

"He wasn't all bad, he would let his brother get a taste first," Cape says.

I relax.

"They would switch spots, and the bad brother would tuck his dick between her perky little ass cheeks so she could feel him throb against her and know what was to come. Little brother would—"

"Good brother," Julian corrects.

"Right. Right. Good brother would eventually not be able to control himself once he tasted her and would want to bury his dick in that tight pussy. But the bad brother, being bad, would want to feel her stretch first. He'd grab her waist and lift her onto his hard cock. The good brother would be forced to suck on her clit while the bad brother fucked her. She would be in so much pleasure that she would drip down around the base of his cock."

I'm absolutely wriggling beneath the covers and I don't know what I'm thinking as I slip a hand in my panties. I just know that if I don't touch myself I'm going to explode. I bite back a sigh of ecstasy as I find myself and drag a finger between my wet lips.

"But she doesn't get to cum yet," he continues. "Not until both brothers get to feel what it's like for her body to tighten and beg for release."

I start to massage myself to the sound of Cape's voice, sure he can't see what I'm doing.

"They would take turns slipping in and out of her until she could take both of them at the same time. And then and only then—" Cape shifts in his seat and I freeze.

"What are you doing?" he growls.

"Nothing," I squeak, as Julian chuckles.

“You’re touching yourself!” I hear him stand up.

How can he see me? I can’t see him. Suddenly, the light flicks on, and I quickly pull my hand up.

“I am not!” I pull the blanket up to cover my lying and red face.

“She’s cheating, Julian.” He throws a look over his shoulder before ripping the blanket off of me.

“Whatever will we do with her?” Julian drawl and his brows are raised in amusement as Cape examines me.

“I wasn’t!” Embarrassment burns my cheeks.

“I don’t believe that for a second.” Cape leans over the bed and grabs my right arm.

“What are you doing?” I try to tug it back but he’s stronger.

“Figuring out if you’re a little liar.” He grips my wrist and before I know what he’s doing, he puts my fingers in his mouth, sucking and tasting. His warm mouth and tongue slip around and send shivers through me.

“Cape!” I scream.

He narrows his eyes at me as he pulls my fingers out of his mouth. “You were touching yourself!”

“I wasn’t!” I try to deny it.

“Then why do your fingers taste like pussy?”

My bottom lip falls open with no rebuttal to give. I’m absolutely mortified as he lets me go and I scramble to pull up the blanket.

“Oh, no you don’t.” He pulls the blanket back and plops down next to me. “You need to be watched.”

I’m in shock as he grabs me and huddles me against him, pinning my hands to my chest with his grip. He pulls the blanket back over us with his other hand.

“Julian...” I whine.

“He’s right,” he sighs. “It’s not fair.”

I blink in disbelief as Cape tightens his arms around me and nestles his chest against my back.

“Are you serious?” I ask, a little halfheartedly, when I feel his hard dick against my ass.

“I’m afraid my hands are tied.” Julian shrugs. “I’m just the good brother.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Cape sleeps like a dog protecting a bone, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. I've never slept in the arms of a man before, at least not arms that I felt safe in and I'm surprised how much my perspective on men has changed.

In a way, Cape and Julian are what I've always known about men. They are possessive and perverted, violent and short tempered, but they are controlled in their nature. They don't take without care or behave cruelly without merit. They aren't savage in their urges. I mean, at least Julian isn't. I'm not sure what's holding Cape back from pinning me down and taking what he wants, but they both still defy every expectation I've ever had.

Julian is patient with me while he teaches me to drive, even though the appointment is coming up fast, and doesn't even laugh when I botch parallel parking. And while Cape is less patient in teaching me how to fight, which he insisted on regardless of my freshly broken rib, and less gentle than Julian, I know I don't have to be afraid of him. There's something in his eyes when he looks at me that says, whatever the demons tell him, he would never hurt me.

But Dillon makes whatever joy I find in them curdle. The couple of times I've bumped into him in the last few days has me dipping my head and staring at the floor. Julian assures me he has no idea about my dad, but Dillon looks at me like I'm a bug that has no business making a home here.

Dillon's demeanor completely changes if Margo is in the room, though. He perks up like a school boy with a crush, and I'm beginning to think that Margo is the only reason he stays

here. That and Marney, who I know he loves. He always takes an interest in whatever trivial topic she brings up and shows genuine concern for any misstep she takes. And even though I know he doesn't like being in the same room as me, gives in to Marney's pleas for him to watch a movie with us.

Cape has actually started showing up for movie time when Dillon is involved and sits between me and Dillon's side of the couch. Cape sits with his legs wide apart, as if trying to put as much distance between me and Dillon as possible. I haven't said anything, but I notice Cape watching Dillon from the corner of his eye.

Marney is oblivious to the tension and is just excited thinking that Cape wants to watch rom-coms, but I know better. The statement Cape made when they needed to get rid of the body may be the only thing I've heard about not trusting Dillon, but that's enough for me to know something is up.

But it's overshadowed by my increasing worry for Julian. I don't know what's going on with the business but he's taking more calls, and when he comes back he looks tired, as if something is draining him. I hate to say it but I think I would feel better if Cape took back up his half of whatever they do. Yet, while they get along when it comes to me, the topic of Madison and what happened is still too sensitive to get Cape back in the ring.

Don't get me wrong, I know Julian can be just as fierce as Cape, but surely it's hard when it's all on just him. Margo may have some part in things, but she doesn't seem like she gets her hands dirty anymore and is more just an advisor.

I listen to her now as I shovel in dinner.

"It's loss. It's a part of every business," she says.

"A one-point-five-million dollar loss?" Julian rubs his temples, and she shrugs.

"Theft, damage... It comes with the territory. You can't control everything."

He sighs, “The point is to control everything. That’s the whole point. You’re the one that says we can’t show weakness.”

“Then go down there, do something about it.”

I pause with my fork in the air. He has to go again?

Julian tilts his head and grinds his jaw. “What’s the point of having people for this if I need to keep making appearances?” He flexes his fist around his phone and then releases, letting it clatter to the table.

“If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.” Margo absently pushes her plate away and pulls forward the casserole dish of what looks like peach cobbler.

“You guys could always let the whole thing go...” Dillon says under his breath. He’s at the end of the table where he’s pushing around his roasted potatoes.

Margo makes a sardonic ‘Hah’ and grabs a serving spoon. “When I’m dead and buried,” she says.

Julian doesn’t even acknowledge Dillon’s comment and picks his phone back up with a groan.

Dillon’s face falls and he pushes his plate away, standing up quickly.

“You aren’t going to have dessert?” Margo’s brows knit. “I used peaches from the farmers market.”

He doesn’t say anything but pushes his chair in before sulking out of the room.

“Growing pains,” Margo says mostly to herself and scoops out some cobbler to a plate.

I really don’t see Margo as having a blind spot, but it’s definitely not growing pains. He’s twenty-one for starters, and he’s clearly only taking issue with the business. I don’t understand how she can’t see it, but he does typically put on a smile for her. And of course, Cape isn’t around to see this small display of disapproval. Although, maybe it’s best if he doesn’t.

“I *am* going to have to go,” Julian says, and I frown.

“Your father did spend more time out of the states than he did in them.”

“That’s real encouraging.” Julian rolls his eyes.

She just shrugs and pushes a plate in front of me. It has a big portion of the cobbler with gooey peaches spilling out and they make my mouth water.

“Thank you,” I say from under my hair.

“I’m just glad you have your appetite back.” She smiles.

Marney scowls. “Even though we don’t know what made her lose her appetite.”

“Oh, don’t you start. Some things are personal.” Margo wags a finger at her.

“I’ll figure it out eventually,” she replies.

“Curiosity killed the cat, little one.”

I nearly choke on my cobbler. I know it’s just a saying, but still, it’s a cryptic way to prevent someone from digging up dirt on someone else getting killed. I don’t want Marney to find out either, but wow that’s one way to warn her.

Chapter Forty

I haven't had the pleasure of any more bedtime stories, not since Cape realized he can't trust me but he surprisingly manages to keep his hands to himself. Even though every night I feel his arousal on some part of my body.

This morning is different though, as I'm awakened earlier than usual. Julian is slipping my hair away from my face and then lays a gentle kiss on my cheek as I open my eyes. But the odd thing is that I am completely laying on top of Cape. He has his arms locked around my lower back and my chest is pressed to his.

There might be a tiny bit of my drool on his chest.

"I'll be back in a few days," Julian whispers.

"You're going to El Cuco?" my voice is scratchy with sleep as I try to inconspicuously wipe away the drool.

He nods. "Just for a few days. I'll be back before your driving test."

"Okay," I whisper back.

"Go back to sleep, baby."

"We will, Romeo," Cape's gruff voice takes over our hushed conversation as he suddenly gives me a squeeze. He lifts his chin and places it over my head, tucking me back against him.

Julian sighs but smiles at me before he leaves the room.

A little bit of worry gnarls away at my stomach but it quickly dissipates as Cape starts rubbing my lower back. He makes a

satisfied groan and I melt into him, tucking my hands around the back of his neck. I feel him grow between my legs and the warmth it gives me makes me feel even more snugly.

I struggle to stay awake and worry against my comfort. Julian went last time and came back in one piece. I have no reason to assume any different.

Chapter Forty-One

Julian was supposed to be back today. He texted me last night to make sure Cape was *reigning in his bad brother side* and that I wasn't giving him any *pre-birthday goodies*. Just to play with him I texted back a shrugging emoji, which earned me a person emoji followed by a gun emoji. I howled with laughter but now my stomach is knotted.

He should have been back this morning if he was on his way to the airport when we last texted. I didn't want to say anything at breakfast because no one seemed concerned and I know that I've already made it seem like I don't fit in. Showing worry will just make me seem over dramatic and I hoped that he was just running late.

But now it's eight p.m., and while it may look like I'm watching the movie Marney put on, I'm actually covertly watching Margo check her phone every five seconds, and noting how her brows keep getting increasingly more scrunched together.

Cape is too busy eyeballing Dillon, and I'm not sure if he even talks to Julian about what he's doing down there. Does Cape even know that Julian was supposed to be back today?

The knot grows into a rock when the movie finishes and Margo asks Cape to meet her out back. Is that normal? I know there must be things I'm not privy to, and under any other circumstance I wouldn't be bothered. But I have this growing attachment to Julian that gives me a certain sense of entitlement where I feel I should know if anything is wrong.

I don't say anything though and go upstairs to pace nervously until Cape comes up.

But he doesn't come.

I wear myself down until my legs ache and I sit on the edge of the bed for relief. I stare at my text messages to Julian, willing a messages from him to pop up.

Did your flight get delayed?

You're okay right?

Sorry if I'm being ridiculous...

You don't have to but if you could text me, I would feel better.

I'm going to be so embarrassed if he's just busy and I've been blowing up his phone but I have a bad feeling. And where is Cape?

Getting antsy, I crack open my door, wondering if I can fake like I'm just getting a snack to see what's going on but when I do, I jump.

Dillon is standing outside my door. Just, standing there...

"Uh..." I peer down the hallway and I don't see anyone else.

Dillon scoffs and then pushes the door open, sliding past me. "What's going on?" he hisses.

Thrown, I try to back out through the door but he puts a hand above my head and closes it. He leaves his palm there and bears over me. "I know you know."

"What?" I shrink against the door. I'm just as clueless as him. And why is he concerned about Julian? I never even see them talk.

"Don't play stupid. I may not like to get involved, but I have eyes and ears."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't heard anything. All I know is that he was supposed to be home this

morning.” I spit out as quickly as I can, hoping he’ll release me from my pinned position.

He narrows his eyes and shakes his head. “Who?”

“Julian.”

He shakes his head again and puts his arm down, backing up.

I take a relieved breath.

“I’m not talking about him. I could care less,” he says.

“Then what are you talking about?” Jesus, where’s Cape?

“The shady shit you are all trying to cover up. I want to know what the fuck happened.”

“Nothing—” I start but then I realize what he’s referring to. My dad, my dead dad. The dead dad that Cape killed.

Oh, my god.

Oh, no.

“I knew you were in the center of it.” he snaps when he reads my face.

What am I supposed to say? I can’t tell him the truth.

“It’s one thing with their business but they keep that shit overseas. But trouble here and that’s my sister at risk. She’s only fucking thirteen and they have her knowing about shit she shouldn’t know at her age. Or ever, if I had it my way.”

His face has turned red as he seethes and it makes him look like a tomato. He’s in one of his classic running shirts that doesn’t have any sleeves and shows off his side abs but they lose their appeal with the way his face twists. I want to sympathize with where he is coming from. I worry about Marney as well, but he looks like a toddler that doesn’t want to eat his vegetables, and it makes me not want to give him a single inch of what he wants.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I raise my chin for emphasis, trying to get a hold of myself. I’m not going to be

bullied by him. There's a reason he's up here when neither Julian or Cape are here. He knows he wouldn't do this if they were.

He turns even redder, if that's possible, and storms at me. I flinch, of course I flinch, but he doesn't lay a hand on me. He pulls himself back before he can collide with me and hovers over me.

It's intimidation. I'm used to it. What I'm not used to is it not being followed through on. Is he restraining himself because he knows he shouldn't or because he's afraid of Cape and Julian?

"You better hope nothing happens to my sister."

I want to tell him that what happened has no way of affecting Marney, but that means I would have to admit something happened and I don't trust that he won't get the whole story out of me.

"Why would I want something that could hurt Marney?" my voice shakes but I manage to get it out. He acts like I'm trouble, that I don't know better than anyone how fragile someone of her age is. I've been through shit that I would never wish on anyone.

"You think I don't know about your guys' little sneak out in the middle of the night? Crawling down the beach and dragging my sister with you when she should have been safe in bed?"

My eyes widen before I can stop them. How does he know about when we went to Julian's? I thought we were so careful. There was no one on the beach, no lights on in the house. Where was he watching from? Does he make it a habit, following me around? I didn't even know he was loitering outside my door.

And what was he doing anyways? It didn't seem like he was going to knock, if anything it seemed like I caught him trying to eavesdrop. Does he do that often?

"We just went to Julian's. It was perfectly safe." I try to defend it but I knew it was wrong at the time.

He rolls his eyes. "You don't know how Madison died do you?"

I suck my lips in. I still don't know but I think I'm going to find out.

"She was taken." He nods his head like, *you see?* "Right from Cape's super safe and sky high loft in the clouds. He popped off on the wrong people and they retaliated. They took her and tortured her. When Cape found her she was in pieces."

I wince, my whole body feeling suddenly like lead.

"Yeah," Dillon sneers. "And you're hopping on his dick like he's going to be your rock. Imagine what seeing something like that does to a person. And anyone with them ends up just—"

"Why are you with them?" I snap, surprising myself. I know better than to talk when someone is angry but he doesn't make any sense. If he doesn't like them, if he doesn't feel safe here, then why stay?

He tilts his head to the side like I'm stupid.

"Because once you're in, you're in." he says it like a threat but with the way my skin tingles at his words, I think I hope it's a promise.

But if he's insinuating that they would kill him if he tried to leave, I just don't believe it. Margo loves him. Dillon may not be her flesh and blood but she treats him no differently than Cape and Julian. And I can't see her taking him away from Marney.

Unless...

God, unless there was some truth to the FBI folder about Margo being involved in their parents death. But if it was true, wouldn't Julian have warned me?

Chapter Forty-Two

When Cape finally does make it to my room it's after two a.m., and Dillon is long gone. I've already decided I'm not going to mention the encounter. I don't want to create any more tension than there already is, and in case what he said is true, I don't want to throw him under the bus and get him killed.

Cape expertly makes his way through the dark room and crawls into bed next to me, scooting his body to align with mine. I automatically reach out and pull myself closer, resting my head on his chest.

He's still in his shirt and jeans, typically he gets into bed in some shorts and no shirt, but tonight he's still fully clothed and smells like the warm scent of fire, probably from the fire pit out back, and I deduce he's been out there this whole time.

"Is everything okay?" I whisper.

He doesn't answer me. The only sound is him repeatedly rubbing the stubble on his chin. A scratchy white noise.

I'm being vague, but whatever is going on has to be about Julian, and it makes the pit in my stomach double in size.

"Cape?" I try again, starting to feel like I don't care if I come off as a silly worried girl.

"Huh?" He stirs as if just now realizing I exist.

"Julian was supposed to be back..."

"He's fine. He's a big boy," he says quickly.

I don't like his tone, it's clipped and distant, as if he's already had to say it once.

"What did Margo—"

"Margo's being dramatic," he cuts me off, clearly exasperated, and I shut my mouth.

After a few moments of lying awake in the dark, he sighs and the scratching sound ceases.

"Get over here," he says, twisting and grabbing my waist.

He pulls me on top of him and manhandles me by my ass to situate me where he wants me. Which is apparently lined up with his cock, where it presses against my underwear. I can't say it doesn't make me melt and I wiggle harder against it.

"God, you're tempting me," he groans, his warm breath tickling the top of my head. "Julian's fucking nuts with this waiting till your birthday shit."

I *almost* say it. I *almost* say we don't have to wait. It would be so easy for him to unzip his jeans and slip my panties to the side. We would barely have to move, and I could get to feel him inside of me. I would take all of him, which seems daunting if I'm going off of what I feel between our clothes, but I need all of him, even if it breaks me in two.

But I want Julian too, and he's not here. I don't know where he is and it's eating at me. I know it's only been the day, but I feel on the cusp of tears. Have I lost my mind? Probably. Can I be this attached to him already? The idea of something having happened to him makes me feel like I might as well be sitting back on the edge of death in Bridgerock. I just wouldn't be able to bear it. I would need to find the peaceful nothingness of Death to stop the pain that would be worse than anything I've endured.

"Are those tears on my shirt or drool?" Cape shifts.

My cheeks burn at the mention of drool—god, have I been making a habit of that?—and I answer him honestly if only so he doesn't think it's the latter.

He sighs just like Julian, and I tighten my arms around him, desperate for him to understand.

“I’m worried,” I say.

“Well, don’t be. Shit comes up, just like I told Ma. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gotten held up in places I don’t want to be. It’s part of the job. He’ll show up.”

I want to believe him but I’ve gotten used to his voice, and his tone is not typical. He’s worried too, even if he won’t admit it.

Chapter Forty-Three

I'm a wreck after two more days. I don't even bother making myself a plate of food at breakfast, and Margo doesn't give me one either. She's staring off into nothing and doesn't even have a cup of coffee in her hands like she usually does. As if Marney can sense the vibe, she's grabbed a muffin and high tailed it out of the kitchen.

The food sits on the counter untouched while me and Margo both emit the dying scent of wilting flowers. She has to know that I'm losing my mind as well, but she doesn't say anything to me, and I'm too afraid to bring it up. In case she tells me something that sends me over the deep end.

I just keep listening to Cape, who tells me to relax but gets more and more tense as the hours go on.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

Cape jogs down the stairs, hair fresh and wet from a shower. He slides into the kitchen with a pep in his step, and despite my mood, I can't help but salivate a little. He's absolutely mouthwatering as his hair drips water onto his black shirt and he flings his head to get it out of his eyes.

"You ready, speed racer?" He walks around me and leans on the counter, grabbing a piece of bacon.

Before I can ask him for what, Margo's head snaps up like she's been waiting for him.

"Now, I can't hold off Denny," she launches at him.

Cape shrugs, but I notice the tiniest bit of tension in his jaw.

“You’re going to have to swallow your shit, Caperson,” she snaps at him. “I want you on the first flight.”

My heart picks up, my body coming to life for the first time in two days.

“I don’t do coach.” He picks a chocolate chip off a muffin and pops it in his mouth.

“God damn it!” She smacks a hand on the counter, and I flinch.

“Don’t use the lord’s name in vain, Ma. It’s not becoming,” he drawls nonchalantly, and I start to feel the same anger as Margo.

“So something *is* wrong?” I ask, looking between the two of them and ignoring Cape’s dig.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Margo shakes her head but looks at the floor. “But Cape needs to—”

“Stop, Ma.” He pushes off the counter and I can practically see steam coming out of her ears. He comes to me and pokes me in the side. “Hurry up and get dressed. The DMV waits for no one.”

What? I look at him like he’s insane.

“Your appointment. It’s today.”

Oh, my god. I roll my eyes. I could care less about that, I want to know what’s going on and why Margo seems in denial.

“Julian—” I start but Cape cuts me off.

“*Julian* was supposed to take you but he’s not here right now, so I’m taking you.”

“Don’t you think we should—” I start.

“Cape, we need to react rationally—” Both me and Margo start to talk, but Cape booms over us.

“Both of you need to stop!” he yells, and it echoes through the house.

I'm surprised when I don't shrink in my seat. I don't know if I'm loosening up or if I'm just too distracted to care about my own well being when Julian's is all I care about.

Cape drags a hand through his hair as if trying to compose himself after his outburst.

"Just... Stop," he says more gently. "Julian is fine. You both are overreacting. I'm not going to fly down there. Bad shit happens when I get involved."

My heart aches for him when I notice his eyes go distant and I can imagine what he's seeing, what Dillon told me Cape found when he finally got to Madison.

"Cape, that was a one off. You need to get over this," Margo pleads through her teeth.

He comes to and raises his chin. "Julian is fine," he says to Margo and then looks down at me. "Now fucking get dressed. We're going to get your license."

* * *

I'm not happy as we wait to be called in the DMV. There's so many people talking and kids running around, that I feel like a live wire just waiting to be tripped. I understand where Cape is coming from, I really do. He thinks that whatever he did caused Madison's death and he's scared to have it happen again. But he's being stubborn. I don't think this is the same scenario, and he's in denial, convincing himself that Julian is fine so he doesn't have to get involved. And I'm stupidly enabling him by agreeing to take this drivers test. Not that I think I had a choice. I think I was one more 'no' away from being carted into the car in my pajamas.

Once I'm in the driver's seat with a woman named Donna, who has a scowl on her face in the passenger seat, I'm all nerves. I can't even think about Julian as my palms sweat on the steering wheel. I actually need to concentrate so I don't crash and kill the miserable woman next to me. God, this was a bad idea.

I'm in the McLaren that Julian made sure to leave the keys for, and this is the first time I don't have him next to me, guiding me. Although, Cape is still in my line of sight. I haven't pulled out of the space yet and he's leaning against the wall of the stucco building, one foot lifted and planted against it.

He wasn't too happy that I refused to drive us here, making him fiddle with the bells and whistles of the car. Apparently, it's been a while since he's driven and he usually takes his motorcycle everywhere. I thank my lucky stars that it wasn't Cape that found me on the bridge, otherwise I'd be taking a motorcycle test right now.

"Whenever you're ready," Donna says but it sounds more like, *let's get this over with already.*

I give one last worried look at Cape as I shift the shiny gear stick into reverse. He smirks and then purses his lips, sending a kiss my way. The gesture makes my stomach flip and I ache to recreate the kiss from the bathtub. I bite my lip and smile back at him. The small act helps me shake off any nervousness and I feel a bit more confident. I'm going to ace this.

Scratch that. I didn't ace it. I royally fucked up. I fucked up so bad that I'm currently standing on the curb near a stop sign while the McLaren sits in the middle of traffic, unattended. The engine is still running with the front fender hanging on by a thread.

There's a car in front of the McLaren at an angle with its whole passenger side dented in. We didn't even make it that far. I can still see the DMV down the road and I had only made one loop through a residential area.

My hands are shaking as I text Cape. There's a guy yelling at Donna about car insurance and how this is bullshit, that driving tests shouldn't be held on public roads.

Accident

It's all I can manage to send before Donna turns on me and starts listing off things I need to supply. I have no idea where any

of that is. I'm more concerned with what I've done to Julian's super expensive car.

I know that everyone always says it wasn't their fault, but it truly wasn't my fault. I was waiting to make a right turn, waiting for it to be clear, waiting and waiting, sweating and hyper aware of Donna's frown as I continued to miss opportunity after opportunity to turn. And of course, of course, the car behind me had no patience. They went around me, trying to zip past and make a right in front of me but they did it too quickly and it just happened to be at the exact moment I worked up enough courage to turn myself.

I didn't hit them hard enough to hurt anyone, but hard enough that it ripped off the fender, and caused damage to the run of the mill Nissan owned by a bald man in crocs.

"You rich, entitled kids with cars you don't even know how to drive!" He points at me now, holding a flip phone to his ear. I know he's calling the police. I wring my hands in front of me, sweating despite the cool breeze and gnawing on my already raw lip.

"This is what happens when you hold up traffic and aren't decisive," Donna says and looks at me with disdain. How am *I* the one in the wrong here? Aren't there laws about what he did?

"I didn't mean to," is what comes out of my mouth instead, and I hate myself a little for the tears welling in my eyes. I want to tell her to shove it up her ass, that I didn't do anything wrong but I can't bring myself to own it while I'm shaking like a leaf and using every bit of strength I have in me not to cry.

"You're daddy's gonna pay for this, you little twat." The man points at me again.

"You're going to want to shut your fucking mouth." A familiar voice roars, and before I even turn to see Cape, I feel relief flood through me.

Where did he come from? Did he run here? His body is thrumming with energy and I can tell his breathing is harder

than usual.

“Who are you?” the bald man asks.

“I’m her fucking daddy,” Cape snaps, and is then at my side. His hands cup my cheeks and he tilts my head up to look at him. “Are you okay?” he asks me, his eyes searching my face and down my body.

I nod in his hands and the tears roll gently down my cheeks. “It wasn’t my fault. He turned out in front of me,” I whisper to him.

“I don’t give a fuck if you hit him on purpose.” He lets me go and spins around. “He doesn’t get to talk to you like that.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that when the cops get here, buddy.”

“I’m not your buddy. I’m the guy that’s going to break your knee caps if you don’t shut your mouth.”

The guy balks and takes a step back.

“That’s uncalled for.” Donna crinkles her nose.

“And you can leave.” Cape looks at her like she’s a piece of gum on the sidewalk.

She raises her brows in indignation. “I have to give my statement to the police.”

“There isn’t going to be any police,” Cape growls and he pulls out his wallet.

He steps off the curb towards the man in crocs. The man takes a couple tentative steps back but keeps his eyes trained on the wallet.

Cape squints and does a quick assessment of the damage on the Nissan before pulling out a stack of bills.

“Five thousand or you’ll never be able to drive again, your choice.” Cape holds the money out in front of him.

The man lowers his phone, glancing at me and then at the McLaren and then back to Cape’s face. He scrutinizes him for a

second and then snatches the cash from his hand.

“That’s not how things are done, sir,” Donna calls to him from beside me.

The man gives her a quick, shameful glance but then snaps his phone shut before scuttling away from Cape with his new fortune and climbing back in his damaged car.

“I don’t get paid enough for this.” Donna jerks past me and starts walking back towards the DMV.

Cape turns back around and tilts his head at the McLaren, eyeing the fender on the ground but instead of looking disappointed, he looks amused. My god, I have a feeling I’m not going to live this down.

He steps up to the hood and bends over, picking up the ruined piece of metal and ripping it off all the way. He chucks it into the gutter and smiles at me mischievously.

“Wanna drive home?”

Chapter Forty-Four

The second we pull in the driveway, and Julian's house sparkles before me, I'm back to worrying. I don't even care if Julian gets mad at me for ruining his car, as long as he comes home. Even though I don't think for one second Julian would be upset with me. If anything, I expected Cape to be angry, but he handled everything for me. He even stopped to get lunch, forcing a jumbo sized frosty at me and ordering me one of everything on the menu when I told him I wasn't hungry. So not only is Julian's car missing a fender but it reeks of grease and burgers.

Cape didn't seem to worry about it though as he shoved in fries, dropping them between the seats as he did so. He gave me a sheepish grin and said, *been a while since I can eat and drive at the same time.* I laughed and then devoured a twenty piece of chicken, feeling a little lighter because of his joke.

But now the food feels heavy in my stomach as we come in the front door of Margo's. Dread twists my insides when I see Dillon waiting in the kitchen as Cape puts the rest of the food in the fridge.

"You need to listen to Margo," Dillon says to Cape when he closes the fridge.

"I don't have to do shit," Cape responds calmly and turns his back on him.

"She's upstairs packing a bag. She thinks she's going to go down there and do something."

Cape stills and throws his head back, eyes closed to the heavens.

Dillon continues, “She’s not thirty anymore, bro. She can’t walk into that shit guns blazing.”

I want to dwell on picturing Margo at a younger age, laden with guns and every bit as much of a badass that I assume she was, but all I can picture is Julian, dead and in pieces like Madison.

“I’ll tell her to stop.” Cape opens his eyes and sighs.

“She’s not going to listen to you. You need to go fix whatever’s happening.”

Dillon isn’t being rude. His face is resigned, serious, as if he really doesn’t want Margo going, but that doesn’t stop Cape from whipping around like a snake and getting in his face.

“I said, I’ll tell her to stop,” he barks. “I’ll handle it.”

I’m surprised when Dillon doesn’t waver. “The only way to handle it is to go find out what’s happening. If Julians dead then at least she can—”

“He’s not fucking dead!” Cape pushes him, and Dillon stumbles back. “Why the fuck would you say that?”

“Because it’s a real possibility.” Dillon rubs at his shoulder but doesn’t retaliate.

“Are you out of your mind?” Cape yells. “The only one that’s going to be dead is you if you don’t—”

“You think he’s dead?” my voice is barely audible, but they both turn to look at me. I’m clutching my stomach and I’m pretty sure I’m not breathing.

“Does Margo think he’s dead? Do you think he’s dead?” I look to Cape but I can’t read him.

Oh, god. No. No. No. My mouth starts to water and I feel dizzy. I try to grip the cold counter for support but it does nothing to quell the gut wrenching pain.

“He’s not dead,” Cape finally says, and I’m aware he’s coming to me but I back up and put my hands out.

“He’s fine. Dillon’s an idiot. Don’t—”

But before he can finish, my body automatically bends at the waist and I throw up all over the floor.

* * *

I’m sitting on the heated bathroom floor in my room. Cape was adamant that I needed to stay near the toilet, even though I’m pretty sure I got out all the chicken nuggets. I can’t tell if I’m more embarrassed that I threw up or angry that Cape won’t go to El Cuco, especially if it’s a real possibility that something has happened to Julian.

He’s in the bathroom doorway, hands bracing himself on the top of the frame and feet crossed, leaning in. A tiny bit of his shirt has rid up and I can just see a bit of his tattoos on his sculpted V cut.

I look away.

The answer is both. I’m both embarrassed and upset with him.

“Cape...” I start.

“Jesus, you’re going to lay into me too?” He cracks his neck, and my vision is pulled back to him as he folds his arms, leveling me with a look that says, *try it*.

“I think they are right,” I say. I may not know all the dynamics of the house but I know that Cape loves Julian. The way he reacted when Dillon said what he did is enough for me to know that. I can also tell that as much as he’s trying to bury it, he’s worried too.

“I know you are scared but—”

“Scared?” He raises his brows.

“Yes.” I try to be brave. “You’re scared after what happened to Madison.” I’ve never mentioned her name to him before and I don’t know what to expect, so I hurry trying to get out what I want to say before he storms away or grabs me by my neck.

“I can’t imagine what that was like... What it’s still like for you. But you are all Julian has right now, and he needs you. I feel it Cape. I felt it the second I didn’t wake up to him in the room four days ago that something was wrong. I understand why you don’t want to get involved, but what happened to Madison wasn’t your fault. She didn’t die by your hands. I know you probably tried to find her, to save her and were too late but you might not be too late for Julian. Please. Please.”

I knot my hands over and again in my lap, waiting for the backlash of my words, but all there is is silence, and I’m afraid to look up. I probably said too much, things I have no business talking about. I never met Madison and everything I know is second hand. But I’d be a coward if I didn’t try to advocate for Julian with everything I have. Julian may not have known it at the time, but he saved me. If not that night, then another night I would have eventually ended up under that bridge, lifeless and cold.

When I can’t stand it anymore, I finally look up and my face falls. Cape’s eyes are glassy and vacant, staring into nothing. He’s rigid except for the tic in his jaw and his hands are in fists at his sides.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, getting to my feet. I reach out to touch him and then pause, not sure how he’ll react. It’s as if he’s a broken animatronic toy that might have a power surge and spaz out.

“Cape?” I try gently.

I have to stop myself from jumping in my skin when he speaks.

“I’m not scared,” His voice is nothing more than a husky breath. “I’m terrified.”

My heart breaks in slow motion, chips so tiny they flake off lightly and swirl in my chest until there's nothing left. There isn't a thing I can say. I know that there is nothing that can make something so monumental better.

"I was supposed to protect her," he says, still not looking at me. "And I was reckless. She's gone because I couldn't hold my temper, because I burned someone that I could have let go."

"That's not going to happen again." He needs to know that. He needs to know that this isn't the same.

"Julian's more level headed than me. Whatever he's gotten himself into, he's better off without me," he says.

"No. He needs you. Please," I beg and allow myself to touch him, placing my hands on his chest. His body ripples and he blinks, looking down at me. A single tear catches in his lashes, and it's simultaneously the most crushing and most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

The way he's looking at me makes me feel like I'm asking him to fall on his sword and not save his brother. He's all war and duty as a man, and I think I've failed.

"Please." I lay my head on his chest, unable to look at him and know how much it hurts him for me to ask.

Chapter Forty-Five

I'm second guessing what I've done by the second day after convincing Cape to go find Julian. Now they are both gone and what if neither returns? I'm thinking this but I'm staring at a text from Cape that says he's currently fine. Followed by another that says he's about to lose service.

I think Margo got the same text because she suddenly starts chewing on her cheek and clicks her phone off with more force than necessary. When she drops it on the table it clatters her wine glass, and Dillon looks up from his plate at the dinner table.

Marney is at a sleepover and there isn't a shred of cheer in the room. I would give anything to listen to her rant about how amazing my birthday is going to be, just for the distraction.

Dillon isn't as tense as me and Margo, but he keeps watching Margo like she's one second from falling apart. I can admire his concern for her, but I think it's misplaced. As horrible as I think it would be for her to lose both her sons, she doesn't strike me as the type of woman to fall on her knees. I imagine she would cry in private and raise her chin in public. Something I haven't learned the art of because I sullied Cape's shirt with tears when he kissed me goodbye.

On the lips.

It wasn't a sexual kiss but one laced with fear and a promise. I savored it and now I keep replaying it in my mind like I'm going to need to remember it. It's morbid, but I can't shake it, considering I don't even know what Julian's lips feel like. The

idea that I might never get to know is enough to drag me into a dark place where not even my numb mode can reach.

Dillon gets up, and I'm expecting him to leave, but he wraps around the table and pulls out the chair next to Margo. He scoots closer to her and I see his arm shift in a way that makes me think he's holding her hand under the table.

Margo makes a closed mouth smile that doesn't reach her eyes but it seems to bring her back to the moment.

"Sorry you guys," she says and fluffs her hair.

"Don't apologize," Dillon's voice is lower than usual, and while I know he's trying to console her, there is something about it that makes my skin crawl. He doesn't say it like a son, but like a husband.

* * *

The odd look in Dillon's eyes, as if Margo was a piece of steak, stays with me for the rest of the night until I'm alone in my room with all the lights on.

Something about the dark doesn't feel right without Julian and Cape watching over me. I'm contemplating taking the keys Julian left and making my way down the beach to his house, as if being there might make me feel closer to him. I don't think he would mind if I curled up in his bed so much as he would about me being alone in his house.

I don't really know what's going on, and Dillon's words that Madison was *taken* plays in my head. He was so worried about Marney even walking down the beach. Does the same apply to me now? Should I be more cautious? I have no idea if their business is warring with another or if they are being targeted. All I have to go on are movies about the cartel. I don't know the first thing about what happens in arms dealing.

I decide against it and am about to lay back down when I hear a yelp. My paranoid mind immediately thinks of Marney,

but I remember she's at a sleepover and hopefully safe.

I strain to hear anything else but there is nothing. With furrowed brows, I sink under the covers and close my eyes. Then I hear another sound. A thud. Followed by loud voices. I sit upright quickly and crawl out of the bed, freezing by the door, not sure what I'm hearing. Margo? The only ones in the house are me, her, and Dillon.

I crack the door and the voices grow louder. There's another thud and whatever it is causes the floor to vibrate beneath my feet. Stupidly, I go towards the noise. It's definitely Margo. Did something happen? Did she get a call?

I find myself almost breaking out into a run down the long hallway to her room. The double doors are cracked and there's a dim light. I can finally make out what she's saying.

“Inappropriate. I don't know what would give you the idea —”

“I'm sorry. I'm so, so, so sorry.” It's Dillon and he sounds panicked, desperate.

I edge closer, hovering right outside the door, unsure if I should let them know I'm here or not. They aren't making any sense and I don't know if it's about Julian or not.

“FUCK!” Dillon screams suddenly, and then there's another thud. I jump, startled and grab the handle to steady myself. I accidentally fall inwards, pushing the door open and they both whip around to look at me.

Margo is in a nightgown, standing by the window near her bed, and Dillon is in just a pair of boxer shorts and crew socks. Margo runs her hands down the sides of her nightgown when she sees me, raising her chin.

“Peach,” Is all she says, before Dillon looks right through me, ignoring me, and puts his fist through the wall. It crumples the drywall next to two similar looking holes and makes the same thud sound I've been hearing.

I startle again and I have to give credit to Margo, she doesn't even flinch and she's standing not more than two feet away from him.

"Everything is fine," she says to me, ignoring his outburst and stepping around him. "You can go back to bed."

My eyes dart between the two of them, still unsure what I'm seeing.

"Julian?" I question.

She shakes her head. "I haven't heard anything. Everything is fine for now, you can go—"

"I'm so sorry," Dillon repeats, turning around and wrapping himself in a hug over his bare chest. He's that ugly shade of red and it's spread down his neck, and his eyes are panicked. "Margo, please. I didn't mean to," he cries at her back, and I realize he has tears streaming down his face.

He tears at his icy hair and falls to his knees. "I don't know what I was thinking. I'm stupid." He socks his chest. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid." He socks his chest with every reiteration.

My eyes are like saucers and I'm frozen to the spot, watching the display with my mouth hanging open. Margo doesn't turn around though and steps up to me, cupping my cheek and holding my eyes for a second.

"Go back to bed," she says.

I nod absently, unable to look away from the complete meltdown happening behind her. Dillon looks nothing more than a ten year old throwing a tantrum.

I back up towards the door, not sure if I should listen to her. He may be acting like a child, but it's unhinged and he's not a child, he's a man with male strength that just put three holes in the wall.

Margo nudges me back till I'm on the other side of the threshold, and the last thing I see before she clicks the door shut

on me is Dillon burying his face on the floor and pounding his fist against it.

I'm frozen outside the door, and after a minute the pounding stops.

"Get up. You just made a mistake." I hear Margo shuffling, followed by a sob. "We'll pretend it never happened," she says.

When all that's left is quite sobbing, and I'm sure the situation has been diffused, I walk slowly back to my room, hand gripping my chest and a new worry unlocking itself.

Chapter Forty-Six

The whole day, the house has been so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Marney is still with a friend, and I haven't seen Dillon.

I know that Margo is sitting out back only because I noticed her when I went looking for water. There was no breakfast and that was fine with me. I'm nothing but a bundle of nerves and I'm afraid to eat anything in case I get so scared again that I throw up.

But I am surprised that Margo didn't make the spread she usually does. Even with Julian MIA, she still normally made breakfast. Whatever happened last night must have really unsettled her. I know it unsettled me. There were no more thuds, but I have a feeling that she didn't get any sleep.

I struggled as well. Between checking my phone every five minutes and trying to remember what I read in the FBI folder about Dillon, I feel like a ghost of a person. I know he was on the max dose of some medications but I can't remember what they were. But the display last night was clearly the result of an unmedicated individual.

I want to say that, with the level of control in Margo's eyes, it's nothing that hasn't happened before, but their words didn't make any sense. What mistake did he make? What was inappropriate? Did he sleep walk and he ended up in her room in his boxers? The idea makes me shudder and I can't wait for Julian and Cape to get back. If they take any longer, maybe I should get a lock for my door.

I'm back in the kitchen, my nervous energy having me up and down and all around the house trying to get rid of it. A walk on the beach would be nice but I'm too afraid that it might not be a good idea with everything going on.

I notice the top of Margo's head outside the french doors and realize she's been out there for hours now. I don't want to bother her, god knows she has enough on her mind, but I'm going to lose mine if I have to do another solitary lap through the house.

I open the doors as quietly as I can and peek my head out. The sun is starting to set in a sad cast of blues and grays, and she's staring at it as if she can see something past it.

I bite my lip and fidget my way out the door.

"Margo?" I breathe when she doesn't notice me, not wanting to startle her.

She turns in confusion, her brows in a hard line of concentration and then her face softens when she realizes it's me.

"I wondered when you would find me," she says and pats the spot next to her. "Come sit."

When I do, she goes back to staring out over the ocean and I relax, just glad to be not alone. After a moment, her hand finds mine and gives it a squeeze. The touch fills me with a comfort I didn't know I was missing and I squeeze back.

If I could conjure up the perfect picture of the mother I never had, I think it would be Margo. She's always warm and welcoming, and no matter the circumstances, she doesn't lose her cool. I may have no idea what happened with Dillon but I know that eventually he'll be back at the dinner table, and Margo won't look at him any differently. The way she doesn't look at me any differently than Marney, even though I was forced on her doorstep and had my dead dad on her kitchen floor.

She emanates a confidence that I only wish I could one day possess. She doesn't flinch against the angry testosterone that fills her house and she doesn't put up with any bullshit. She may

have mentioned that when she was younger that her life wasn't much different from mine, but I find it hard to believe. If she had as many broken pieces as me there's no way she could be as strong as she is now. I've lost parts of myself that I won't ever get back, how could I ever be as resilient as her if I'm not whole?

"The boys will be okay," she says without looking at me and she says it with such conviction that I believe her.

After a moment, I start to feel guilty. She's this rock for everyone, always having to diffuse situations and make decisions. Maybe she *has* to speak with conviction to hold herself up.

"Cape is going to bring back Julian, and then Marney is going to make them dress up for Halloween," I say, trying to cheer her up. "They can't miss it or Marney will kill them herself."

Margo's cheeks rise and she makes a small huff of a laugh. "You've heard?" she asks me, and I nod.

"Oh, yeah. She wants them and Dillon to be the three big bad bears so she can be goldilocks." The idea is so cute that just picturing it makes my cheeks hurt.

"You know she's going to do those boys up and they aren't going to be big and bad right? They are going to look like carebears."

It's my turn to laugh and I have to lean forward to clutch my rib. I miss how it feels to laugh though and I cherish it. I make a promise to myself to help Marney hold them down so she can get her wish. They just need to come home first.

When I finally get a hold of myself, Margo turns to look at me.

"Speaking of Dillon..." she starts.

My body tenses at his name.

"You know a little bit about his parents, him and Marney's, right?"

I nod, unsure if she knows that I read the FBI folder.

She tilts her head to the side and sighs. “It was really bad, the accident. Dillon and Marney were in the car when someone ran them off the road.”

I desperately try to bury the idea of it being Margo that ran them off the road and let her talk.

“It was up in the hills and late at night. They had just gotten back from Barbados. The car went down the cliff side, and their father was killed instantly.”

Margo’s expression pains me and I wonder how close she was with them.

“Marney was only seven and unconscious. She almost didn’t make it. Their mother, though, was alive. At least, Dillon says she was, but when you have a harrowing experience like that, your mind creates things to get you through it. But she was impaled, some tree or something or another—” Margo waves her free hand through the air. “—and she didn’t last long if she was alive. Anyways, the way Dillon tells it, he watched her bleed to death while she was screaming for help. But like I said, it was late and even if it wasn’t, no one would have heard her.”

My chest tightens for Dillon as I hang on her every word. “Then how did they get rescued?” I picture Marney, unconscious in the backseat, fragile and barely holding on.

Margo takes a deep breath. “Dillon scraped his way up the hill, getting bit by a rattlesnake and shredding his knees, all while having a broken wrist and a dislocated shoulder. It took him four hours of dragging himself down the road for a car to finally come across him.”

“And Marney?”

“He did it for her. That fourteen-year-old boy saved his sister’s life because he didn’t give up.”

I hold a hand to my mouth, my eyes watering despite how long ago it was.

“Even another ten minutes and Marney might not have made it. She had a collapsed lung that was just about to kill her.” Margo rubs my shoulder and smiles softly. “I think that’s why Dillon has taken up running. Maybe he thinks that if he can be fast enough, he’ll be better prepared for next time.”

“Next time?” My brows bunch.

“Like I said, it was harrowing. You don’t get through something like that and get out scot-free. He’s got it in his head that anything that can go wrong, will. Anxiety among other things. I’ve had him seen by several doctors but when he turned eighteen he flat out refused anymore.”

“But I’m not telling you this to tug on your heart strings, Peach. I’m telling you this so you don’t hold what you saw last night against him. He struggles because of what he’s been through. I have a feeling you can relate to that.”

I purse my lips. I *can* relate to that but I’ve never put holes in walls. “The medication doesn’t help?”

Margo’s eyes flicker and I realize she never said anything medication, that I’m quoting the folder and I quickly look away.

After a second she answers me. “He won’t take it anymore. And honestly? I don’t blame him. Everything they gave him made him just a shell of a person. So maybe he has flare ups from time to time, but at least for the in between he can feel like a person.”

I don’t know anything about what it’s like to take medication so I can’t disagree, but that blind spot I thought Margo didn’t have is starting to appear. My heart aches for Dillon. I can’t even imagine what that was like and I’m so grateful that he saved Marney, but what I saw last night was scary.

“You understand right, Peach?” She grabs my eyes, and I nod, even though I don’t. “Good. I don’t know what it looked like last night, or what you thought it was, but he just made a mistake, that’s all,” she says a *mistake* but I can’t tell if she’s trying to convince me or herself. “But let’s not tell the boys when they come back, hm? No need to worry them.”

A bad feeling takes root in my stomach. If there's no need to worry them, then why am I so worried?

Chapter Forty-Seven

My heart is hammering as I wait for the garage to close. I'm huddled next to Margo, Dillon, and Marney the next day, just by the door with the clicker, and I feel like all of us are holding our breath. It's my first time seeing Dillon after his outburst and he won't even look me in the eye, but I can't focus on that right now.

An hour ago, Cape called Margo, and she was kind enough to put it on speakerphone. He said they were on their way and to get ready. That was it. No information on Julian or where they are on their way from, but he sounded stressed. And get ready for what? I'm basically on my toes trying to figure out what that could mean as the sleek black car cuts the engine in the garage and it finally closes.

The first one out is the older man who drove me and Julian back from the airport. He's not friendly this time and instead ignores the three of us as he whips around the hood of the car and comes to the passenger back door. I wouldn't think he could move that fast and my mind is spinning with what could have his bones working overtime.

My mind only reels worse when Margo barks at Dillon to take Marney away. What did she see on the man's face that could be so bad that Marney shouldn't see?

Marney doesn't protest, and Dillon doesn't hesitate as he sweeps her through the door behind me, and then Margo is moving. She's suddenly behind the man who is hunched over in the backseat.

I have no idea what he's doing, and the anticipation is causing my heart to jackhammer. I have to will myself not to pass out. Not now, not when I don't even know what's going on.

I'm surprised when the backdoor on the other side of the car opens and a man I've never seen gets out. He's massive, muscles on muscles and can barely wedge between the wall and the car. He's cartoonishly large, and if I wasn't distracted by the blood smeared on his shirt, I would be able to remember the name of the character in Marvel who is big and green.

"Move!" he booms and comes around, shoving the chauffeur out of the way. Margo has already stepped back with her hand tightly holding her chest.

Within a second of taking the old man's place, the hulk—the character suddenly comes to mind when I see how strong he is—is heaving a body out of the car by the legs.

My heart shoots into my throat and I can't breathe past the clog of erratic thumping.

Not dead. Not dead. Not dead. Please.

I find myself rushing forward when I see Julian's face in Cape's lap. Cape is shimmying out with his arms latched under Julian's shoulders, but Julian isn't awake.

Not dead, just not awake. I can work with that. I gulp down my heart and try to suck in air, clear my head, figure out what I can do.

All three of them, minus the chauffeur, are covered in mud. It's caked onto their clothes and mixed with dried blood. It's under everyone's fingernails and trapped in their hair. There's so much of it that I can't tell where the blood is actually coming from. Surely, it's Julian right? He's the one that's unconscious. I take an assessment of Cape just in case, so I can make sure and just worry about one of them.

He looks okay, despite the mud, and he looks clear of mind. His face is covered in more stubble than usual and his eyes have

taken on a seriousness that I haven't seen on him before. The only thing that's concerning is the strap going across his chest with a very large gun attached to it. I notice that the hulk has one too, plus another smaller gun in the back of his pants and knife strapped to his ankle.

I back up and scramble to open the door as they carry Julian through the garage.

"Easy, Denny!" Cape grits through his teeth when the Hulk/Denny bounds up the step without so much as breaking a sweat.

We're on the ground level where the workout room is, and I don't know where they are trying to go with him. Up the stairs? But Margo is suddenly bustling beside me and opening one of the guest rooms.

I'm surprised when I see that one of the dressers has been cleared off and replaced with a lay out of tools. Needles, bottles, scalpels, cloths, and gloves. Did Margo set this up in the last hour?

They gently scuttle towards the bed and then lay Julian down.

"Talk to me, Cape," Margo says and starts pulling on gloves.

Cape uses the back of his wrist to push the hair out of his face and grimaces.

"He's dehydrated. Gun shot through and through on the abdomen. There's glass or something in his back, lots of it. But more than anything, he's dehydrated. Do we have a saline bag?"

Margo throws a clear bag of liquid across the bed at Cape and he catches it with one hand. They both start busying around the room, and I'm left standing next to Denny who I peek up at. He looks me up and down and nods his head to the side.

"Trouble. But I can see the appeal." He shrugs.

"What?"

“You’re Julian’s girl right?”

“Careful, Denny. She’s mine too.” Cape spits from over the bed.

Denny’s bushy brows shoot up and he looks between the three of us and then waits for Margo to acknowledge him.

“I raised savages, okay? What do you want from me?” She is cutting off Julian’s shirt and doesn’t bother to look up.

“Your family is too close.” He shakes his head and gives me another side glance.

I purse my lips and look away, not in the head space to feel ashamed.

When Julian’s shirt is peeled away from his torso I see the wound and my chest constricts. Is he going to survive that? My god. Shouldn’t he go to a real hospital? I don’t want to discredit any skills that Margo has but I don’t want to risk Julian’s life.

“Fuck, Ma.” Cape rears back. “Maybe we should—”

“No. No one is going to treat him better than I can. They’ll give him as much effort as the common criminal. Not my son.”

Cape grits his teeth but doesn’t say anymore as Margo starts trying to wipe some of the mud away. She’s got a deep line across her forehead and her eyes are determined, fixed on Julian, and maybe she’s right.

“Cape, you and Denny go clean up,” Margo says, peeling back the wrapper on a needle. “Peach, I need you to help me clean him up.”

“Me?” I step forward eagerly, wanting to do anything to help and desperate to feel his skin, so I can know it’s warm and that he’s not dead.

“No. The other peach in the room.” She flicks her eyes to Denny and I swear I see him blush. The fact that she can make a joke gives me hope and I push up my sleeves.

* * *

I'm still wiping away mud from Julian's beautiful skin an hour later. There's only Margo in the room and she's stitching up his side. I dip the towel into the bowl of water again and wring it out. The mud is more like clay and it's dried itself to his skin like a cast, but the more I clean up, the more his tattoos come into view. I'm transfixed that he can still be so gorgeous when he's filthy and bloodied.

I'm just about finished with his chest when Margo says we need to roll him over. I put the cloth aside and help her the best I can, but when I see his back I freeze up. Cape wasn't lying. Between the blood and mud, Julian's back shimmers with glass, embedded at pointy angles and protruding painfully from his raw skin.

Margo clears her throat and I blink, helping her roll him the rest of the way. She hands me a long pair of tweezers, and I look at her to make sure she wants me to do what I think she wants me to do.

She nods, and I take a deep breath, hunkering down and leaning closely over his body. I begin gently, struggling to grasp the tiny shards with the metallic tips of the tweezers. I'm tense, afraid that I'm hurting him more than I'm helping him, but the more pieces I get out, the more confidence I gain.

Margo has her hands full cleaning up and stitching the exit wound, she can't do it all. It's on me to help and not be weak. Julian deserves strength from me right now. I'll sit here for days making sure I get every single fragment if that's what it takes to restore his beautiful back, knowing that he would do the same for me.

Once I put aside my worries of hurting him, I move much quicker. I pluck sliver after sliver, and drip water on his skin when I can't see between the mud. I keep an eye on the saline bag as well, watching it become lighter and lighter, hoping that he's getting all the hydration he needs.

How long was he without water? Since the day he was supposed to come home? And why is he covered in mud? Cape didn't say anything about where he found him or what happened, and my mind is running wild.

I still, staring at the mess he's become as I wonder... Will loving him kill me? There's two things that concern me. *Loving*. Do I love Julian? And second, will doing so come with similar days like today? More days of gut wrenching worry and frightening sights of him unconscious? What happens when it's Cape in this bed? Or what happens if one day one of them doesn't actually come home?

Chapter Forty-Eight

It takes Julian two days to wake up. Two days of torture. Two days of nothing to be done. So, I clean and re-clean his skin. I'm surprised his tattoos haven't rubbed off with how many times I've slid a damp cloth over his body. It makes me feel like I'm doing something, even though I know I'm just being neurotic. It also lets me touch him without feeling like a creeper. All I want to do is crawl in next to him and rest my head on his chest. Feel his heart beating against my cheek and have it remind me that he's alive.

Cape and Margo are in and out, in and out, but I stay. I don't eat dinner with them and I don't sleep in my room. I just wait. I know they are in business mode out there, and I don't care. I don't need to know who did what or who is responsible. All I care about is that Julian is back and alive.

When he finally opens his eyes, of course, I've fallen asleep. By the time I open mine, he is sitting up, leaning against the headboard with an arm behind his head.

"Oh, my god!" I cry and fling myself at him, abandoning my resolve to be gentle with him.

He makes an *oof* noise but wraps his arms around me and chuckles. The sound is like music, and I press my face against his skin and suck in the vibrations of his laugh. After a moment, he pulls me up, and I realize I've been crying. I quickly try to wipe away the tears I've left on his chest, and he shakes his head, grabbing my gaze and smiling.

"I thought you were..." I say

“I’m fine,” he says and wipes a tear from my cheek with his thumb. “Are you okay?”

I snort, as if that’s even relevant right now.

“I’m sorry we missed your drivers test.” He grabs my waist and rubs. His warm hand is like a soothing spell and I try not to fall under as I realize I have to tell him what happened to the McLaren.

“Well...*You* missed it but I didn’t,” I say.

He cocks his.

“Cape took me.”

“Hmm. I see. Well at least you can drive me around while I—”

The door opens and Cape freezes, seeing his brother sitting up right. His face flashes with relief, and I notice his shoulders sag. He regains his senses quickly and runs a hand through his hair.

“Bout damn time,” he finally says, coming all the way in.

“I can always go back to sleep,” Julian says.

“Please don’t. Ma is up my ass.”

* * *

It takes a whole three minutes for Julian to climb the flight of stairs to the main floor and while that’s not normal for him, it’s still way faster than I thought possible with a gunshot wound. Cape tried to tell him to take it easy, as did I, but Julian looked at us like we were crazy. His eyes darted between the two of us with suspicion, as if we’ve teamed up against him in his absence.

Cape smirked, satisfied with the wary, yet comical look on Julian’s face, meanwhile I blushed, thinking about what he could be suspicious of.

When we are all at the table, Marney and Dillon included, along with Denny, Margo brings out a massive spread. A spread

so big that we could survive for a month on the food in the dining room alone.

It's all Italian food. Everything from lasagna to cannolis, and my mouth waters when I realize that I'm starving, having not eaten properly recently. But I put my stomach aside and fill Julian's plate first. Me and Margo start loading it up with a bit of everything.

"Here, this too." Margo scoops a creamy pasta with bacon in it onto the plate. "Oh, and this." She grows a third arm and starts heaping more.

I snag some of the stuffed mushrooms with parmesan and tuck those in as well. There's a meat sauce that I pour onto the plate too when I realize there's silence in the room.

I look up to find everyone looking at me and Margo as if we've lost our minds. I slowly put the ladle back and try to hide behind my hair.

"Well fuck, little bro, hope you're hungry." Cape laughs under his breath, and my cheeks burn.

"You all stop that." Margo shakes her head. "He needs to eat to get his strength back."

"Do you need to get big and strong?" Denny asks in baby talk.

Dillon laughs and then tries to cough to hide it.

"Laugh it up guys, but I don't see you two being served right now." Julian gives me an appreciative glance, and I set the plate in front of him.

Cape grabs a plate with an eye roll and then starts piling it up. I sit and watch Julian take a bite and I know I'm being ridiculous but I can't help it. The food smells so good, and I know I need to eat but I'm more concerned that he can eat with a hole in his body and that he's up so soon.

Denny thanks Margo for making such a fine meal and starts digging in as well. After a beat, everyone starts in and dishes

clatter. Marney launches into asking Julian questions, and I know it's the start of a very lengthy interrogation. The only one that hasn't sat down to eat is Cape, who is still loading up his plate. Even Margo is eating already, albeit with a meager portion of chicken parm.

Julian takes another bite and tells Marney that he doesn't have any pain. She narrows her eyes at him, clearly not taking his bullshit, when suddenly a plate gets placed in front of me.

I look up to see Cape leaning over the table, his hand still holding the edge of it. He gives me a sarcastic shrug and I suck in my lips, blushing. He winks, clearly in good spirits, and my eyes become saucers when I see that it has even more food than I put on Julian's plate.

"Thank you," I whisper just to him.

Looking uncomfortable, he lets go and grabs a cannoli before sitting down and leaning back in his chair. Denny gives him a long side eye, as if he can't believe what he just witnessed.

A little over an hour later, I'm somehow still eating. I've moved onto the tiramisu and I *do not* have room for it but it tastes so good that it would be criminal not to force it down. Marney has moved her questioning on to me when every answer Julian gave her was PG and clearly sugarcoated.

"I don't know anymore than you do," I tell her honestly through a creamy bite.

She huffs.

The only thing that has been explained is how the boys got back. Cape said he had to get a private charter to get Julian home. Denny shuddered when Cape brought it up, and I can't imagine his massive hulk like frame crammed into a single propeller shoe-box.

"Oookay. If no one wants to tell me *anything*, then we'll talk about something else."

I see Dillon visibly relax, like he has been holding his breath, waiting for someone to tell his little sister something graphic. I really don't know what he was on about when he said she knows things she shouldn't. As far as I've witnessed, everyone keeps her pretty in the dark.

"Since Julian is back, we can finally go shopping," Marney says to me.

I sag. "Shopping?"

She juts her chin out at me like I've offended her. "You need something to wear for your birthday!"

Oh no. I've completely forgotten about this obsession she has with my birthday. It's in five days and there's no way I'm going along with anything without Julian.

"Maybe we can put it off a bit?" I beg her. I have no idea what she's cooked up. I want to think it can't be that bad. What could a thirteen-year-old plan? But she has access to money I can't even dream of and I know her last birthday was in Hawaii.

"Don't even try," Julian says beside me, and I rear back to look at him. "Your birthday is the only thing that's going to get me back on my feet." He shifts in his chair and stretches out a leg. He doesn't wince but I can see the strain it causes in his features.

"Julian, it's in five days. You can't expect to be up and—"

"Don't worry, brother. If you can't get it..." He looks at Marney quickly and then clears his throat. "If you can't get *up*, I'll make sure she has a good time." He gives me a wicked smile that makes my insides melt.

"I'll be good as new in five days." Julian narrows his eyes at his brother.

"See?" Marney says and beams. "The party is still on and we need to go shopping."

I furrow my brows and frown. "I don't know..."

“You don’t have a choice.” Marney tells me flatly, and I have no idea how she can make *me* feel like a child. “And it’s going to be totally tame so don’t worry.” She gives Cape a not so conspicuous look that he returns with a nod.

Oh no, what are they planning?

Chapter Forty-Nine

The day after next is completely shot. Marney drags me through every store known to man and then some, considering she demanded I also needed a Halloween costume. My heart isn't in it though, it's back at the house with Julian. Who surprisingly, is doing way better than I expected, but I still want to be there.

Cape had Julian in the workout room before me and Marney left this morning and was doing some sort of physical therapy with him. I only budged on going on this little shopping spree because Marney said we would be gone an hour tops, but it's been the whole day. The *whole* day. She had me trying on dress after dress and then some of the same dresses again with different shoes.

I've tried to glean what she has planned but she's more tight lipped than a thirteen-year-old should be. Whatever it is though, it's upscale, if the dresses she's forcing me to try on are any indication. The idea gives me a nervous stomach that only dissipates for the hour she allows us to munch on a plate of nachos and fries that we share between us.

If I wasn't so worried about Julian, I would have to admit that hanging out with Marney is fun though. She has so much energy and she's genuinely kind to every sales person we come in contact with. I would expect someone like her, with her blonde ponytail and loads of money, ballet lessons and private school pedigree, would have no respect, but she's even better mannered than me. And some of the things she says has me laughing till tears hit the corners of my eyes.

When we finally make it to a small specialty costume store, my feet ache, and I feel bad for the chauffeur that's been waiting for us all day, loading bag after bag Marney gives him into the back. It's the same old man who drove Julian into the garage, and I wonder if he's their private driver and not part of a company.

"These are expensive," I whisper to Marney when I eye a tag on a pirate costume that says three hundred. "Can't we just go to Party City?"

"Ew, no," she snaps at me and charges ahead. "I saw the perfect costume for you when I came with Bellemy and got my goldilocks outfit," she hollers over her shoulder, and I follow.

"Can I at least know what we're doing for Halloween?" I ask, passing by a frighteningly realistic joker costume.

"Well, Cape said no to the party at his loft so Margo said we could have a party at our house."

A part of me relaxes, at least I don't have to leave Julian.

"Here! It's still here!" she shouts from behind a rack. "Look! Isn't it perfect!"

I'm a little scared as I round the rack, who knows what she wants me to dress up as. It wouldn't be as common as a witch or a vampire and when ruling out those two ideas, my mind draws a blank.

"I can do your hair up with the swirls and Margo has a ruby necklace, it's not blue but it's still perfect." She beams as I take in the costume, my eyes pleasantly surprised.

* * *

When we get back home, everyone is congregated near the door, even Dillon. Denny is leaving and has his arms full of tupperware and a wholesome smile on his large face.

"Hate to say it, but I hope I don't have to come back here anytime soon. Me and planes don't go together," he gives a

booming laugh, and Margo bats his arm. “But you all come down and I promise no one will get shot this time.”

“Yeah? You *promise?*” Julian holds his wounded side and makes a face.

Denny just laughs and turns to Cape. “Gonna be seeing more of you or?”

Cape folds his arms across his chest. “Depends if I gotta keep cleaning up your mess.”

“I don’t think there’s gonna be anymore messes after what you did. No one is going to want to cross you now.”

Cape’s jaw tics, and I wonder what Denny is talking about.

“Anyways.” Denny turns, and Marney reaches up on her tippy toes to hug him goodbye. I notice Dillon scowl but he smooths his face out before anyone else can see.

The front door is extra wide and Denny still has to side step to shimmy out. Margo gives his body an appreciative glance, and I have to resist the urge to snicker. She likes them *buff buff* then.

Dillon is staring at Margo with a frown that she doesn’t notice, and I wonder if I’m making a mistake by not telling Cape and Julian about Dillon’s episode.

* * *

Later that night I’m finally back in my room with Julian and Cape. I’m wedged between the two of them in the bed feeling the most content I have in, well, ever.

I tried to tell Julian that he needs his own bed to heal, but he scoffed at me and said that if Cape gets to lay in my bed, then so does he.

“So,” I say into the dark, relishing the feeling of both of their bodies pressed against mine.

“If you’re going to tell me Cape has already had his way with you, I might cry and I’m in a fragile state, baby,” Julian says to my

right.

“No!” I stiffen between them.

“It’s gnawing at you, isn’t it brother?” Cape laughs on my left.

“We didn’t do anything!” I protest and bite my lip. “It’s something else.”

“Hmm. Are you sure you want to tell him? Let it be a surprise,” Cape says, catching onto what I’m trying to confess.

“Oh god…” Julian groans. “Out with it.”

I take a deep breath and turn on my side to face him, even though I can’t see him in the dark but I can feel his breath on my cheek. “You know how you were saying I could drive you around?”

“I was just kidding, baby. I wouldn’t be caught dead having you as anything but my passenger princess.”

“Right,” I draw out the word. “Well, that’s good because I didn’t pass the test.”

Cape snorts behind me, and I smack a hand at him blindly.

I can feel Julian’s confusion through the darkness when he speaks.

“That’s… That’s perfectly okay. I don’t care if you have a license. I just wanted you to feel like you weren’t stuck. So you would have a sense of freedom.”

My heart does a flip flop but I tell it to calm down because the sweet sentiment is about to be ruined.

“Well, um, I appreciate that but it’s—”

“She wrecked your car, bro,” Cape says flatly, and my bottom lip falls open.

Why would he just blurt it out like that? You don’t just blurt out to the person that was kind enough to let you use their car, that they wrecked it. My god.

The room is silent, and I'm waiting for the sigh, the growl, the *shame on you*, but nothing comes.

"I'm really really sorry," I say.

"Cape?" Julian says calmly.

"Yes, brother?"

"Do you remember when Marney broke the jacuzzi?"

I spin around as if I can see either of them, trying to understand what they are getting at.

Cape suppresses a chuckle. "I do remember that."

"I think the same punishment is required."

"What punishment?" I ask, and neither of them answer me. "What punishment?" I try again, feeling hot and like I'm not on the inside of some joke.

"One..." Julian says.

What the fuck?

"Two..." Cape draws.

Why are they counting?

"*Three!*" They both shout and then as fast as whips they are both on me, digging their fingers into my sides and... and... and tickling me?

I squeal and twist, trying to wither out of their grips but it's useless. "Stop!" I cry. "Stop!" But they don't.

"Mercy!" I yell, and Julian laughs.

"You wrecked the McLaren and you think you get to walk away unscathed?" he says.

"She didn't even show remorse," Cape tacks on. "She laughed and kicked the fender into the gutter."

"No I didn't!" I scream. "Please!" My body jerks and twists as their warm hands swarm my body. I'm panting around giggles even though I think I'm about to die.

“Hold her down, I’m going to get her feet,” Cape says.

“Noooo!” I squirm as Julian laughs and pins my arms. I give a little bit of a fight, but not as much as I want to considering his wound.

“CAPE!” I yell. “DON’T!”

But it’s too late, he’s pulled off my sock and he has my ankle in a vice grip. I make the loudest screech as he touches the sole of my foot and I realize they have me completely snared. If this was life or death, I still wouldn’t be able to get away.

“Julian!” I cry between a giggle. “Pleaseeeee!”

“What have you been teaching her Cape? She doesn’t even know to get free,” Julian throws over his shoulder playfully.

“You think we’re training down there?” Cape slides his fingers down the arch of my foot. “Hate to break it to you, brother but we’ve been playing—”

The bedroom door swings open so hard it bangs against the wall.

“What the fuck?” Both brothers say in unison when they see Dillon.

I scramble to pull down my over-sized shirt that’s rid up to my waist and revealed my underwear. The hallway light shines brightly into the room and shows the disarray that’s become of the bed... and me.

Dillon eyes dart between the three of us as Cape prowls towards him. Cape’s in only a pair of sweat shorts and his chest immediately ripples.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he says to Dillon, but Dillon looks surprised or confused, I’m not sure.

“I...” He narrows his eyes at Cape, noticing him coming at him. “I heard screaming.”

“Cape,” Julian warns, but Cape’s whole demeanor has gone from zero to one-hundred in the blink of an eye. He’s like a

predator stalking prey.

“So you just barge in? What if she was naked?” Cape snarls at him.

“Cape,” Julian says again. “He was just checking on her.”

“He doesn’t need to check on her. She’s got us.”

Dillon sneers and tics his tongue.

“Shit,” Julian says and starts to climb out of the bed. But it’s too late, that tiny amount of disrespect was all it took. Cape grabs Dillon by the throat and slams him into the wall. I clamor against the bed board and throw a hand over my mouth.

I *was* screaming bloody murder. It’s an honest mistake. If anything I’m a little touched that Dillon would even care to check on me. But Cape’s reaction is making me glad that I didn’t tell him about the last time Dillon was in my room.

“Let him go,” Julian says, putting a hand on Cape’s shoulder. “Don’t get your feathers in a ruffle.”

Cape shakes him off a little roughly, and Julian winces, grabbing his side.

“I don’t trust him.” Cape keeps a hold on Dillon, who despite his situation is remaining calm.

“He’s our brother,” Julian sighs.

“Nah.” Cape tightens his grip, and Dillon’s throat makes a noise that curdles my insides. “I don’t think he’s one of us.”

“Get off your high horse, Cape.” Julian rolls his eyes and tries putting a hand on him again. This time Cape doesn’t shake him off, but he stares down Dillon, grinding his jaw. The muscles in Cape’s arm are twitching, chomping at the bit to what? Crush his throat? Over a harmless mistake? Jesus.

I crawl out of the bed, slowly but determined. “Stop. I was screaming, he came to help,” I say, but Cape doesn’t turn, doesn’t lessen his grip.

On shaky legs, I come up beside the three of them and then dip under Cape's arm, wedging myself between him and Dillon. Cape's eyes flick to me for a second but then back up at Dillon.

"Move," he grits, and despite the tone in his voice, I stay put.

"No. Let him go." I know my voice wobbles damn it, but I mean it. I've had enough of the confrontation and drama. Enough of the violence. I spent my whole life in it. I'm barely coming to terms with the karmic fate that met my dad and I just spent the last week worrying about the violence that befell Julian. I do not want anymore. I just want to get back into bed between them and sleep soundly.

I stomp my foot when Cape doesn't budge.

Julian snickers, and I shoot him a deadly look. He quickly smooths his features and lets go of Cape, backing up with his hands in the air.

Cape cracks his neck to the side but doesn't take his eyes off Dillon.

I put a brave hand on Cape's chest. His heart is hammering like the gallop of a horse.

"Let him go," I say more firmly. Everything in me says I should be frightened right now. I'm standing in front of a man that has the ability to snap me in two and I know all too well that the rage of a man needs to go somewhere, and I'm right in front of it.

But I'm not scared. I raise my chin a little higher. I'm *not*. Something in me knows that Cape would never hurt me. Julian either, and even if they would, I refuse to take it anymore. I can't control what happens to them but I can control what happens to me.

Cape's eyes narrow, but I feel the muscles in his chest relax and then his arm slowly comes down. Dillon tries to hide it but he gasps for breath like he was a second from blacking out.

“Don’t come in here again,” Cape growls. “Don’t walk past that door.” He points. “And *don’t* fuck with me, Dillon.” Cape wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me against him.

Dillon’s voice is scratchy when he speaks, and I wanted so badly to give him a silent thank you, but it all goes out the window.

“Sick fucks...” he says.

Cape flings me to Julian so fast that I slam against his bad side and he lets out a small *oof*. I hear the sound of Cape’s fist connecting with Dillon’s face.

Chapter Fifty

The tension in the air is as thick as the pancakes in front of me on Halloween morning. Typically, Dillon wouldn't be at breakfast, but Marney has him in her clutches, applying makeup to the black eye he's sporting.

"You're supposed to be a *bear*," she screeches. "Not a zombie." She grimaces at the blue and purple outline on his occipital bone.

Dillon's eyes flick begrudgingly to Cape, who is as cool as a cucumber, eating a pumpkin muffin and unaffected by the gaze on him.

Meanwhile, there's a litany of strangers scurrying around us with fake cobwebs and strings of purple lights. I'm amazed by how quickly the house is turning into a spooky masterpiece and how none of the workers even care about the agitated state of us.

"I didn't hit myself," Dillon grumbles.

"Well, you didn't try *not* to get hit either," she huffs, and I can't help but smirk when I see Cape do the same.

Margo is at the arch of the kitchen, talking to a man holding a pile of fake bones. She's reaching up, demonstrating how she wants them as the man nods along. She can't hear the little conversation, but she already knows what happened.

We were up for another hour in the kitchen last night while she held an ice pack to Dillon's face and scolded Cape. Dillon sank against her chest like a small wounded child, when he did in fact ask for it. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and leave but he couldn't help himself.

It's not long till Marney has me locked in her room and sitting on the floor. She's standing over me, moussing my hair this way and that. The floor is littered with bobby pins, and I don't know if I should be worried about looking in a mirror.

I'm glad that Julian and Cape had to 'run an errand', and Marney still has to do their bear makeup. It will give me time to calm my nerves. I've never been to a Halloween party and while I'm sure it's probably most of Marney's friends from ballet or school, I'm still not sure how I'm going to fare. But I suppose this will be preparation for whatever my birthday is going to hold.

Marney has been surprisingly silent, so when she speaks, I startle.

"Why did Cape punch Dillon?" she asks, and I frown.

I can tell by her tone that she's trying to sound nonchalant but there's a bit of hurt there, and I can understand why. She may love Cape, but Dillon is her blood brother.

I swallow through the taste of hairspray, not really sure how to explain it. Cape shouldn't have reacted the way he did. but Dillon *did* press his buttons.

"Was it because of Margo?" she asks before I can formulate a response, and I'm left even more confused on what to say.

"What do you mean... because of Margo?" All I can picture are the three holes in the wall of Margo's room.

"You have to promise not to say anything." She slips a pin against my skull and I flinch. "Sorry," she chirps. "But you have to swear."

"Well..." I draw out the word. God, why do I suddenly feel so uncomfortable? "It depends what you're talking about..."

She huffs and comes around to face me. "I'm serious. You can't tell Julian, or Cape. You have to promise."

Her pure little face is etched in lines that make me apprehensive. I'm already keeping a secret from Cape and Julian

about Dillon. Do I really want to tack onto that?

“You’re the only one I can tell, please?” She kneels down in front of me. Oh, god. What am I supposed to do here if I’m the only one she can tell?

“Okay,” I say slowly, not one-hundred percent sure I’m going to stick to this promise.

She looks at me like she knows this but whatever is weighing on her gets the better of her.

“I think Cape punched Dillon because Dillon likes Margo.”

I blink. And then I blink again. My lips part but words don’t come out. Of course, I’ve thought about it. There are little things here and there that seem a bit creepy, like the way he flirts with her sometimes and the odd way he rested his head on her chest last night. But I think I chalked it up to overkill, trying to make up for not being Margo’s blood and win out over Cape and Julian, her real sons.

“*Likes?*” I ask, just to make sure she means what I think she means.

“It’s so gross. I know it’s sooo gross, and I think that’s what happened last night.”

I suck my lips in. “Cape punched Dillon because he called Cape...” Jeez, am I supposed to say ‘sick fucks’? But I don’t want her thinking it’s because of some seriously twisted crush.

“It was because of me.” I backtrack. “I caused a bit of... Well, you know they are always fighting. It didn’t have anything to do with Margo.”

I keep my mouth shut about the night I caught Dillon in Margo’s room, even though I’m seeing it in a whole new light. Marney doesn’t need to be thinking that her brother likes her godmother.

She tilts her head and raises an eyebrow at me, clearly not believing me.

“I’m not lying,” I say. “He punched him in my room. It had nothing to do with Margo.” And then I can’t help myself. “Why do you think Dillon likes Margo?” What has she seen that I haven’t?

“He’s different with her than how Cape or Julian are.”

“Well, I mean... he’s not...” Why are my armpits sweating? “He’s just probably trying to—”

“Sometimes he stares at her. The way Kirby stares at Bellemy.”

“Who is Kirby?” I squint. I’m not doing well in this conversation. My mind is spinning out of control, putting one and two together, trying to remember every time I’ve even seen Dillon smile at Margo, and simultaneously trying to preserve any innocence Marney has left.

“He’s this totally basic guy that keeps sending her memes that aren’t funny. Bellemy thinks he’s a weirdo, but he’s Katie’s brother, and we kind of have to be nice to him.”

I’m in an information overload as she stands back up and starts messing with my hair again.

“Do you think Cape and Julian are only nice to Dillon because he’s *my* brother? I don’t think Dillon’s a weirdo. He is pretty basic though.” She giggles to herself.

I feign a chuckle and I’m glad she can’t see my face as I lie to her. “Dillon’s not a weirdo.”

Chapter Fifty-One

The whole house is *packed*. There are so many kids in colorful costumes, and I can't even tell what they are as the strobe lights flash. Music thrums a deep pop bass, and all around me, squeals and whoops let out.

I'm amazed by the transformation of the house. Nothing looks familiar and every classic piece of Margo's has been replaced by skeleton bowls overflowing with candy and creepy painted pumpkins. Every surface is covered with lace black cloths and every ceiling corner has cobwebs with spiders dangling.

I linger at the bottom on the stairs, scanning over the tops of bobbing heads for a familiar face. I didn't get to see what the boys look like yet, since they were trapped in Marney's room, but they would at least be taller than all the other guests.

I know the four of them—Dillon, Cape, Julian, and Marney—made a grand entrance that I missed while trying to shimmy into the dress that makes my costume complete. I hollered from the other side of the bathroom door for them to go on without me, not wanting to hold them up when Marney's patience was wearing thin.

I didn't know the house was going to be so full though. I thought maybe twenty, thirty kids max. This looks like the whole school and then some.

"Damn, you're hot!" A kid with braces leers at me.

"Um, thanks?" I look down at his cocky little face. He's got frankenstein bolts glued to his neck and a cup of some sort of

green juice in his hand.

“I didn’t bring a date so if you want—”

“Beat it, pipsqueak.” A brown colored bear of a man pushes the kid away with a claw to the kid’s forehead.

“Hey!” the kid whines, and Cape roars. Like an actual roar, putting up his bear claws and shaking them.

I snort as the kid’s eyes go wide, and he backs away.

“I expect I’ll have to do that all night.” Cape turns and eyes me up and down. I blush under the weight of his gaze. My chest is more exposed than I’ve ever felt comfortable allowing. The dress came with a corset that Marney snapped at me *had to be worn*.

But I see that Cape didn’t get a say in his outfit either. He’s wearing a brown leather vest and nothing underneath it. His whole muscular body is on display, except his hands that are in a grizzly pair of bear gloves. On his head is a pair of ears that seem to disappear into his hair that are slightly rounded and protruding tufts of fur. Marney has attached long fangs to his teeth and painted his face with perfectly brown feathered strokes to add the appearance of fur.

And honestly? It’s extremely hot.

As if Cape is aware of this, he gives me a side smile, showing off a sharpened fang and putting out an arm for me to take. I do so with a warm heat in my stomach and let him lead me into the crowd.

It’s not as claustrophobic as I thought it would be, at least not with Cape cutting a path. The kids ping off of him like bullets on an armored vehicle, and suddenly we are on the other side of the house, nearing two similar looking bears and a goldilocks.

“O-M-G!” Marney bounces on her toes when she sees me. Her natural blonde hair is perfect for her costume and it bounces with her in tight ringlets. Her blue patterned dress has shoulder pads and white lace all around the trim.

She gives me a hug and beams around at all of us. Julian has the same outfit and makeup as Cape but done in all black. Somehow he comes off less rugged though, a more gentlemanly bear. I purse my lips to stop from smiling as I take him in.

I can't believe how sturdy he is despite his recent injuries and it occurs to me that my birthday is in two days and he's not going to be under the weather.

"You look..." Julian's eyes go wide as he takes me in. He shakes his head and grabs my white gloved hand, kissing it.

Feeling giddy, I raise my chin and act superior. I am *Rose* from *Titanic* after all.

"Oh ho, ho, well, well, well, now who's being rude?" He raises his brows, quoting Jack and he does it so well, his smile so bright, that I break character and giggle.

"My, Oh, My!" Margo appears wearing a witches hat and looks me up and down. "You look gorgeous, Peach." She cups my cheek and smiles, her eyes crinkling lovingly. "Titanic is my favorite movie and might I say you're a better Rose than Kate Winslet."

"Yeah, you look really nice, Hailey." Dillon says from off to the side, and I feel Cape tense behind me. It's such a random thing to say, coming from him, and I look at him quizzically.

He doesn't look me in the eye though and instead takes a sip of the green juice that's circling the party. He's done up as a gray bear and the metallic paint on his face covers the bruise well. It makes his icy hair pop in contrast.

"You do too," I say, hoping he's offering some sort of olive branch. Maybe he's finally realizing he's been acting, for lack of a better word, like a weirdo. I just hope that Marney is mistaken about him liking Margo.

Julian claps Dillon on the shoulder and pulls him closer into the group. "See? One big happy family, Ma."

“Hah! For tonight at least,” she jokes and hands Julian a beer that I didn’t see she had tucked in her arm. She pulls out another and gives it to Cape.

“Don’t leave those lying around.” She looks the boys in the eyes. “These kids are scavengers. I’m pretty sure there’s a spiderman with a flask somewhere.”

“Let ‘em have fun,” Cape says and leans over, popping the top off his beer on a side table that earns him a glare from Margo.

“You don’t have to look their mothers in the eye at PTA meetings,” she says and then her eyes bulge when he hands me the beer he just opened.

“Caperson!” she hisses and looks around. “She’s underage! What if one of these little shits tell their parents I was passing out alcohol.”

“Relax.” Cape pushes the cold bottle into my hand. “She doesn’t look underage.”

She gives an exasperated sigh and stalks away from the little group we’ve formed.

“I don’t have to drink,” I say and try to hand it back.

“It’s fine.” Julian takes his beer and cheers’ my bottle before I can turn to Cape.

“Margo’s right. It will look bad,” I say and tuck the bottle against my stomach, trying to shield it.

“Yeah? Then what’s it going to look like when I do this?” Cape drawls behind me and then slips a hand behind my neck. Before I know it, he has his lips on mine and my knees go weak.

I can’t think about what it looks like, it probably looks really bad, but all I can feel are his lips between mine and his strong grip holding me up. My stomach swoops as he dips his tongue in my mouth and he tastes like something a little stronger than a beer.

My cheeks are burning pink when he releases me and I surreptitiously glance around. Julian is scowling at his brother, good-naturedly though, and Marney is looking at me like, *we're going to talk about this later*. I'm reluctant to see Dillon's expression but when I glance in his direction, he's gone. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Two beers later and I'm being handed my third in the sand on the beach outback. The boys did their obligatory laps around the house with Marney, letting her take pictures and show off to her friends but then they guided me outside, plucking out their fangs and tossing them in the trash on our way.

They still have on their ears and face paint though, the tiny vests accentuating their lean bodies, and the alcohol is preventing me from having the control to stop staring.

The alcohol has also made me very hot and I'm laid out on the cool sand, one hand propping up my head. I take another sip and ignore the fact that I have a four-hundred dollar dress with beads getting filled with sand.

It's the dress that Rose wears when she slips on the back of the Titanic and Jack has to save her. I find it funny that I'm laying in the sand right now, with the water probably as cold as Jack explained to her. Would my guys jump in after me?

I examine them, sitting side by side, their shoes kicked to the side. I'm laying in front of them long ways and I have a perfect line of sight to take both of them in. Their profiles are back-lit from the lights of the house behind them but the moon is bright enough that I can still see how achingly gorgeous they are.

"If I ran out into the water right now, would either of you come in after me?" I ask, feeling relaxed and bold and not the least bit ashamed of hoping that they would.

Julian answers first, his elbows resting on his knees. "You jump, I jump."

I dip my head back and laugh, pleased that he knows what I'm referring to. I'm beginning to think he's seen the movie as

many times as I have.

When I look back, Cape's eyes are dark and he looks at me from under his brows. "I wouldn't let you run out into the water in the first place," he warns, as if I was truly thinking about it.

"You don't think I could outrun you?" I push his buttons a little, feeling playful and light.

"You could try." He licks his lips and a warmth spreads through me. "You won't get very far."

"Promise?" I flirt with him. At least, I think it's flirting. There has never been a guy that I felt this way with. Safe enough to banter with, attracted to enough to want his hands on me.

"She's teasing me," Cape growls and dips his head to look at Julian in complaint.

"Two more days," Julian reminds him.

I twirl a lock of my hair, liking that I'm getting Cape flustered. "What? Are you having a hard time resisting me?"

Suddenly his arm darts out without looking at me and he grabs my ankle. I paw at the sand as I'm twisted onto my stomach, and he easily slides to him.

"You want to play?" his voice is husky, filled with promise, and I don't fight him as he pulls me up and into his lap. My dress hikes up around my hips as he locks each of my thighs on either side of him. One of his hands slips expertly under the seam of the dress, pressing against my lower back and the other grips my bare ass.

"Maybe," I breathe, arching my back and letting my breasts fill his vision. There's something about being wanted and still having the power to say no, knowing that he won't take without my permission. I can lean into the things that I like about myself without fear of repercussion.

"I'm going to show you what little restraint you have compared to me." He squeezes my ass and then quickly slides his

hand to the front, resting on my stomach until sliding down slowly. His palm is warm against my belly button and I moan. His fingertips dig into the rim of my underwear and then tugs, roughly. They lace tears easily enough and my breath hitches.

I gape at him in surprise, and I'm returned with a wicked, self satisfied smile. I look to Julian, wondering if he's going to allow this but he's leaned back on his elbows, admiring the view that is now my pussy.

Cape grips my body against his chest and then twists, laying me on my back in the sand, his body hovering over mine. The dress falls a bit and he pushes it back up as he prowls lower, looking up at me from beneath his dark lashes.

I'm completely on display and I crane my neck, my cheek brushing against the sand, to look down the dark and empty beach.

"Cape..." I whimper, suddenly very sober.

"You asked for it," Julian says.

Is this it? Are we not waiting for my birthday? My legs shake, and Cape positions his head between my thighs. His pupils are blown out, ravenous as he stares at my pussy. I tense, waiting for his tongue, practically pooling with anticipation. Am I ready for this? My body clearly is. But am *I*?

I'm no stranger to sex but I've only ever been used, tense with fear. The tension in my body now is from excitement and I don't think this is going to be a one way street. The way Cape and Julian are taking me in makes me think they want to please me. And I'm ready for it, desperate for it, and I feel safe with them.

Cape holds my hips and dips his face, opening his mouth and... and...

Breathes against my clit. His lips only hover over me and his tongue doesn't even touch me. He just breathes against me, his warm breath blowing sweetly against me. My god. I fist the sand

at my sides and buck my hips, but he pins me down and laughs darkly. I can't practically feel the hot moisture of his laugh and I arch again.

"Awh," he drawls against me. "Are you having trouble resisting me?"

I thrash against his words, realizing what he's doing, that this isn't it, that he's playing with me and throwing my words back at me.

He breaths again, warming me and I throb, swelling at the action. His lips don't even graze me, but I know they are there and try to slowly arch up, but Cape is in control and he holds me down.

I let out a disgruntled moan, and he breathes deeper, his hot breath like an entity itself as it caresses me.

"Please," I beg, turning to Julian, hoping he'll give in but my eyes widen as I see he's unzipped his pants and he's stroking himself. He's angled in a way that I can't see his length, just his arm as it slowly slides up and down. My need doubles as he holds my gaze, pleasuring himself to me.

"I don't think he's going to help you," Cape says cruelly from between my legs.

I huff and twist in his grip. "It's not fair."

He laughs and shifts onto his knees, still holding me down with one hand. He uses his free hand to undo his own zipper, and I gape as he pulls himself out. Unlike with Julian, I can see all of him and he's rock hard, the tip glistens with liquid, and he's so close to my pussy that I can barely contain myself.

"Go ahead and buck again for me." He holds himself and slides his hand up and down, angling towards me. I hate that my body responds and does what he wants. I wriggle against his arm, trying to shimmy in the sand, thinking if only I could get my legs wrapped around him. But he's too strong and his muscles only flex more, the faster he touches himself.

“It’s not fair,” I cry again and look to Julian. It’s no use though and my gaze darts between both of them rapidly, not being able to decide who I want to watch. They move with a fever that makes me ache and pulsate.

“Please,” I beg as Cape uses a knee to nudge my legs open wider.

“Don’t worry,” his breath comes heavy as he pants around his words. “I’m going to give you something.”

I freeze as he bends over me, his pace picking up. The tip of him is so close to me that I hold my breath, waiting for him to push in and fill me up.

“Admit you’re having trouble resisting me,” he growls, and I nod quickly. “Say it,” he demands.

“I’m...” I’m having a hard time formulating words, waiting to feel him inside me. “I’m having trouble...”

“Doing what?” he pants.

“Resisting... you,” I choke out.

“Come on, baby, all together now.”

“I’m having trouble resisting you!” I yell, hoping that will please him enough to get him inside of me.

“That’s a good girl,” he moans and then his body shudders. I gasp as I feel his warm cum squirt against my clit, drenching me and dripping between me. My pussy twitches and tightens, desperately wanting more, and I cry out in frustration.

Cape leans over me, holding his face above mine but keeping his dick just out of reach of my body. “Now you know better than to tease me.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

Julian sighs when Cape knocks me to the workout room floor. “You don’t have to be so rough,” he says and puts a hand out for me.

I wave him off, not wanting to put anymore strain on his body. He’s working himself to death in here with Cape. There’s no way that a real doctor would sign off on what he’s doing. I’ve watched him do everything from push ups to pull ups to weights and the treadmill.

And when I say watched, I mean *watched*. Which is part of the reason I’ve been knocked down. I was in a daze watching Julian pull himself up effortless on the bar, the back of his shirt drenched with sweat. It takes everything in me not to ask him to take it off. I don’t know why he doesn’t. Cape took his shirt off the second we walked in. And it’s not like Julian isn’t just as nicely defined.

“You think someones going to go easy on her?” Cape asks, bending over and picking me up, and I let him. He’s not the one with a hole in his side.

“I’m pretty sure no one in her life has ever gone easy on her.”

I still with Cape’s arm around me. Julian says it so adeptly, like he knows and yet he can’t possibly know just how true his words are. I bite my lip and dip my head, my natural instinct when I think of the shit I’ve been through.

Cape growls, “Why do you do that?” his question is aimed at me and tinged with annoyance.

“Do what?” I avoid his gaze, feeling embarrassed for what I’ve let happen to me.

“Eat it.”

I shake my head, confused, *eat what?*

I look up at him and he dips his head to hold my eyes, tossing a bit of my hair behind my shoulder and his face softens. The graze of his hand against my shoulder is gentle, comforting, despite the way both of them are looking at me, with pity.

“You swallow all that pain. You eat it like you did it to yourself.”

Of course I eat it. What else am I supposed to do with it? I can’t erase the injustice my dad spewed at his only child, even if he is dead now. I can’t forget what it feels like to be backhanded by Kyle. And I can’t forget trying to keep my head down in school, trying not to draw the attention of another teacher that could control me. I have to swallow it all.

“Yeah.” I narrow my eyes at Cape. “It’s mine to eat.”

“No.” He shakes his head like I’m being dense and grabs my hand, pulling me with him to the bench press and sitting down. He places me on his lap, my arm pressed up against his damp chest.

“It’s not *yours* to eat. You never did anything wrong. You didn’t ask for anything that’s happened to you. All that is *theirs*, the people who hurt you, to eat, to swallow, to poison their bodies and rot them from the inside out.”

I try to pull away. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. It’s as much a part of me as it is a part of them.

He keeps his grip on me and grabs my chin to look at him.

“But it happened to me,” I try to tell him while his eyes try to tell me otherwise.

“Yes. It happened *to* you. So taste it, roll it around on your tongue, feel the texture, the flavor, the bitter burn. You can taste

it all you want, because it was forced into your mouth but don't you dare swallow it. Spit it out."

"He's right," Julian says, stepping in front of us. "You're drinking poison that isn't yours and it's going to kill you."

I falter. Kill me? I *wanted* to die that night on the bridge. That was my choice, my decision, my escape. But... The way they are both looking at me, was that the poison killing me? Was it really not my own choice?

"That piece of shit out front of your house?" Julian grabs my hand. "I should have killed him but I didn't want to scare you. He's one of the ones that deserves the poison."

"The teacher?" Cape asks.

Julian blinks. "What?"

"The one who raped her."

I wince at his words, that ugly word that I never use, and Cape immediately grabs my chin again, giving it a shake. "Stop that. Spit it out."

"Wait, what?!" Julian takes a step back, and Cape stares at his brother.

"There was a sick fuck, a *teacher*, that—wait, then who was outside her house, her father?"

"No. It was some piece of shit, a real—" Julian shakes his head. "Hailey, am I to understand that—"

"Stop." Tears start to pool in my eyes and I get off of Cape, putting some distance between me and their confusion, their shock.

I put my back to them and grip my chest, feeling it get tight. It was stupid of me to mention what Mr. Canes did to me to Cape. And while Julian put two and two together that Kyle had been the cause of the bruises on my body, I never wanted anyone to know. I can't hear it from their mouths. Not when all I do is listen to it in my head. It's too much.

“Hailey, I’m sorry,” Julian says.

“I’m not,” Cape snaps, and I hear the metal bench shift behind me. “I want a fucking list. Right now. Every single fucking name.”

“Give her a minute,” Julian hisses.

“No. I’m going to fucking murder—”

“We’ll get ‘em, just relax for a minute.”

I take a shaky, trapped breath and I realize what they are saying.

“No.” I turn around.

“No?” Cape balks. “The don’t get to fucking live.”

The tears come in a rush. “No. No. No. They don’t deserve death.”

Cape’s eyes bulge out of their sockets and the vein in his forehead appears, but Julian’s brows come together.

“That’s exactly what they deserve. Are you out of your mind?” Cape roars.

“Death is peace.” I scramble for him to understand. “Death is freedom, free of pain and worry and fear. Death is a mercy. They don’t deserve her.”

“*Her.*” Cape barks a bitter laugh. “This again? Stop idolizing death. The only reason you have this fucked up obsession is because of what those bastards did to you.”

I shake my head, angry that he’s not getting it but also angry because he’s making a point, one that doesn’t fit into the world I’ve crafted. Being here, feeling safe, I see the lure to live but I’ve spent so many years not being afraid of death that the idea of it now? The idea that if I go to her, I don’t get Julian or Cape or Margo and Marney? That’s frightening, panic inducing. I just can’t be afraid of death. I have to welcome her, otherwise the fear of her would be too much.

“Baby, you don’t want to die right?” Julian’s lips have fallen so low, his eyes so hurt that my own heart aches.

“No!”

“Yes, she does. She thinks it’s the only way to make the pain stop,” Cape scoffs.

“It is the only way to make it stop!”

“No!” Cape yells, his voice vibrating off the mirrors around us and he steps to me, putting his face in mine. “The only way to make it stop is to *live!* To not swallow other peoples crimes. To learn from what you’ve been through, to get stronger, to make sure it never happens to you again. To get revenge, to kill those that ever made you want to die.”

I don’t flinch in his wake, at his raised voice or the anger radiating off of him.

“I am getting stronger,” I say. “And I’m never letting—”

“No.” He straightens and turns his back on me. “You won’t ever fight for yourself if you keep up this fascination of dying.”

“I don’t want to die.” I look at Julian but I can see it on his face that he doesn’t believe me. “I don’t but I can’t be afraid of it either.”

Cape reels around. “Yes, you do need to be afraid of it. It has to be the most terrifying thing on this planet. You have to be so petrified of dying that you would do anything to survive.” His eyes have gone distant and I realize what he’s saying, what he’s thinking.

Madison.

I look at the floor, embarrassed that I would even try to fight him on this. Here I am advocating for death when she’s dead.

“You’re right,” I concede.

He seems to come to, his eyes narrowing on me.

“You’re right about it all,” I continue. “There is something wrong with me.” My voice cracks admitting it. “But I’m trying. And everyday that I spend with you two—” I look to Julian to make sure he knows this. “—I get better. I just don’t know what to do with all this... this *want* to live. Because I do. I want to live, it’s just hard.”

Cape’s jaw tics as he studies me, as if he’s not sure he believes me but at least the rage has subsided.

Julian comes to me, wrapping his arms around me and resting his chin on my head. I bury my face against his chest and breathe him in, the scent of him, one of the things that makes me want to live and I make a promise to myself. I’ll do whatever it takes to survive for these two men.

“We’re still going to need a list,” Julian says.

Chapter Fifty-Three

I had spent the whole rest of the day in the workout room, even past when Julian had tapped out and then again the whole next day. I made it my mission to understand every self defense trick that Cape had shown me. I struggled with sit ups and pull ups and I killed myself working on my legs. Cape says that my legs are my strongest, that I should use them to my advantage, so I've run with that.

But I had been so focused on getting stronger that when I was just about to fall asleep, pinned between my two personal space heaters, I was shocked to hear that today was the day.

“Goodnight, Birthday Girl.” Julian's lips grazed my ear, his voice filled with wicked promise.

All the worries that have plagued me about what Marney could have planned for my birthday were suddenly the last thing on my mind.

Now, I get ready in a daze, the only thing on my mind that I'm eighteen. Eighteen and legal and sexable.

I take a bath in the vanilla bubbles and add some drops of an oil that Julian picked out. I try to relax, take my time and calm my nerves but I find myself staring at the bubbles as they pop. One after another. I shave every inch of my body and nick myself once or twice because of my lack of focus.

When I get out, I put on one of the plush, expensive robes that hang in an offering on a bronze hook in the bathroom. I had been avoiding their call since being here because I didn't want to sully them. But today I just can't resist, feeling indulgent and in

need of comfort. And boy does it bring comfort. I'm lost in its luxurious, fuzzy folds while I try to smooth the rich body butter on my skin. I feel like I'm in the montage part of a movie where I can't get out of my head and the world moves in erratic motion around me.

I fumble with the sleek Dyson blow dryer that Marney put in my room for me. Without a clue what I'm doing, I whip it through my hair, this way and that, losing sight of what I'm doing and instead imagining being with two men. Both of them cradling my body with the promise of pleasure.

I've never been with two. And why shouldn't I? I deserve it. Lord knows I've been sorely disappointed with one up until this point. The two of them will be like an ecstasy that I've been craving my whole life. And add to that it's two men I love then—

What?

I freeze with the blow dryer blasting my face and gawk at my own reflection. Do I love Julian and Cape? A pair of brothers that are too old for me but somehow fill up parts of me I didn't even know I needed?

I put down the blow dryer and sit on the edge of the bathtub. Why wouldn't I love them? Julian literally saved my life. He picked me up and took me home to a woman who is the mother I've always wanted and to Marney who is like the little sister I've always needed to conspire with. To a home full of safety and nourishment. And he's kind, in control of the temper that all men have.

Cape not so much, but at least his temper never lashes out at me. He used that temper, that flared in my honor, against my dad. He did what I couldn't do for myself and is trying to make sure that I can take care of myself in the future. He's the firm hand that I never utilized for myself. And the way he looks at me, like I'm his... It's the first time I've ever liked being looked at like that.

Yes, I love them and the realization makes me giddy.

I fiddle with the makeup that the lady from the store wrapped together for me. I'm not completely helpless. I know about concealers and mascara but I worry about going overboard. I apply a little bit of a few things and call it, surprised that Marney hasn't made an appearance to do me up. But I would assume Margo is keeping her at bay.

Slipping into the dress is like dipping a toe in a hot tub. It's a black velvet piece that ruches and folds around my breasts but dips in the center to show off my cleavage. I push away any qualms I might have about that, knowing that I'm going to be with Julian and Cape and I suspect that they wouldn't even let another man look at me. The velvet fabric hugs my hips and reaches just past mid-thigh. It also has a slit on the right that shows off my bruise free high leg.

I'm a sight, that's for sure. I've never felt more beautiful as I turn in the mirror, taking in how my hair has somehow turned out so silky. The haircut I got has grown out a bit and is giving it a more wispy look, and whatever gloss I slapped on my lips has a slight tingle that I think is making my lips bigger? And I just can't get over my skin, how it looks wrapped in luxury and void of bruises.

The last thing I need to do is put on the heels. They taunt me from the edge of the closet like pointy blades that threaten to trip me, but I'm hoping whatever Marney set up involves more sitting than moving around.

Once I'm ready, I hold the stair rail for dear life as I make my descent, focusing on my feet so intently that when I take a breath in relief and straighten, I'm surprised to find everyone around the island, seemingly waiting on me.

Julian is pressed to perfection in a fitted suit, sans tie. It's a deep black that I'm sure isn't your typical black, that or the material is an expensive kind that I've never laid eyes on. The slicked back hairstyle he's donning though doesn't seem to be cooperating and a sinful slash of hair has fallen across his forehead, as if inviting me to run my fingers through it.

Cape is leaning back in a barstool wearing dress pants so tight that nothing, and I mean *nothing* is left to imagination. The belt around his waist with its black metal is like a cage keeping a beast inside. He's only in a dress shirt and the first three buttons are undone, revealing his chest and the tattoos that stretch up to the base of his neck.

"Oh, my *god!*" Marney squeals. "I am so jealous!"

I suck in my lips and dip my head, embarrassed at her outburst. I may feel beautiful, but hearing someone else say something makes my cheeks burn, especially in front of everyone else.

Margo is wrapped in one of her silk robes and swirling around a glass of wine as she gives me a cheeky grin to go with Marney's exclamation. Dillon is next to her, sporting similar formal attire to Cape and Julian but doesn't look nearly as fitted or gifted.

"Sorry. I'm crashing your birthday plans," Dillon says when my eyes find him. "Hope that's okay?"

The idea of Dillon coming along doesn't surprise me as much as the way he genuinely seems worried if that's okay with me, as if he is trying to mend bridges.

"Uh, yeah?" I say. I'm not sure where we are going or what we are doing. I didn't have any assumptions about tonight and who would be with us. But now I can see that it's not everyone, if Margo's robe is any indication.

"I can't go unless he comes." Marney rolls her eyes at Dillon and hops off a barstool.

She's wearing a pink glittery dress that sashays out around her knees, and her hair is tied back into a sleek bun. She looks so cute and yet mature at the same time that I smile as she comes in for a hug.

"Happy Birthday!" She wraps her arms around me and squeezes. The bruising along my ribs has started to yellow and

it's getting better, I barely feel a hint of pain with her embrace. "I can only stay out until midnight."

"That's fine," I say. "We'll probably be back by then right?"

She smirks as she lets me go. "Uh, no. Where we're going things don't typically get hype till midnight."

"She shouldn't even be allowed in," Margo says and clicks her tongue.

"Then how...?"

"I *did* set everything up. It's only right that I should be allowed in," Marney says.

"I think *Jules* may have pulled some strings," Margo adds, a little ruffled.

"She'll be fine," Julian says as if they've had this conversation already.

Marney spins around with her hands on her hips. "And Dillon will be there and he'll bring me home."

"Don't think I don't know you twisted his arm so you can get what you want." Margo shakes her head.

"He wants to go!" Marney cries and looks to Dillon for confirmation.

"I'm just making sure my baby sister is safe." He puts his hands up.

"You want to go! You're twenty-one and you never go out!" Marney spins back to me with wide eyes. "He wants to go!"

Chapter Fifty-Four

There is a limo outside waiting for us, and not just any limo. It has rhinestones around the window frames and the tires are those monstrous ones with shiny rims. The interior is bubble gum pink and all leather. I can only imagine that Marney hand picked this particular style.

The five of us climb inside and Marney immediately hands Cape a champagne bottle to open. She pouts when Dillon doesn't allow her even a taste but I see Julian slip her his glass while Dillon isn't looking. She takes the tiniest of tastes and promptly hands it back. Ever the mature young woman.

I sit with my legs held together in a similar pose as Marney, my knees touching Julian and my back side tucked against Cape. He holds a protective arm around my waist while he stares Dillon down across from him. Dillon pretends not to notice and stares out the window, holding his champagne flute on his knee, untouched.

I want so desperately to like Dillon, for Marney's sake. It can't be easy having your brother as the 'weirdo'. I just don't understand what his deal is. He comes off as such a great guy that cares about his sister and lets her drag him into situations like this, and I know he can be charming. He has all the discipline in the world if I think about all the training he does for that upcoming marathon and he's quite good looking when he's not letting his face turn into a tomato.

Is he really just messed up in the head? Can he not control himself when he corners me and makes tantrums in Margo's room in the middle of the night? Also, the way it seems he's

flipped a switch with me. Is it because I'm finally eighteen and the closer I got the more it eased his mind about me joining the family? Or does he just have mood swings that aren't being tamed without medication? Either way, I wish he wouldn't isolate himself in the corner of the limo.

Now, as we wait outside the limo for Marney to find a ring that slipped off her finger, he's standing off to the side. His face is passive and he doesn't seem annoyed to be here but he might as well have the demeanor of a stranger.

We're in front of a four story matte black building. There's a red velvet rope that secures at least a hundred people in a line that seems to wrap around the building. I feel awkward standing here and would like to just take our place at the back of the line. Why would the limo driver pull us up in front anyways?

"I got it!" Marney cheers and pops out of the back, straightening her dress.

Dillon huddles her in front of him and Cape does the same to me. Julian leads the way but instead of going to the back of the line he steps up to a bouncer with dreads and sunglasses who is manning the doors.

Julian whispers something, and the man steps aside to let us through. I gape at the line behind us as I teeter inside. Cape's hands are planted firmly on my ass cheeks as he pushes me forward. I expect it from Cape but I'm salivating, waiting for Julian to touch me the same way.

Even this morning, Julian didn't take it upon himself to kiss me on the lips and still stuck to my cheek. I'm trying to be patient but I realize I've wanted him since he handed me that milkshake on the drive to Florida. I may not have known it at the time, but now I do and all that desire is becoming retroactive and I feel desperate for it.

As we walk down a long hallway, music starts the thrum around us. Just the bass at first, like a force vibrating my bones, and then more treble, electricity mixed with voices.

Marney slips away from Dillon and grabs my arm. “I’m so excited! Have you ever been to a club? This is the most exclusive club within five-hundred miles. Oh my god, I wonder who’s going to be here!”

I force a smile, my nerves getting the better of me. Up until this point, I hadn’t conceptualized that we were going into a nightclub. I’ve been so distracted by Dillon and excited by what’s to come with Julian and Cape that I’ve been just going along, happy to have this moment.

We come up to a door that can barely contain the chaos inside. Julian turns and pushes his back against it, dipping his head and smiling at me.

You got this, he mouths, and just knowing that he knows how I feel comforts me.

“Stay with me.” Dillon grabs Marney’s hand and pulls her away from me, and then we are in the thick of it.

There are bodies everywhere. They come together forming one moving entity in the flashing lights. Beams of green, blue and purple slice through the air. There’s balconies above that feature the same thing, full of people dressed to the nines, if you would call it dressed—most of the women are barely covering their nipples or the bottom of their ass cheeks—and swaying to the beat, drinks with glistening ice cubes and fun colored liquids in their hands.

For a moment, my heart thuds rapidly to the beat and everything closes in on me. I desperately try to focus on feeling Cape’s chest against my back and keep my eyes trained on the hand that Julian has outstretched behind him. I know I should take it but that would mean losing contact with Cape.

But before I know it, we are cordoned off into an elevator and the bass is the only thing that penetrates it. A man in a suit presses a button for us and up we go. I’m truly surprised that no one is making a fuss about a thirteen-year-old being in the club,

or even me, but I guess with enough money and exclusivity, anything can be pulled off.

We're led to a private booth in a corner that still has a view over the entire club below, and there are buckets of ice on the table with expensive-looking bottles of alcohol.

When the man leaves us, Marney immediately pulls me from Cape and drags me to the rail. She bounces up and down.

"I can't believe I'm here!" Suddenly her phone juts out and she snaps a selfie of us that I barely get a chance to smile for. "All my friends are going to be so jealous. Do you know how hard it is to get in here? Even one of the Jenner sisters was turned away. Oh my god! Is that Tom Holland? Look!"

She points to the second level and I have to squint. The guy does bear a resemblance as he kisses the neck of... Zendaya? Woah.

I lean into her ear. "How much did this cost?"

With her eyes still on the celebrities she makes a face. "Mmm, I know better than to tell you that. Julian warned me. But—" She turns to me and hugs me. "—it's your birthday!! Don't think about it." She lets go and beams up at me.

"Do you think we can get to the second floor?" she asks, clutching my arm and pulling me with her.

Marney is like a little paparazzi, snapping pictures of anyone she thinks is important. I have to give her credit though, she doesn't accost any of them. Dillon stays right by our sides, following us around like a security guard, and I make an attempt at telling him sorry. He shakes his head and waves me off with a smile. I loosen up a bit about his presence, maybe he's not so bad.

Or maybe that's the purple drink in my hand. I have no idea what it is, Marney got it for me, something she desperately wants to taste, and while I would let her try it, since she doesn't seem like she actually wants alcohol but is just curious, Dillon never

leaves our side. I don't want to get his feathers ruffled if I can avoid it.

Cape and Julian stick to the booth. Wherever Marney drags me I can still arch my neck and get a glimpse of the top floor corner. They've both ignored the bottles on the table and instead are drinking an amber liquid in short glasses. They don't seem to mind the laps I'm making with Marney, even though my feet mind, and look to be talking between themselves.

At some point—three purple drinks later?—Marney has me dancing on the floor with everyone else. And yes, I'm actually dancing. It's hard not to when everyone's bodies are moving in rhythm and the frequent bumps from other people force me into it. Marney is having a blast. She grabs my hands and makes me twirl her. Even Dillon is swaying to the music and bobbing his head, a protective hand always hovering behind Marney's back so no one can dance against her.

When we're sweaty and panting, we finally make our way back up to our spot. Cape and Julian stand when we approach, and as I shimmy into the booth to rest my feet, Cape grabs me and pulls me onto his lap.

When I turn to look at him there's something feral in his eyes and they linger from my breasts, up my chest and to my throat. He leans in and breathes. I feel his tongue slide down my neck, tasting the shiny sweat that dots my skin. He makes a groaning sound, and I feel something firm spring to life beneath my ass.

"You taste so fucking good," he says, and I blush, looking to see if Marney has witnessed the inappropriateness. But she's leaning over the rail. It's Dillon who is looking at us, a fist clenched at his side.

When our eyes meet he shakes his head with a frown that looks like he's truly hurt and turns away.

"Time to go," he says to Marney.

Is he jealous? Or am I reading things wrong because of the alcohol. Either way, no one but me notices and I try to ignore it.

“Wait! I have to give Marney her present.” She swoops under Dillon’s arm and comes running up to me. She sidles in next to Cape, not batting an eye about our public display of affection, or the fact that it’s Cape and not Julian.

She shoves on Cape’s thigh repeatedly, and he grunts.

“Okay. Okay.” He shifts and digs in his pocket, holding me tight so I don’t fall off of him.

When I look at Marney in confusion, she giggles. “I don’t have pockets.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I say as Cape pulls out a velvet satchel in the palm of his hand and Marney snatches it from him.

She hurriedly pulls the strings and tips it over into her hand. Two rose gold bracelets spill out and she tosses the bag to the side.

“So we each have one.” She beams and holds them up.

They are thin chains with two pendants each. The pendants have little diamonds and an engraving I can’t read.

“Yours says *friends like sisters* and mine says *sisters like friends*.”

My mouth hangs open as she paws at my wrist and wraps it around, getting close to snap the clasp.

“Marney...” My eyes start to water and I have no idea what to say. She thinks of me as a sister? The chain barely holds any weight on my wrist, but I suddenly feel heavier, fuller, more complete.

“You’re like the big sister I’ve always wanted,” she says. “I know I’m being super immature, and it’s probably so cringe, but I’m really glad you’re here.”

The tears roll over when she lets go and holds hers out to me. I take it, feeling like it’s not really me but some very lucky version of myself.

She holds out her wrist and I attach it. She has no idea how much this means to me. I used to think that maybe if I had a sister, things would have been different, that I wouldn't have felt so hopeless if I had someone to confide in. I never had a girlfriend or anyone to share the tribulations of being a girl with.

This delicate chain—that probably cost a fortune—feels like a link between us, a bond that I didn't need a bracelet for because her thought of me like this would be enough.

"It's not cringe," my voice breaks. "It's the most thoughtful gift I've ever received"

She purses her lips at my tears. "You're going to make *me* cry."

"No, don't." I pull her in for a hug. "If you start then I will really start and then we're crying in a nightclub."

She laughs and squeezes me. "You don't have to wear it all the time if you don't want to."

I pull away and look her in the eyes. "I'm *never* taking it off."

"Well, how am I supposed to top that?" Julian has come around to stand over us.

"You don't!" Marney sticks out her tongue and stands.

Within thirty minutes of Marney and Dillon leaving, the club becomes even more of a madhouse than I thought possible. The other VIP booths around us fill up, and pretty soon I can't tell who belongs to which table.

The table nearest to us is nothing but men. They hoot and holler and pop the bottles on their table, spraying and spilling every which way. And pretty soon they pull out a multitude of white baggies. Cocaine litters their table as they all go in together, snorting lines and getting even louder.

Cape has stuck me on the right of him so I'm bordered on each side by him and Julian. I've cut myself off from the purple cocktails, and Julian goes through the six bottles on our table, having me taste each one. They all taste like alcohol, and I can't

differentiate between one I like and one I don't like. Eventually Julian gives up and hands me his drink, the amber liquid. It somehow tastes stronger than the stuff on the table and burns a lot more going down but is somehow smooth after? It must be expensive. and I try to pass it back, but he pushes it back towards me and leans into my ear.

“It might help.”

I turn to look at his profile. “With what?”

“With what we're going to do to you tonight,” he purrs.

My skin immediately heats and my voice comes out breathy, “What... What are we going to do?” I ask.

“And spoil the surprise?” He grips my thigh. “I don't think so.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

The limo slips around curves on the dark roads, and finally the scent of the ocean hits me and I know we are getting closer to home. My heart speeds up and my skin flushes in anticipation. I'm tucked in the alcove of Cape's arm and chest and I can practically feel his body burning between our clothes. Julian is on the other side of me, his eyes roaming and roaming, and if I don't get what I want out of tonight I might explode.

I'm surprised to see that we pass Margo's house and the limo stops in front of Julian's. If I wasn't already having a hard time formulating thoughts, then I would be completely speechless.

Julian squints out the window that faces the ocean and I try to see what he's looking at, but the windows are too dark. I think I see the outline of a car as it pulls away but then Julian is back to eyeing my legs, albeit with a small hitch in his brows.

When Cape helps me out of the limo, my mouth falls open as I take in the brand new car in the driveway with a giant pink bow on top. I have no doubt that Marney had a hand in picking the bow, but by the gray metallic of the car and the way it's shaped like a tiny bullet, I know that this is Julian and Cape.

"You didn't..." I spin to look at Julian as he gets out of the limo. He's wearing a cheshire cat grin and he slips his hand into his pocket.

"Well, I did expect you to pass your drivers test but..." He tosses me a shiny key fob, and I barely catch it against my chest. "At least, next time you try you can wreck your own car."

I bite my lip. "It's too much."

“It’s not,” Cape grunts next to me and then in one swift movement he bends and latches his arms around my ass, picking me up and taking me closer to the car with its precious bow.

The limo quietly disappears behind us and I think that Cape is going to set me in front of the driver’s door but instead he steps past the hood, and I grip him tighter at the sight.

Hidden in front of the sleek new car is a stunning motorcycle, slim and dainty but still daunting. It also has a bow but this one is red.

I snap my expression to Cape. “I can’t ride a motorcycle!”

“I’ll teach you.” He lets me slide down to my feet and he nudges me towards it while pressing something into the palm of my hand. It’s another key fob, and I stumble in a stupor.

Are they both insane? A car and a motorcycle? I hardly need either, but the way they are both grinning at me makes me think this makes them happy to do.

“You guys...” I hold my arms out at my sides. “I can’t accept these.”

Julian comes to stand beside Cape and tilts his head.

“You can and you will. But you like mine more than his right?” He gives a playful jab into his Cape’s side.

“Right now she might, but once she learns to ride there’s no better feeling, and your gift will rust in the garage,” Cape snaps.

I shake my head and turn to gape at the two modes of transportation that I don’t deserve. The solar lights that dot Julian’s driveway give a warm under-glow to both, and I have to admit that there is something alluring about them. And they are mine?

I’ve never even had a bicycle.

I chew my lip, tears at the ready, but Julian pulls me into him and catches me when I stumble.

“We’re not done.” He tilts my chin up to him and his eyes smolder. “Don’t cry yet. baby.”

Cape punches in a code to Julian’s front door, and I’m ashamed to say that I only know that the back door is keyed. He leads the way, and the familiar scent of Julian hits me. It’s stronger than what his body smells like and it wraps around me. I breathe it in deeply, feeling the giddy urge to put my arms out and spin in the foyer, feeling his presence around my whole being.

“This way.” Julian wraps an arm around my lower back, breaking my fantasy and nudging me forward.

“You guys really didn’t have to do this.” I still have the two fobs, one in each hand, and my palms are sweating. I worry that my nerves are going to dull their shine.

“Don’t.” Julian leans in and whispers in my ear and then he gently puts his hands over my eyes. “Just enjoy it. You deserve it.”

I can’t see, but Julian has his back against me, and I take a step in sync with him. What could he possibly have left to give me? I already feel like the luckiest girl alive. Unless he unveils my eyes and I see Cape naked. I doubt there is anything else that could be so weighty on my soul.

We take a shaky step down together, and I know we’ve reached the sunken living room.

“No crying,” he whispers in my ear and then removes his hands.

I blink a couple times, getting my vision back, and his hands rest on my waist. When I look around the room my chest constricts.

Oh, my god.

I place a hand against my stomach and stumble forward.

“Really?” I gape, not looking away from the lacquered baby grand piano. It has a silver glittery ribbon draped over it and the

hood is propped up.

Neither of them say anything as I quickly kick off my heels and stumble towards it on weak legs. I don't think I would make it if I kept my shoes on.

With wide eyes I run my hand over the smooth top and my soul does all sorts of lively things I didn't think possible.

I never thought in a million years that I would get to play the piano again. I took that grain of salt with a bullet to my chest. The times when I could slip into the music room at school were the *only* times I didn't have to hurt. I knew when I graduated that I would never feel the keys beneath my finger tips, never be able to lose myself in the melodies that my fingers expertly slipped over.

How did he remember this? It was just a few minutes of me baring my soul, tipsy off the wine and then it was overshadowed by the drama.

"Julian..." Tears really do start to fall down my cheeks.

"It's all yours. You can play whenever you want, for as long as you want," he says somewhere behind me.

"You..." I start but I don't have words. There isn't a thing I can say that would convey how much this means to me. I never would have asked for this. I would have buried this one thing that brought me comfort and forgot about it in the wake of the wonderful man—*men*—that have taken me into their hearts.

"Do you want to play?" Julian's voice is closer now, and I can suddenly feel the heat of his body next to me.

"I don't know if I—"

"Play," Cape says, and I realize he's taken a seat on the couch, his feet kicked up on the table.

I take a shaky breath and let myself sink into the seat before the keys.

"I'm not good," I try to tell him.

“I’m sure that anything coming from you will be beautiful.” Julian leans on the piano with one elbow.

I swipe at the tears on my cheeks and then straighten. I let my hands graze the black and white keys of solace. There was never anyone to hear me play. I wasn’t part of a class and I made sure that no one was in the halls.

I thought I would never play again. I’ve tried to forget every string of notes I know so that their presence in my mind couldn’t crush my heart. Now, I try desperately to remember them. There’s only one that comes to mind at the moment and it’s one that I rarely played. It was too happy, too full. It used to hurt to play it, but now it’s all I want to hear.

I begin slowly, shakily, unsure if I remember it correctly but then it’s coming quickly, easily. I don’t even have to think as my fingers take over. I close my eyes and relish the soothing vibrations that come from the strings in the wooden case hitting correctly.

I tilt my head and I’m not here. I’m every note, every ring. I’m up and down and left and right. I’m music, freedom, and light.

I have no idea if Cape or Julian think it’s being played right. It sounds right to me, feels good to me and I’m euphoric, realizing that I don’t care. I just play for myself.

I thought that I didn’t need this. That Julian and Cape would be enough, Marney and Margo, my new family. But I do need this. For the moments when the happiness is too much, when the memories of my nightmare life plague me... I need this.

The song crests and then falls, slowly pacing out, and I hit the final key with a reverence that feels like closing a book. When I open my eyes, Julian has his brows drawn together and his eyes glimmer with wonder.

“Hailey...” He shakes his head, and I blush at his loss of words. “That was...”

Cape is still on the couch but he's sitting forward, his feet planted on the floor and he looks like he's stuck in a trance, his eyes glossy and lost.

My line of sight is pulled away as Julian grips my cheeks and puts his lips against mine. The initial shock that he's actually kissing me, Julian is *kissing me*, the man who saved me and brought me home to his family, fades quickly as I sink into his hold on me. His lips slip between mine and I can finally taste him, his breath, his desire. His tongue is hungry as it swirls against mine, like I'm a wine he can't get enough of.

I'm suddenly pressed against his chest, my hands roaming up and down, feeling his body between the fabric as I crane my neck to reach his kiss. His hands slip to the nape of my neck and his fingers tangle between my hair. It's intoxicating and my chest pumps erratically. I don't give myself any room to breathe as I paw at him because I need his lips on mine more than I need oxygen.

A hard body presses against my back and I moan into Julian's mouth. Cape wraps his firm arms around me, slipping his hands between me and Julian's body. He runs a hand ruggedly down my chest. The velvet of my dress rolls and my breasts fall out. My nipples are only cold for a second before he cups them, massaging them as his lips come down to my ear. I feel a tickle as my legs weaken. His breath is ragged and I lean into it. His lip grazes my ear and I feel myself dampen between my legs.

My god, this is it.

I'm carried upstairs with my legs wrapped around Julian and then laid on the bed. Cape immediately takes Julian's place between my legs and pushes my knees wider. I suck in a breath at how wide I have to spread. I'm wearing just a scrap of lace for panties, and Cape crooks a finger between them and my clit. He tugs and they roll down my hips.

He pulls them down with his finger and steps away long enough for my ankles to come together. When they are free, he

drops them to the floor and nudges my legs back open. I'm on display for him and I can feel myself drip before him.

The air is cool on my slit as the feral look in his eyes takes me in. It has my skin on fire and I throb for him.

Julian is suddenly behind me on the bed, hooking his arms under mine and tugging me up against him and onto his lap. Gone is his shirt and pants, and there's nothing shielding his length besides my dress. I'm a little disappointed that I didn't get to see his cock, but I can feel it and there is *no* disappointment there.

In tandem, they work together, and Julian holds me against him while Cape pulls my dress down my body. My body is so hot that losing the thick fabric is a welcome action. When he tosses the dress to the side, his eyes caress my body and he slowly starts unbuttoning his shirt.

Julian relaxes his arms and slides his hands down the sides of me. I'm completely naked and his touch feels like electricity. I arch my neck back and he kisses me without question. His lips are supple and tender, and everything I've dreamed of.

I've never felt so at ease being exposed. I want them to see me, feel me, and taste me. And I want to do the same to them. I try to twist to face Julian while Cape undresses, but he locks a hand between my thighs and reopens them, keeping my body forward and my bare ass planted on his cock.

I grind against him, and he lets out a breath into my mouth. He has to pull his lips from me and he grabs my jaw and turns me to face Cape who is now completely naked, sprung right in front of me, and as if I wasn't already wet, I feel a rush of it.

If I thought Cape looked good without a shirt, he looks like a god without pants. He's built in all the right places and his skin where the tattoos end is smooth and taut.

My pussy throbs and aches as he leans and puts a knee on the bed. Julian pulls me farther up so his back is resting against the headboard and I'm resting against his chest.

Cape follows our movements and ducks his head between my thighs.

He looks up at me from beneath his brow, a wicked smile at the corner of his mouth. "You ready?"

I nod, feverishly.

"Say it. Say you want it."

"I want it," I say.

"What do you want?"

"You," I tell him and then turn to look up at Julian. "Both of you."

Julian's cock pulses between my ass cheeks and then Cape dives in. My body stiffens and then melts. His tongue slides between my pussy lips and he laps up my arousal with hunger.

I moan, and Julian grabs my throat, tilting me back and sticking his tongue in my mouth. Both of their tongues feel like the only thing I need. I squeeze my thighs around Cape's head, and Julian tuts.

"I want to watch." He grips the inners of my thighs and pushes them open.

Cape's tongue swirls around my clit with a quick tapping that has me arching my back.

"Please..." I want his tongue inside of me. I want to feel his heat and spit.

"Patience," Julian whispers into my ear as he licks the lobe. "Do you know how good it feels to have my dick on your ass?"

I grind against it again, thinking if I can arch just enough that I can get him inside of me but Cape's tongue picks up and then runs along my entry. I shudder, my toes curling. I want it desperately, but he pulls away.

Cape leans over me, pressing his chest against mine and kisses me. He slips his tongue against mine and I taste myself. I

buck against him and I feel his cock touch me. It's enough to make me feral. I grab onto him, quickly hooking a leg behind him.

I'm not quick enough though, and Julian grabs my hips, forcing me back onto his cock.

"Please," I beg again, and Cape licks my nipples and sucks them into his mouth.

"You're going to have to calm down because you aren't cumming until we both get to feel you," Cape says as he trails his lips down my stomach.

He goes back between my thighs, and Julian grabs them, spreading me wider, opening me up to Cape.

Cape presses his lips to my clit in a kiss and then he sucks it in between his teeth. I cry out as my legs try to close around him, but Julian holds them firmly. He's sucking on my neck and has started moving his hips. I've become so wet, dripping so much that it's found its way to the tip of his cock and slides around his shaft. He easily glides his length between my ass cheeks, up and down, and I'm surprised by how good it feels.

I'm a wriggling mess between the two of them and I don't know how I'm supposed to hold out.

Cape uses the flat of his tongue to lick straight up my whole pussy, teasing my entry and cleaning up any loose juices. I twitch and throb, wishing he would just press inside of me.

Julian finally lets go of one of my thighs and he cups my breast, smoothing his thumb over my nipple and pinching lightly in a way that makes me pool even more. Cape licks that up too and goes back to sucking on my clit.

It's as if he knows every time I'm getting close and he changes rhythm, preventing me from getting there.

He leans up and grips his cock, the tip only inches from my pussy.

“Now, I’m going inside, but if you start to cum, I’m going to pull it out.” He gives me a hard glare, and I pout.

“Why can’t I—”

Julian whispers, “Because we both want to feel your first orgasm.”

“I can’t control it,” I say, eyeing Cape’s cock and squirming towards it.

“I’ll control it for you,” Cape says and then the tip of him is against my entry.

I moan too quickly because he doesn’t actually go in, just rubs the tip around and around. The frustration is unbearable and thrash against Julian’s hold. He laughs darkly in my ear, and Cape runs the tip up and down me till he nudges against my clit with it. I feel his pre-cum smooth over it and I’m panting with want.

He pulls away for a second and looks to Julian over my shoulder, eyebrows raised in question. I feel Julian nod behind me, and then Cape lowers himself again and slowly pushes into me.

I scream in ecstasy.

He takes his time as he enters and it’s not till he’s to the hilt that my eyes roll back. He hisses in pleasure.

“Fuck you’re tight,” he says. “We’re going to have to break you in to fit us both,” he grits through his teeth.

“She just needs to open up a little more,” Julian says and reaches his hand between my legs. His fingers find my clit and he rubs soft circular motions as Cape pumps slowly in and out of me.

“That’s good,” Cape breathes. “Get wetter for me. It’ll make it easier.”

I do as he says and move in sync with them. I arch for more of Cape’s cock when he tries to slide out and I grind against

Julian's fingers. Julian puts his mouth over mine and I moan into it as he sticks his tongue in mine.

I start to twitch, feeling myself building and I'm crying out. I don't care what Cape said, I want to cum. I'm going to. I arch and —

He pulls out quickly. "Not yet."

I'm a fucking wreck with the loss of his cock, but then Julian pulls me higher and finally I can feel the tip of him.

"You try, brother. She likes mine too much." Cape chuckles, and I concentrate on trying to wriggle Julian inside of me.

His hands are holding my breasts and I try to reach forward to find him and press him inside. Cape bats away my hands and uses his instead. He nudges my legs open farther and then spreads my lips apart. The tip of Julian finds me and I feel his wetness mix with my own.

"You want me to fuck you?" Julian asks.

"Yes." Jesus, how much more clear do I have to be?

He laughs at the venom in my voice, and Cape shakes his head. "I think waiting till her birthday was too long. She's way too ready."

"I want her desperate," Julian says, and I buck.

"Well she's wide open for you and—" His eyes burn into my pussy, and I know I'm gushing. "—very desperate."

Julian then slips inside of me, letting out a ragged breath in my ear.

"Oh fuck, you *are* tight and so, so wet for us."

He's just as big as Cape and I melt onto him, moving my hips as Cape loses grip of my lips. Cape leans back down and sucks on my clit as Julian fucks me. Within seconds I'm ready, my hands fisting the sheets.

"Damn it." Cape pulls up, and Julian slips out.

“Damn it!” I cry, copying him as I lose their touch and my orgasm with it.

Julian reaches around to flick my throbbing clit, not enough to get me off but enough to keep me on the edge.

“Baby, you can’t cum yet. You have to wait till we can both fit inside.”

My response comes quickly, “You both can fit. Please.”

Cape laughs. “I don’t think you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” I cry as he slips a finger inside me. It’s nothing compared to his cock, but he crooks his finger and makes a come hither motion inside me that has me moaning.

“Maybe you need to really feel how big both of us are,” Julian says and then he’s up and my back is on the bed. I think he’s going to push back inside of me but instead he puts a pillow under my head and tilts my chin up as he hovers over me. His cock touches my lips, and I don’t hesitate to suck it into my mouth.

“You feel that? Now, you think you can take both of us?” he asks.

I nod gently, letting him fall into the back of my throat. I lick every drop of myself off of him and then suck to get his flavor in my throat.

“Let me try.” Cape’s cock is suddenly beside my other cheek. I reach up to grab it but he taps my wrist down. “No hands.” His eyes darken above me.

Julian pulls away to make room for Cape and I open wide. He tucks his cock into my mouth and dips it down to my throat. I don’t even care about air as I try to sit up to take him to the hilt. I want to choke on his pleasure and swallow the cum.

Julian grips himself not too far from my lips and reaches a hand down to rub my clit. I moan around Cape’s cock at Julian’s touch.

“You think you can fit us both in your mouth?” Julian asks, his eyes trained on his brother’s cock pumping in and out of my mouth.

I nod again, and Julian shakes his head but edges the tip of himself near my lips. Cape pulls back and then both tips are between my lips. I try to open wider, suck them both into my mouth but it’s impossible. I go back and forth, sucking each one evenly and running my tongue along their shafts. The faster I lick, the faster Julian rubs my clit. Cape has reached a hand down too and has pushed two fingers inside of me.

“She’s opened up quite a bit, brother. She might be ready,” Cape says, and Julian looks down at me, finding my eyes.

“You want to try?”

“Yes,” I stammer around his cock.

They pull me up together, and Julian lays back, setting me on his lap so I face him. He doesn’t hesitate as he slips inside of me and I fall against his chest in pleasure, my breasts pressed against him. He’s rigid in all the right places, and I never want him to pull out.

“That’s it,” Cape says, and suddenly I feel him behind me, his hands pushing me farther down and spreading me. I feel the tip of him at my entry, right next to Julian’s cock and I want it so bad.

“Tell me if it hurts,” Cape says and then nudges in.

I let out a cry and bite Julian’s shoulder. It hurts but it feels good at the same time. I try to open wider, spreading my legs farther out from Julian’s sides. Cape holds my waist, assisting me as he slowly pushes, pushes, pushes.

When they are both inside of me, my body relaxes and I rock my hips, intoxicated by the feel of both of them together. The way they fill me up is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. They slip against all my most tender spots in tandem, and every time one of them lets out a breath of satisfaction, I get closer to climax.

Cape bears down over my back and wraps an arm around my waist as he pumps into me. I'm enveloped between both of them, their scents, their sweat, their hunger as they deliciously fuck me.

"I'm going to—" I yell, and their tempo increases.

"Do it, baby," Julian growls. "Cum on my cock."

And I do. My whole body tightens and then shudders as I feel them burst inside of me, letting out groans of their own. Their cum mingles with mine and I sag against Julian's chest, feeling them both pulsate and fill me up with every drop.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Of course I'm at the piano, of course I am. Slipping out from between two sleeping, well built men, was no easy task though and I barely snagged a sheet to wrap around myself. It's close to nine in the morning but I just couldn't resist. I would hate to play it and wake them though, so I run my fingers over the keys and admire it.

I feel so whole.

The bracelet Marney gave me glints in the sunlight as I run my hand up and down the piano. I honestly don't know which means more to me. It's not even about the probably very expensive bracelet, it's about what it means.

A sister.

A family.

A confidant.

Of all the things I ever wished for—no more pain, no more suffering—I never thought I would ever get someone like Marney. I also never thought I would meet a man like Julian.

I mean, a piano? It's not even about the piano itself, though I do cherish it, but it's about that he cares enough about me to even think of getting me a piano.

And Cape? All the effort he's put into helping me learn to protect myself is enough, not even considering the motorcycle. God, how am I going to learn to ride a motorcycle?

A click echoes through the house, followed by a huff.

“Jules?!” Margo’s voice finds me all the way in the living room from the back.

“Jules?!” She yells again, sounding out of breath.

In a panic, my eyes dart around the room, looking for clothes, but of course, there are none, and I grip the sheet tighter around me and stand.

Fuck. Fuck. My hair is mused and I know I smell like sex. I turned eighteen but I don’t want Margo to see me like this.

“You don’t answer your damn phone!” She rounds the corner with wild eyes, her own hair mused and sloppy with sleep.

“Oh.” She blinks at me. “Oh, thank god.” Relief flows through her face as she takes me in. “Are the boys here?” She quickly looks away and starts for the stairs, not batting an eye at my toga.

“Um...” I scurry after her, hoping to all hell that they aren’t still sprawled out in bed with their floppy privates on display. If she sees both of them in the same bed she will surely put two and two together.

“Jules!” she hollers again and pulls herself up the rail, two steps at a time.

When we make it to the top, a groggy Julian, buck naked, is coming to meet us.

“Ma? What the fuck?”

“Oh, thank god,” she pants and braces herself on her knees. “I thought something—”

“Jesus.” Cape appears behind Julian, just as naked, and I cringe. He runs a hand through his hair, and neither of them make a move to cover themselves up.

“Does she always wake you up in the morning? You still need mom to wake you up?”

Julian rolls his eyes and then takes a real look at Margo and his brows draw together. “What’s going on?”

She stands upright. “What’s going on is you don’t answer your phone and we’ve been hit. Denny called. The warehouse is gone. Up in smokes. Denny says the Tortellis. Did you fuck with the Tortellis?”

“What? No. Why would they—”

“Caperson?”

“No, Ma. Jesus.”

She shakes her head and snaps, “Get dressed. Five minutes.”

* * *

Julian cinches a pair of his joggers around my waist and pulls a clean white shirt over my head before dressing himself in a similar outfit. Cape pulls back on the clothes he wore last night to the club, and then they have me huffing it down the beach.

I’m scrambling to keep up as they spit numbers at each other. Apparently the warehouse held the whole stash there. Millions of dollars worth of guns in El Cuco. I have no idea who the Tortellis’ are, but Cape and Julian bicker back and forth about them. Cape swears up and down that he didn’t come in contact with them when he went down there to get Julian, but Julian also swears that none of his guys would mess with them.

Margo is pacing the kitchen when we enter.

“Let’s go over what happened when you looked for Jules,” she says to Cape.

Julian pulls out a barstool for me, and I hop up sheepishly. I was hoping I could duck away and change, so it didn’t look so obvious what had happened, but maybe everyone will be so focused on the crisis to notice me.

Julian pulls out his phone and scrolls through what looks to be numerous texts from Denny as Cape sighs.

“Let me at least get some coffee first,” he drawls.

I sit for an hour and I finally hear all the details of what happened to Julian. I've tucked my knees against my chest with wide eyes, in shock by all the carnage.

The man who was driving Julian to the airport was killed when their car was ran off the road and Julian was pulled out and tied up.

He estimates that the people who took him were driving for an hour before he managed to get one of them at a disadvantage in the backseat. At which point he kicked—actually kicked—out the back window and jumped from the moving car. Which explains the glass in his back.

Where they were taking him, he has no idea, but they were in the middle of nowhere with nothing but trees and muck. He ran into the wild while they fired at him, and that's how he was shot, but they didn't catch him. I can't imagine him being shot and still having to run as the blood bleeds through his fingers.

He was lost and alone in the wild for fucking four days, growing weaker and finding it even more difficult to find his way out.

Thank god Cape found him.

But the more they talk, it's revealed that the men who tried to take Julian had gotten in bed with the Tortellis, selling half their businesses to them. And one of those was a building that Cape burned down in his efforts to find Julian. *Set fire to a whole building.* My mind can't comprehend it but something about imagining Cape lighting a match and walking away gives me goosebumps.

"How the fuck was I supposed to know?" Cape slams his fist on the counter.

"You couldn't have known," Julian says but his face is hard, and I can tell his mind is spinning.

"Well, they aren't going to stop there." Margo shakes her head. "You know what they are like. That's why we avoid them at

all costs.”

“I know. I know.” Cape runs a hand through his hair. “Fuck! I shouldn’t have gone down there. I’ve been out of it for too long. This is the same mistake I made—”

“I would have died if you didn’t find me,” Julian says, not letting Cape finish his sentence. “We’ll deal with whatever comes.”

“Yeah? How many people were in the warehouse when it blew up?”

Margo chews her cheek but eventually answers. “Three.”

“Then that’s three lives, on me.”

“No, it’s not. It’s on the Tortellis,” Julian says.

I take a deep breath, trying to resist the urge to reach out and hug Cape. I know that if Julian had let him finish he would have compared this to whatever he did that got Madison killed. But no matter how similar, a selfish part of me doesn’t care about the repercussions. He got Julian home safe, and I don’t care what it took. I wish he wasn’t being so hard on himself.

“Can we fix it?” I speak for the first time since we entered the kitchen. “Can we make amends? They are in trade too, right?”

Margo tilts her head at me. “Oh, Peach. I wish we could but that’s not how these people work.”

Julian’s jaw tics. “They don’t trade the same thing as we do.”

“What...” I don’t like the way he’s become tense. “What do they trade?”

“You don’t want—”

“People,” Cape says over Julian. “Women.”

My stomach turns. They traffic women? As in sex trade?

Now I’m really glad Cape set fire to one of their buildings. He should set fire to all of them. Am I being a hypocrite when the family I’m in love with deals guns? Maybe, but it doesn’t sicken

me the way the idea of women being passed around and subjected to abuse does. I know first hand what that feels like and I don't wish it on anyone.

My chest starts to feel tight and I excuse myself to go upstairs. I turn on the faucet for a much needed bath and I stay there for the next hour. As much as my mind reels, thinking about the women, my body is on another level. I'm sore in all the right places and I examine my body.

I don't have a single bruise and I swear I see definition in my muscles. The slightest flex reveals a tone I don't remember ever having. I wish that every woman had the privilege I've found myself in. With the strength to emotionally and physically protect themselves.

Most of the time, I think our inability to not fight back comes from being afraid. I don't think I am anymore. When you live in that type of abuse, you don't know what peace feels like. But now that I have it, I value it so immensely that I won't ever let anyone take it from me again.

I feel sorry for the next man that tries it with me because I will kill him. I will kill him with the rage of the millions of women who can't kill their own abuser. I will do it for me and for them.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Cape and Julian appear with a large box as I'm getting dressed. They take up the door frame and don't even try to look ashamed as they eye me up and down in my underwear. I don't make a move to cover my breasts—they have seen them front and center—and I tilt my head, liking the way they look at me.

“Already wanting more?” Julian smirks. “I would think you would need to recuperate.”

“And let her close up?” Cape steps in, handing his brother the empty box. “I think we need to keep her open for us.”

I begin to throb faster than I thought possible. I may be sore, but my body craves the source of its pain like a sadist. I tilt my head back to look up at Cape as he licks his lips. I turn to jelly at his stare and I go slack like a rag doll as he picks me up, my breasts pushed against his chest.

He sets me on the cool counter and nestles himself between my legs. He's already hard and I can distinctly remember just what his cock feels like inside of me. It has me edging off the counter towards him, and Julian sighs.

“We were supposed to take her back to my house,” he says but tosses the box and comes to stand beside Cape. He wraps a hand behind the back of my neck and reaches in front of Cape to press his lips to mine. He tastes like caramel coffee and somehow still smells like that expensive cologne of pine.

I feel silly wanting this when the business is in turmoil. Does it make me seem like I don't care? Especially the way I excused

myself? I do care. I care about how it affects them, if they have to go back there, and the lives lost. I especially care about how Cape is handling the backlash from his actions. I still need to tell him that I'm grateful he found Julian.

But damn it if my body isn't thrumming with the need to feel both of them inside me.

"Is everything going to be okay?" I ask, a little breathy as Julian's lips trail down my neck, and Cape's hand grips my thigh, tugging me closer to his erection.

"Everything's going to be fine, baby," Julian purrs.

"What about the lost..." I struggle as Cape's finger slips into my underwear. "The lost product."

"It's just a drop in the ocean. We'll recover." Julian runs his tongue along my neck, seeming completely disinterested in the business that affords them such a lavish lifestyle, and even though I know they mentioned they had millions of dollars in that warehouse.

"Do you guys have to go to El Cuco?" I lean into Julian as Cape tugs off my underwear. I know they have a business to run, but I just got Julian back and, who knows what will happen with the Tortellis now that they are being targeted?

"Why? Would you miss us?" Cape asks and drags a finger between my wet lips. I arch and shudder while Julian cups my breast.

I nod weakly, shimmying closer to his touch.

"With all the drama in El Cuco, Ma thinks we should pull out." Julian appeases me by answering my question, unlike Cape.

My brows draw together even though my eyes flutter shut as Julian rubs my nipple. "You're not going to do the business anymore?"

They both chuckle, and I open my eyes. They look at me like I'm a silly girl who doesn't understand.

“What?”

Julian tilts his head and kisses my cheek. “El Cuco is only one of forty outposts. The business isn’t going anywhere.”

My mouth falls open a little. If there were millions of dollars in El Cuco and I times that by forty? The business is way bigger than I thought.

“And to ease your worries, we rarely have to make appearances. El Cuco has been a pain in the ass from the get go though. Things will be more tame going forward.”

“So I don’t have to worry about either of you getting shot?”

Cape growls, “I might shoot Julian if he doesn’t shut up and let me fuck you.” He quickly undoes his belt and whips it from his waist.

His pants are down before I blink and I barely get out my last question before he spreads me wider.

“So we don’t have to worry about the Tortellis?”

Cape pushes inside of me then, and a moan escapes me as he fills me up. He’s more in control than me though, and he grabs my chin to look him in the eyes. I can’t tell if the fire in them is from my pussy clenching around him or what he says.

“*You* don’t have to worry. What I’ve done isn’t going to touch you. I’ll protect you with my life and fucking bleed out before I let my actions hurt you.”

I know what he’s referring to even if that’s not what I meant by my question. I want to tell him that I’m not worried about befalling the same fate as Madison, but he slides out so potently and then drives back into me, still holding my jaw and staring into my eyes. I can’t form words. I can’t think of words. I can’t think at all.

Everything I feel is primal instinct and I latch my arms around him, pulling him deeper inside of me. He hisses in pleasure and grabs my ass cheeks, picking me up, and I don’t

hesitate to wrap my legs around him. He easily lifts me up and down on the shaft of his cock, and I loosen my legs so I can feel the full length.

Suddenly, Julian snares the back of my hair and gently tugs my head back. He sticks his tongue in my mouth while his brother fucks me, and I moan into his mouth. Julian slips a hand around my waist and nestles between me and Cape, finding my clit with the pads of his fingertips.

A fresh wave of wetness slicks around Cape's cock as Julian expertly rubs me in sync with Cape's thrusting.

"Fuck, you're still so tight," Cape pants. "Want to feel, brother?"

Yes, please.

Within seconds I feel Julian's cock against my ass, and then Cape lifts me off him and passes me to Julian. I'm only empty for a second before Julian is in me and I throb violently. They both fill me so perfectly yet I can tell the subtle difference between them.

The head of Cape's cock tickles an unreachable part inside me while Julian's has a thicker edge to his underside that hits another precious spot. They are both immense but have different advantages.

Julian sits down on the edge of the bathtub with my legs wrapped around him, and Cape comes beside us. I'm at the perfect height to put Cape in my mouth and so I do. He holds the base of himself steady while Julian pumps into me, and I suck him up and down, running my tongue along him and finding that edge on the top of him.

He moans as I take him into the back of my throat and just knowing I'm getting him off makes my clit hot. I reach a hand to touch myself but Julian grabs my wrist.

"You think I'm going to fuck you, and you're going to have to touch yourself?" He puts my hand down and he rubs me instead.

“You will never have to give yourself an orgasm as long as I’m alive.”

The way he touches me is so in tune to what I want that I think he knows what works better than I do anyways. I’m able to focus on Cape and how he feels in my mouth, every pulse and the salty taste that comes from his tip. I suck to get more of it and I don’t even have to worry about my own pleasure as Julian slips in and out.

I’m already about to cum and Julian picks up speed. I tighten around him, not wanting to give in so easily.

“Don’t fight it, baby. I’m ready to feel you,” his voice is all gravel.

Cape wraps a hand in my hair and pulls me closer, tucking his cock in the back of my throat and I whimper around it, vibrating with barely contained need. I don’t last much longer and my scream is muffled by his length.

Cape twitches and his cum shoots down the back of my throat, right as Julian reaches his own cock as deep as it can go. He pulsates and the movement draws out my orgasm, feeling him fill me up. I’m full from top to bottom.

I sag as Cape slides out of my mouth and I gulp quickly so I can catch my breath.

“You swallow like you like it.” Cape grins.

I blush and look down. “I do like it,” I mumble.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Julian says and gathers my hair behind me, giving a slight tug till I’m forced to look up at him. His skin is dewy and his bottom lip is swollen from the way he bit it during climax. I can’t resist the urge to kiss it, so I do, feeling brave and loose. He smirks into my kiss and nips at my lip. His perfect teeth tug and suck until my lips are just as swollen as his.

“I thought we were moving her into your house, brother?” Cape drawls sarcastically and zips up his pants.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Everything I've acquired barely fits in the box. Julian effortlessly sets it in his room and then sighs when Cape complains.

"Why does she stay in your room?"

"Because it's my house." Julian side steps him in the hallway and jogs down the stairs. Cape follows him, and I follow Cape.

"You don't think that's a little selfish?" Cape isn't whining, he's getting under Julian's skin and I try to hide a smile. I'm glad that this morning's news hasn't wrecked his mood.

"I think letting you move in is the opposite of selfish," Julian hollers ahead of Cape from the kitchen.

When we round the corner, Julian opens the fridge and starts pulling out things. A package of bacon, a carton of eggs, butter, and bread. He has a pep in his step and seems to be moving to unheard music.

"No, that's just being good family. It's selfish that you would expect Hailey to stay in your room." Cape winks at me and pulls out a chair for me.

Julian raises his brows in exasperation and pulls out a pan from one of the sleek cabinets beneath him. "Well ultimately, it is up to Hailey."

Cape takes the seat next to me and grabs the bottom of mine, pulling me closer, and I brace against the counter to catch myself from falling out of my chair. He smiles that cheshire grin of his, and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Wouldn’t you rather stay in my room?” he asks.

My eyes widen. I can’t make that choice. No matter who I choose, someone’s feelings will get hurt.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to answer that.” Cape purses his lips. “I know it’s mine.”

“Hah!” Julian throws down a piece of bacon into the hot pan. It immediately sizzles and my mouth waters. “I didn’t say you could have a room. You get the couch, and I doubt she wants to sleep on the couch.”

I giggle, and Cape slowly turns to look at his brother, daggers shooting from his eyes.

“I am not sleeping on the couch,” he growls.

Julian’s lip quirks. “I guess you better buy a new house within the next few hours then.” He shrugs theatrically.

“You’re pushing me,” Cape warns.

“You started it.” Julian cracks an egg, unperturbed.

But after a moment of Cape staring him down, Julian looks up and sags. “I’m kidding. I wouldn’t want you leaving a dent in the couch anyway.”

“That’s what I thought.” Cape raises his chin. “I’ll take the left side of the bed, closest to the door.”

“I thought you wanted a room?” Julian sighs. “Now you want a spot on the bed like a guard dog?”

I snort. Oh, my god. I smack a hand over my mouth but another snort breaks through. Julian pauses with the butter in his hand, and Cape slowly twists to gape at me.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I try but the words only come out through giggles.

“Do I seem like a dog to you?” Cape leans back and rests an arm over the back of his chair.

I can’t help myself. “I mean, kind of...”

Julian howls, slapping the butter on the counter, and Cape rolls his eyes.

“I think she means *loyal, loving, protective...*” Cape emphasizes.

Tears spring at the corners of Julian’s eyes. “Yeah, like a dog!”

Cape grunts, leans over the counter, and smacks Julian on the side of the head.

“What the fuck...” Julian rubs his head but is still smiling and points a finger at Cape. “You get that shit from Ma.”

“If you mean her inability to put up with bullshit, then yeah.”

Julian shakes his head and looks at me, a wry smile at the corner of his mouth. “You want pancakes, baby? I’ll put whatever you want in them if you call him a dog again.”

Cape glares at me with a side eye, and I bite my lip.

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

“I’ll still put whatever you want in them.”

I’ve had four blueberry pancakes and probably all the bacon. Julian made a really good spread, and I surmise that he got *that* from Margo. I almost feel bad that we aren’t at Margo’s with Marney. I hope that I get to see her just as much now that I’m living at Julian’s. I make a mental note to plan a sleepover with her, even if that is childish. I never got to have sleepovers and I don’t think Marney will have a problem with it.

When we finish eating, the boys take a shower, and I gravitate back to the piano. I play a sad song that was always my go to but it doesn’t do much for me like it used to, and I find myself yawning. Probably a food coma. I slink over to the couch with the intent of just resting my eyes.

I’ve never been so content.

Just knowing that Julian and Cape, two men that would never hurt me and would protect me at all costs, are up stairs, and Margo and Marney are down the street, fills a hole in me that used to ache so much I would have to turn off the pain and

go numb. I clutch my wrist with my bracelet against my chest and lay down.

I think of the piano and how it will always be there for me to play whenever I want, and I smile despite my worry about learning how to ride a motorcycle.

I don't intend to, but I fall asleep, excited about my new life and everything to come.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

When I wake up it's dark and there is a thick knitted blanket wrapped around me. How long was I asleep? I feel so disoriented, and who is yelling?

I sit up, clutching the blanket and squinting to read the roman numeral clock Julian has hanging above the fireplace. If it's correct then it's nine p.m., and I've slept through the whole day and evening.

There's a glass of water on the table in front of me that looks enticing, but the yelling seems more pressing. It's far away. Out back maybe?

As I make my way through the house it gets louder, and I can make out that it's Julian, outside and arguing with someone else. When I make it to the kitchen I pause behind the wall so they won't see me through the glass doors.

It takes me a second but I register that it's Dillon he's arguing with. Feeling braver, I step around the corner. Outside the glass they are just a foot apart from each other on the deck. Dillon is in a hoodie over his running pants while Julian is dressed in a button down. The two of them look like a businessman reprimanding a kid on his property. An indignant kid.

"Get over *it!*" Julian shouts but doesn't encroach on Dillon.

"It's not right!" Dillon is shaking with anger but his voice comes out whiny.

What is his problem now?

He takes his phone out of his pocket and starts dialing someone. The police? For what? Does he ever take a chill pill? Maybe Margo should force him onto medication.

“What’s going on?”

I nearly jump out of my skin at Cape’s voice behind me.

“I don’t know,” I say, gripping my chest and turning around.

Cape has a big paper bag with the Harley Davidson logo on it in his hand and he absently hands it to me, looking over my head and stepping around me.

When he pulls open the door the yelling halts.

“What the fuck is going on?” Cape barks.

Julian runs a hand through his hair and sighs, pushing past Cape and coming inside.

“Who are you calling?” Cape asks Dillon, who now has the phone pressed to his ear.

“Margo,” He seethes.

Cape makes a scoffing sound and turns in the doorway, his brows raised at Julian.

Julian grinds his jaw and then gives me a sympathetic look.

“Just shut the door,” he tells Cape.

But before anything can be decided, Dillon saunters past Cape and starts yelling again.

“You’re supposed to at least have some sort of up standing reputation.”

“Reputation?” Cape swings the door shut and cocks his head.

He’s calm for the moment, but I worry that’s not going to last long. He raises a brow in amusement and Dillon turns on him.

“We live here under the guise that we’re just a normal family but what are the neighbors going to think about an underage girl living with the two of you?”

“I don’t give a fuck what the neighbors think,” Cape says.

“She’s not underage anymore,” Julian supplies, rubbing his temples and seeming over the conversation.

“Did he really come over here to give us a lecture on how we live our life?” Cape gives a pointed look to Julian, crossing his arm over his chest.

How are we still on this? I *am* eighteen and it’s not like I’m going to go knock on the doors of the neighbors and introduce myself. Why does he even care anyways?

“Why isn’t she answering?!” Dillon jams his finger at his phone.

“Maybe because it’s almost midnight,” Julian mumbles.

I guess the clock is wrong and I slept longer than I thought.

“You have to stop this shit, Dillon.” Julian tries to put a hand over the phone in his hand.

Dillon rips his hand back erratically, and Julian puts his hands up. “Come on, man. We’re brothers.”

“You haven’t been listening to me.” Cape lunges at Dillon and plucks the phone from his hands. “He’s not one of us.”

“Don’t say that,” Julian’s tone is sad but he gives Cape a look like *shut up*.

Dillon turns red. “Give me my fucking phone!”

“Mommy isn’t going to do shit.” Cape pockets the phone.

“Somethings wrong! She always answers!”

“It’s midnight,” Julian says again.

“She leaves her ringer on for me,” Dillon snaps at him.

Cape’s eyes narrow and he takes an intimidating step towards Dillon. “Why would she answer your calls at midnight? And before you fucking lie, don’t think I haven’t seen the holes you put in her bedroom wall.”

Dillon's eyes widen.

"What holes?" Julian asks.

Cape ignores him and continues. "You want to tell me what really happened because I know the bullshit Ma spewed is just that, bullshit."

The veins in Cape's neck have appeared, and I take a step back, still clutching the bag he handed me.

"It was an accident." Dillon's eyes flick to me.

If he thinks I said anything, then he's mistaken and the only thing he's done by looking at me is throw me under the bus. I was listening to Margo and trying to keep the peace but I guess it doesn't matter because he just keeps causing drama.

"Hailey?" Julian looks at me, and I bite my lip.

"Margo said that I shouldn't mention it to you guys." I wring my hands through the loops of the bag.

"Shouldn't mention what?" Cape asks.

I give Dillon a searing look. This whole thing could have been avoided if he didn't come over here. Now I have to explain what I saw when tensions are already high. If I tell them my theory that he has a crush on their mother, I'm sure Cape will strangle him. Then again, maybe Dillon needs a wake up call. He's been nothing but unhinged since I've met him and what if he is obsessed with Margo like Marney's friend's creepy brother?

Maybe if I throw *him* under the bus he will stop meddling.

"When you went to get Julian from El Cuco, I caught him in —" I start.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Three pops suddenly go off and everyone freezes.

They came from somewhere outside, muffled like they came from down the way, but I can't tell in which direction. They kind of remind me of the Fourth of July.

“Fireworks?” I ask, my lips pulled down.

“Those are gun shots.” Julian springs into action and spins. He goes to a little sleek table by the door and opens a drawer. When he turns back around my heart speeds up at the sight of a gun in his hand.

He motions for Cape to take it, but Cape reaches around his back and pulls a similar one out. “Already ready, brother.”

Where did that come from? Does he always have a gun on him? I’ve never noticed before.

“What’s going on?” my voice cracks.

“Unless Ms. Milton shot her husband, then we have a problem.” Julian tugs the bag from my hand and it falls to the floor. He pushes the gun in my hand and I back up, holding it out in my palm. What the fuck does he expect me to do with a gun? I’ve never even done target practice. I don’t know the first thing about how to hold it or how many bullets it has.

“Did that come from *our* house?” Dillon’s angry shade of tomato has faded and now he’s a sickly pale that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“I don’t know how to use this!” I screech, feeling suddenly panicked. Why would there be gunshots coming from Margo’s?

“I told you something was wrong! She always answers! Fuck!” Dillon tugs at his hair. “Marney!”

My stomach twists, and Cape grabs the gun from my hand and situates it so my finger is on the side of the trigger. “Point and shoot,” he growls. “Go to the first level—”

“No.” Julian grabs Cape’s shoulder, looking behind me and examining the house. “We can’t leave her. They might already be here.”

“Fuck,” Cape huffs and suddenly I’m hoisted up, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. I flail with the gun, terrified that I’m going to accidentally fire it.

“Who?!” Dillon shouts, and both Cape and Julian wince at his volume.

“Quiet!” Julian hisses.

“Stay here and find out.” Cape sneers, and then we are out the back door.

Julian has grabbed another gun, from where I have no clue, and he has it aimed with both hands. He leads the front as we creep down the stairs to the dark beach. My arms are latched around Cape’s neck and I try to angle the gun down so it’s not pointed at Dillon who is taking up the rear.

Dillon is jittery, sweat beading at his forehead, and he’s looking over the rail, trying to see down the beach. He doesn’t make a move to rush ahead of us though. His eyes are wild with worry and I’m sure my expression isn’t that much different.

I whisper into Cape’s ear. “Do you really think it came from the house?”

“This isn’t a neighborhood where you would usually hear gunshots.” Cape leans his head closer to me and his voice is husky and tight. “And we’re the only ones with a current target on our backs.”

“Tortellis?”

He doesn’t answer me and instead growls. The vibrations hum through his chest to mine and I try to let it soothe my rapidly beating heart.

When we make it half way down the beach, sticking close to the half wall like I did with Marney, my hands are so slick that I have to keep readjusting the gun.

“We should call the police,” Dillon says, when the Milton’s security light comes on.

“Stupid,” Cape hisses. “Someone probably already did. We need to get there first.”

I gulp, not wanting to know why we have to get there first.

“Give me my phone.” Dillon gets in front of Cape.

Before I can worry about an altercation, Cape lifts his arm that is holding the gun and brings it down on Dillon’s head—hard.

I gasp.

Dillon blinks once, twice, and then he crumples to the ground.

“Fuck.” Julian spins around. “What the fuck did you do?”

“We don’t have time for him right now.” Cape steps over Dillon’s body.

Julian shakes his head but turns back around, continuing to lead the way. I gape at Dillon in the sand. He looks like a homeless man taking a nap, bunched up against the wall. If I wasn’t already taking this seriously, I am now. Part of me hoped that maybe the shots came from somewhere else, that the boys were just being cautious, but to just knock Dillon out without hesitation?

I grip tighter onto Cape.

When we reach the base of the steps to Margo’s, he sets me down, grabbing my chin with one hand. “Point and shoot,” he reminds me.

“I can’t.” Tears have started falling down my cheeks.

“You have to.” He shakes me. “You have to fight. You have to *want* to survive if something happens. None of that ‘*she*’ is peace bullshit.”

I suck in a breath. God, he’s right. I’ve completely forgotten about how badly I want to live. I swipe at my face with my free hand and nod.

“Good. Stay ten feet behind me.” He turns without my acknowledgment, and my hand shakes. My whole body feels cold without his arms around me and now I have to stay ten feet back?

I don't aim the gun as I follow, worried that I'll accidentally shoot Cape, and instead keep it at my side. I walk on wobbly legs, trying to get a hold of myself. Didn't I just promise myself that I would kill the next man who tried to hurt me? And if this is the Tortellis, then I want them dead all the same. Anyone who hurts a woman deserves to die.

I hang back by a chaise, waiting. When Julian opens the french doors they let out a little click that has every muscle in my body tensing. They both creep in and scan their guns around like a very small SWAT team. The lights are off and there's no sound.

My gut twists and I switch the gun between my hands again, unable to hold onto it while my palms are sweating. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing that the house is silent. Maybe it *was* random fireworks. Or maybe Marney and Margo are lying lifeless in their beds as the blood soaks the sheets.

I gulp and shake the thought from my head. This isn't the movies. I need to get it together.

Cape waves me into the house and I don't hesitate to scurry across the deck. He puts a hand on the top of my head when I reach him and he firmly pushes. Confused at first, I then squat, mirroring him. We walk low to the ground and clear the kitchen.

When we round the corner for the living room we all stop. Both Cape and Julian are squinting into the dark and have their eyes trained towards the stairs. I can't tell what they are looking at. It doesn't make sense. There are mounds at the bottom of the stairs, and my brain can't make sense of what the dark outlines are.

I jump when one of the mounds gasps.

"Shit," Julian curses at his regular tone and straightens. He immediately flicks a light switch, and all the air leaves my body.

There are four bodies in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, absolutely smothered in blood. And at the bottom of the pile, a lock of blonde hair peeks out, stained red.

“Marney!” I scream.

The body that gasped is Margo, who is on top, and she chokes, reaching a hand up.

“Get me up!” she croaks, and Cape springs forward.

The other two bodies are men I’ve never seen before. They’re dressed in jeans and black shirts and are... dead? Oh god, is Marney dead beneath them?

I drop my gun on the floor and go forward, getting on my knees and desperately trying to shove off the men as Cape helps Margo up. My knees hit lukewarm blood and soak into my pants.

“Are you hurt?” Julian asks Margo as he tries to help me.

“I rolled down the fucking stairs, of course I’m hurt. Get Marney!”

“Are there others?” Cape holds his gun up and aims at the top of the stairs.

“I don’t fucking know!” she bellows. “Just get her. Get her. Get her.” She starts crying.

Cape shoves his gun in the back of his jeans and pulls one of the men off of Marney, tossing him to the side like he weighs nothing. Julian heaves the other, and I can’t breathe. Marney’s eyes are closed and she’s so soaked in blood that her Bella Luna pajamas are matted to her skin.

I reach out to touch her and freeze, the bracelet she got me catching the light. I can’t know if she’s cold. I just can’t.

“I can’t tell if she’s shot,” Julian says.

“She’s not!” Margo yells. “They didn’t get a shot off before I got them but they had her, and when I shot them she went down with them.”

“Her head,” Cape says so lowly that I shiver.

My eyes slowly go up from her body and I quickly clutch my stomach to stop from throwing up.

Above her ear she's missing a large chunk of her pretty blonde hair, and I think I see skull.

"Hospital. Now!" Margo shoves Cape forward. "Get the car Julian! Now! Now! Now!"

All of them start swirling around me but I'm stuck, gaping at the hole in Marney's head. She has to be okay. She has to be. Death wouldn't want her. She wouldn't want to give Marney peace. Marney already has peace. A whole life full of it and more to come. With a shaky hand, I eye my bracelet and reach out to touch her neck. There has to be a pulse, right? Otherwise why would Margo want them to go to the hospital so fast?

It's like I'm moving in slow motion, my body refusing to have to do this, the bracelet glinting, and the smile she gave me at the nightclub replaying in my head. This can't be real. This can't—

A guttural wail from behind me has me jerk my hand back and I'm pulled from my slow moving world.

"No!" Dillon crashes down to his knees beside me and shoves me roughly to the left. I brace against the floor, my palms slipping in the pool of blood.

He's making noises, screeches and wails but no words as he grabs at Marney, sliding her to him and pulling her up onto his thighs. She hangs loosely in his arms as he snivels over her. He's saying something unintelligible as he chokes.

The anguish on his face has me start to hyperventilate and I can barely hear Margo.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Oh, god. They were going to take her. I didn't mean for her to fall," Margo rambles.

Dillon pulls his sister's body against his chest and screams, his knuckles turn white as he grips her.

I'm transfixed, unable to look away at the tragedy playing before me and I wish the fly in my ear would stop. Hands shake me, and the fly buzzing becomes words.

“Get up. We’re going to the hospital.”

“But she’s—”

“She’s not dead.” Julian grips me by the arm and wrenches me up. As soon as I’m stable, Cape reappears with a towel and holds it against Marney’s head.

“Give her to me,” Cape shouts.

Dillon wails in his direction, gripping his sister tighter and the towel falls away.

“God damn it! Ma, help me!” Cape snaps, and Margo too seems to wake up from a trance.

“Dillon, baby... We have to get her to the hospital,” Her voice shakes, and I realize I’ve never seen Margo so scared.

“*Youuu...*” Dillon cries.

Cape grunts between his teeth, and Julian shoots a hand out, stopping him from bringing his gun down on Dillon’s head again. “Don’t!”

“What the fuck are we supposed to do? We have to get her to the hospital. He’s going Norman Bates.”

Julian’s rare vein bulges in his forehead and he kneels down.

“Dillon. Dillon.” He slaps him on the cheek. “Buddy, we have to go now. She’s alive, but she needs a doctor.”

Dillon stares Julian in the eyes, and I swear I see hatred, pure and uncontained hatred. It’s so misplaced. Julian didn’t do this. He’s trying to help. I hold my breath, waiting for the wail, the scream, the spit to fly at Julian, but then Dillon goes slack, his arms loosen around Marney, and Julian catches her.

Dillon’s pupils blot out his blue irises and his bottom lip falls open. He sits, smeared and covered in blood as Julian picks up Marney and rushes past me.

“Go!” Cape shouts at me, and I startle.

“What about you?”

His face hardens. "I have to clean this up." He motions to the bodies of the men lying lifeless with their gunshot wounds. "Ma, take her. Go."

And then Margo is dragging me out the front door.

Chapter Sixty

When me and Julian walk in the front door seventeen hours later, passing two cop cars out front, I'm in awe to see that there isn't a drop of blood. No splatters on the staircase and no bodies slumped at the base. Margo stayed at the hospital even though Marney is in the ICU, and they won't let anyone in her room.

I'm surprised that Dillon didn't snap out of it and come to the hospital. I'm anxious to see if he's okay. But instead, when we round a corner, there is just Cape and a heavy set man in a suit with pure white hair sitting in the dining room. He looks too expensive to be a detective, and I'm guessing an attorney.

"You okay to shower by yourself?" Julian whispers in my ear. His brows are drawn together and while he's still gorgeous, there are bags under his eyes and he hasn't unclenched his fist since he handed Marney's slack body over to a doctor.

I nod absently, eyeing Cape and the fresh clothes he's wearing. He looks like he does any other day and not like he didn't spend god knows how long cleaning up a bloodbath and getting rid of bodies. Did he dispose of them the same way he did my dad?

And where is Dillon?

"Um..." The white haired man turns. "Is this Hailey?"

"She's not a part of this, Alec," Cape growls.

"With all due respect Mr. Rossi, she's covered in blood and I wouldn't be as good as I am if I let her—"

“She’s. Not. Apart. Of. This,” he says again, and Alec’s cheeks deflate.

“If you’re sure.” He gulps.

“He’s sure,” Julian says, and I note the protective nature of his tone.

Julian kisses me on the cheek and then nods for me to go ahead, telling me the man is in fact their attorney and not to worry.

When I make it to my room I quickly realize that I have nothing here. All my clothes and soaps were taken to Julian’s.

I sigh and stand in the middle of the room, not wanting to sit and get dried blood on the bed. I know that I could use Marney’s shower and grab something of hers to wear, but it doesn’t feel right.

Maybe if I knew she was going to be okay, but I don’t. She had to have surgery for a brain bleed, and the doctor said there was swelling in her brain that was only making the situation worse. He said that he couldn’t say *definitively* if she was going to wake up. Margo excused herself to restroom after that. When I followed to check on her, I heard her throwing up. I didn’t blame her. I had and still do feel like I’m going to dry heave.

I know that there is no way Julian would let me walk back to his place alone and I don’t want to interrupt him. So, I make my way to Margo’s room, hoping that she’ll be okay with me using her shower because I can’t stand another second of having Tortellis blood on me. Even though Julian said that it probably wasn’t actually them but two of their men. I know that some of it is Marney’s blood though and I can’t tamp down the anger that I feel knowing her blood is mixed with theirs.

I want to wonder what they were doing with her anyway. Margo said they were taking her but I know better than to let my mind wander in such dark places, because they didn’t get her. The people who traffic women did *not* get her. I remind myself this as I turn on Margo’s shower and strip off my stiff clothes.

I turn the water as hot as it can go, hoping it can burn more than my own boiling blood. It doesn't. I'm actually convinced that the water is evaporating on my skin from how angry I am. It's the injustice of it. She didn't stand a chance against those men. I don't care how many karate classes or self defense tips she's gotten from Cape. They were huge, probably in their thirties, and she's a thirteen-year-old girl who can't weigh more than a hundred pounds.

And they were just going to take her, force her into whatever they wanted, hurt her and ruin her the same way I've been ruined but worse. And now? Now she may never wake up. She won't ever get to enjoy the life that was taken from her.

When I'm sure I don't have a single drop of blood left on my body, I wrap myself in a towel and tiptoe to Margo's closet. I hate to take anything without asking but unless I want to walk back to Julian's in a towel, I don't have a choice.

Her closet is in the back of the bathroom with two wide french doors. I've been in there once before, and in the middle is one of those beautiful islands with claw feet and drawers full of jewelry and scarves and literally everything I've never seen Margo wear.

I pull open the door and am met with total darkness. I sigh and feel around for the light, clutching my towel with one hand. When I finally flick on the recessed lighting, I jump with a scream and try to back out. My towel gets caught on the door handle and I stumble, falling back on my ass.

Dillon is tied up, bound by rope at the ankles, knees, and wrists and handcuffed to the bottom of the island. He has tight duct tape wrapped around his mouth. He tries to yell through the tape but it's just a convoluted muffle that sounds like it's coming from a throat that has been screaming for hours, ragged and raw.

I clamor to grab the towel, all my private bits on display, even though his eyes are strictly on my face and pleading.

“Dillon...” I wrap the towel over my body and crawl towards him. He tries to yell again, his cheeks pudgy over the sides of the tape, face red and blotchy. His eyes are bloodshot and his wrists are raw, I presume from trying to get free.

“What...What happened?” I kneel next to him and try ripping at the tape. I can’t get my fingers between it and his skin and it won’t budge. I desperately try to find the end, a flap, something I can use to unravel it.

“I’m trying,” I say as he wriggles, still trying to say something but his throat is too hoarse.

“Stop.”

My hands freeze behind Dillon’s head and I turn quickly.

“Cape! I don’t know why he’s... I just found him...”

“Stop.” Cape’s jaw is set and it takes me a minute to comprehend what he’s saying.

“Stop?” I let my hands fall, and Dillon tries to scream again. “But...” I glance between the two of them. My wet hair is a mess around my shoulders and my towel is barely holding up. I’m on my knees and I shift to my side, catching Dillon’s eyes. “But someone...”

“I stuck him in here till everything is cleared up.”

“What? Why?” I stand, trying to put some distance between me and Dillon. The look in his eyes making my stomach knot.

Julian suddenly appears behind Cape. “Are you okay? I couldn’t get rid of Alec. Fuck, I thought something—” His eyes finally land on Dillon. “Why is Dillon tied up?”

Cape huffs and steps around me. He squats in front of Dillon and easily, but roughly, rips the tape. He turns and puts his hands up as Dillon takes a ragged breath.

“I’m going to fucking ruin this whole family,” Dillon seethes. “You’re all fucking insane. Is my sister okay?! I should be at the hospital!” He yanks at the cuffs and they rattle. “You fucked up

again and this time it's my sister who has to pay for it?" he snarls and shimmies till his feet are against the island. He pushes and pulls at the cuffs. They cut into his skin, but he doesn't stop, like a wolf trying to eat off its own arm. His rant doesn't stop either.

"I'm going to the police and if they don't believe me, I'm going to the FBI. Margo would have let the business go when Luca died if it wasn't for you two. When are you guys going to get it through your thick fucking skulls that what you're doing is dangerous? My parents! Your fiance!" he spits in Cape's direction. "Now my sister? And if you think your precious little teenager is going to survive, you're just flat out stupid. And Margo lets you two get away with it, *get away with murder*, and I'm not going to let you drag her down with you. Just wait till I fucking get out of here!"

I gape at Dillon in a stupor and from my peripheral Cape raises his brows at me like, *you see what I'm dealing with here?* And I do see. Dillon has completely lost his mind, granted he's entitled to, considering he's probably mad with worry about Marney and has been cuffed and gagged in a closet.

Dillon's eyes are wild, and I would compare them to the eyes of a mental patient who wants out of his little barred room. One who would set fire to the building if he ever did get out. Which doesn't bode well for the situation.

"You didn't think to reason with him before you stashed him in a closet?" Julian says and steps past us. "He probably just wants to be with his sister..."

"Fuck you!" Dillon snarls when Julian squats near him.

"Yeah, how's that working out for you?" Cape drawls and leans against the door frame.

Julian rolls his eyes and turns back to Dillon. "Buddy, I want to untie you. I can take you to the hospital. They have Marney in the ICU. She hit her head pretty badly but is going to be okay."

I gulp at his lie. The doctor didn't say *definitively*.

“But you have to stop with this whole idea of sinking the ship because Cape *will* leave you here to rot.”

Dillon laughs, a full hearty laugh that turns my blood cold. “When Margo finds me she’ll untie me. She’s not going to let you —”

“Oh, and she’s going to let you put her sons in jail? I don’t think so,” Cape says. “Why are you so sure she’s going to side with you anyways, huh?” Cape pushes off the wall and prowls towards him. He towers over Dillon like a predator that has pinned its prey.

“Because she loves me,” Dillon’s voice has turned to ice and he enunciates each word.

“More than her flesh and blood?” Cape asks, not realizing what Dillon actually means. My mouth goes dry and I suck in my lips. Does he really think Margo loves him more than a son?

“Don’t say that.” Julian frowns at his brother. “That’s fucked up. He’s our brother, blood or not.”

“Did you not just hear what he said?”

“He’s just freaking out about Marney. Once he sees she’s alive, we’ll be good.” Julian makes to untie him. “Besides, we can’t really keep him tied up in here forever. Give me the key to the cuffs.”

“No. We’ll figure something out but we don’t have any leverage right now. If we let him go he’s going to go straight to the police.”

“Yes, the fuck I am.” Dillon rattles his wrists again.

“You’re not helping your case,” Julian hisses at him and sighs.

“You see the dilemma,” Cape says.

“Damn it, Dillon. Why are you being like this? You need to be there for your sister,” Julian says.

“Go fuck yourself.”

Julian clenches and unclenches his fist, seemingly being wavered by Cape. But he can't agree to leave him tied up. Dillon's sister could die in the hospital, he deserves to be there, even if he is out of his mind. And he looks really uncomfortable. This probably isn't going to go over well but I don't feel like I have a choice.

"You do have leverage," I say.

Chapter Sixty-One

Dillon has a black eye now but at least he's not tied up. Julian dropped him off at the hospital with Margo while I watched Cape demolish the punching bag in the workout room.

I told them what I saw and heard the night that Dillon put the holes in Margo's wall. That he was in his underwear, and Margo told him he was inappropriate. I also told them how he acted, begging on the floor, and what Marney said about her thinking Dillon has a crush on Margo. It did *not* go over well.

Cape punched Dillon and I don't know if he would have stopped if I hadn't grabbed his arm. Dillon didn't admit to it but he sure shut up about bringing down the roof when Julian told him exactly what would happen to Margo if Dillon opened his big mouth. That there was no way to bring down him and Cape without taking Margo with them.

I'm curled up on the couch, staring at the piano while Cape paces the house. I'm sure he would probably feel better if he could go for a ride on his motorcycle but I know he doesn't want to leave me alone with everything going on.

At this point, I don't know what's eating him the most. The news about Dillon, Marney's status, or the thing that he hasn't brought up but I know he's thinking. That again, what he did resulted in a retaliation that got someone he loves hurt. I don't even want to know how he would be if Marney had died. I don't want to know how *I* would be if she died. I'm hoping with everything in me that she will be okay because I can't lose my new sister right when I just got her.

I keep thinking about the blood. How much of it was hers? Too much? There was no way to tell with two other men being shot. And Margo, my god. I don't know what I would have done if I had been in the house, but she shot both of them like a badass and saved Marney from whatever fate they were taking her to. I hate to say that Marney having her brain swelling is better, but anything would be better than being sold off to be raped.

My eyes flick to Cape who has paused by the fireplace. It's lit as it's finally getting a little chilly, and he's staring into the flames. The golden light licks across his face accentuating the sharp lines of his jaw and his full lips. Every muscle in his arms is tense and the flames create delectable shadows.

I feel myself warm even more than the fire. Is it possible that he is even more enticing when upset? I know that history tells me the last thing I should be is attracted to a man when he's not in a good mood, but Cape has a rage I *want* to feel. Since I'm not worried about him hurting me, all that is left is arousal.

I sit up and make my way to him, resting a hand on his forearm. His skin is scorching, and I can't tell if it's from being so close to the fire or if he's just that worked up. Either way, I melt at the contact and slip under his arm to look up at him.

It takes a second for his piercing gaze to register me and then he relaxes his jaw. He roughly wraps his arm around me and pulls me against him. Within a second my body is hot and I find myself tilting my head back, hoping he will kiss me with whatever fierceness that is coursing through his veins.

"You're not safe with me," he says instead.

I've been more safe with him than I have ever been in my life, and his tone, so vehement, cracks something inside of me.

"Then I don't want to be safe."

His stare ignites and he tightens his grip on me. "You still want to die?"

"No!" I pull at his hold on me but it's useless.

I'm annoyed that he would jump to me wanting to die again. I'm past that. Especially with Marney in the hospital. I've gained a perspective that I didn't think possible. I used to think that death was a way out but if I don't want that for Marney, how can I want it for myself?

"The people I love die." He shakes me. "Madison and now Marney."

"Marney's not dead," I rattle.

"Not yet," he says between his teeth. "I don't think things through like Julian. I'm reckless. I'm an omen. You need to run."

"I'm not running." I shake my head in disbelief that he doesn't get it. "Whatever you do, whatever happens because of what you do, it won't be your hands that hurt me. And I'm not running away from that, from you, from the first man who has shown me that I don't need to be afraid."

I stare into his eyes, willing him to understand and I see the unjust hatred he has for himself. He might be reckless, there might be repercussions for his actions, but I don't for a second believe he would ever intentionally hurt the people he loves. If anything, I see the depths he would go to protect them. I see how much it's tearing him apart that Marney is laying in a hospital bed. And I see the pain he carries about Madison.

"You aren't an omen," I say. "You are my savior. You and Julian. Reckless or cautious, I don't care. I don't want to die anymore, but I will if I lose you, because I love you."

I don't get a second to register what I've just said before his lips crash down on mine. He kisses me with a demand that I supply with everything I have. He dips and his arms latch under my ass, hauling me up. I wrap my legs around him and slip my fingers into his hair as his tongue explores my mouth.

God, he's everything tempting that exists in violence.

He tears his mouth from mine for a second, his eyes looking around the room until he growls and takes me to the piano. He

sets me on the hood and pulls off his shirt. I grow wet at the sight of his skin, red from the fire and taut with muscle and tattoos. I run my hands down his warm chest as he leans me back and pulls off my pants.

My skin chills and I wrap my legs back around him, feeling his skin on my inner thighs. He puts both hands under my shirt, running his palms up my waist and pushing the fabric up. My nipples harden as he bears over me, putting his lips on one.

A whimper escapes me and I feel him grow inside his pants. I instantly start to throb and I fumble between us, trying to undo the button on his jeans. His breath is hot on my body, fevered as he kisses my skin, and I can't believe this kind of sex exists. The kind where I'm desperate for him to enter me and his eyes reflect the same and not in a way where he doesn't see me. His eyes reassure that he sees me, that I'm a person and he wants me not because I'm an easy target or because he can't control himself but because he wants to please me.

And I'm starving for it.

I arch my back, pressing myself against him, frustrated that I can't get his pants off. As if sensing this, he pulls away for a breath and expertly undoes his button. Before he can even put his lips back on me, I'm shimmying his pants down with my knees and grasping for the rim of his underwear. I think I scratch him with my nails but he doesn't flinch and instead grunts in pleasure.

"You think Julian will be mad if I fuck you on the gift he got you?" He smirks as he presses the tip of his cock against my clit.

"I think I'll be mad if you don't," I pant and pool at the feel of slickness on his tip. He drags himself up and down me, mixing our wetness, and I want him to fill me with his.

"Yeah? What if I don't? What are you going to do?" He leans down over me, holding himself just out of reach. He has that cocky smirk where his eyes glimmer.

I throw my head back and groan. I don't want to play this game. I just want him inside of me. What's with these two that they have mastered the tease to the point where it's painful?

"Are you just going to give up?" he breathes and kisses my neck, and I shudder with want. "I want to see you *mad*."

I snap my head back up. "I *am* mad."

"Doesn't seem like it." He gives a subtle shrug.

I wriggle beneath him and feel his cock again for a second before he pulls a little farther away and chuckles.

My blood sears my veins. I've never had to wait for a man to enter me, if anything I used to wish I could have a second to prepare myself and now when I really want it, I'm being toyed with.

I'll show him mad.

I narrow my eyes and wrap my arms around him, grabbing a hold of his back and pulling myself against him. Our time in the workout room has benefited me and I can hold my weight easily. I hook a leg around his lower back and use my other to try and maneuver him up so I can get on top of him, even though that probably wouldn't be good for the piano.

It doesn't matter though because he doesn't budge, but I am latched to him like a koala and I have his cock pressed right where I want it. Now if I can just get him inside of me.

I slither against his body as he holds us up, feeling wild with need as I dig my nails into his back to keep a grip. I'm breaking out in a sweat from my efforts and his hot skin. I cry out in frustration when I feel a vibration coming from his chest. A silent chuckle that has me seething.

"Just fuck me!" I screech and dig my nails deeper into his hard back.

"All you had to do was ask," he growls.

He angles his torso just an inch and then he's inside of me. He stretches me in all the right places as he buries himself all the way until I can feel him against my clit. My whole body relaxes, finally getting what I want, and I let go.

Cape catches me with an arm around my back before I land less than gracefully on the piano and he guides me gently down.

"You're so fucking wet for me." He slides out and then in again causing me to moan. "Do you get this wet when it's just my brother?"

Julian's body flashes in my mind and a twinge of guilt comes over me for leaving him out, but it's quickly replaced by the flood of excitement I get. Julian turns me on just as much as I picture his cock in my mouth.

"Damn. I guess you do," Cape says, and I don't even care that he's referring to the way I throb and soak him at the mention of his brother. Maybe any other time, but not when he's slipping in and out of me and my clit rubs against him. It feels too good to feel anything else, especially embarrassment.

He cradles me from the hard piano beneath me and puts his lips on mine. His kiss is soft, less ravenous than before but still filled with passion. I take the opportunity to capture his bottom lip between my teeth and feel the fullness of it. He slowly pulls away and I draw out a tug, liking the way I have him snared.

He comes back in and grabs my own lip, sucking it between his and uses his free hand to cup my breast. The muscles in his arm are firm and latch onto them, feeling them flex as he pinches my nipple.

His abs roll as he slowly pumps in and out of me, more methodically than I thought Cape could be and I match his tempo easily. Every time he slides back into me he presses against my clit so sensually that it isn't long before I'm ready.

"Cape..." I breathe, trying to warn him.

"Let me feel you tighten that pussy," he pants into my mouth.

I squeeze my eyes shut, gripping him for dear life as I tense and come undone around his cock. Within a second, he pulsates and I feel him fill me up, deliciously holding himself deep inside of me. His body shudders and I feel it against my clit, extending my orgasm and making me dig my nails into his arm.

“Remind me to fuck you by myself sometimes,” Cape says.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Cape carries me up the stairs and tucks me into bed. I'm disappointed that he doesn't climb in with me but I assume that he still can't rest. At least Julian finally comes home and it isn't long after I hear the front door echo through the house, that he's in bed beside me. My eyelids are too heavy to open but I hum contently when his warm arms wrap around me and I feel his body press against mine.

"Are you asleep?" he whispers.

"Mmmm," I manage.

"You aren't worried about Dillon are you?"

I can't answer, my mind drifting off. I can't say that I don't have the capacity to worry about anything with him holding me.

"Everything is going to be okay," he hums in my ear. "And Marney will wake up. Sleep sweet, baby."

When I finally wake in the morning my skin is damp with sweat. I'm pinned between both Julian and Cape, both of them gripping me obsessively from the other. I gently tug an arm free to push a few sticky strands of hair from my forehead and turn to look at them.

A warmth spreads through my chest at the sight of Cape. His face is calm, the harsh line he typically sports between his brows is smooth and his lips are neutral instead of turned down. His chest has a steady rhythm that I find myself matching and I think that he's at least at peace while he sleeps.

Julian though, has his lips pursed and I wonder if he's having a nightmare. I know that he bears the weight of his decisions. No one can be that sure and he's the one who untied Dillon. I'm glad that he did, but he must be worried that he's made the wrong choice if his comment last night is any indication.

He twitches slightly and his arm around my waist tightens. Almost immediately, Cape's grip pulls me back the half an inch Julian moved me. Julian rolls in his sleep, turning to face me, but his eyes don't open and he slings a leg over mine.

I quietly huff.

While I love how it feels to be between both of them, they run as hot as a furnace and I want to call Margo and see if there is any news about Marney.

A tendril of dread snakes through my gut and knots itself up. Surely, if anything had changed for the worse she would have called right? I suddenly feel so stupid for leaving the hospital. The only reason I agreed was to change out of my stiff and bloody clothes, but then Dillon was bound in the closet, and I got off track.

I crane my neck to see the time. Would eight a.m. be too early to wake either Cape or Julian? I have no idea what time Julian got home and no idea when Cape finally decided he could rest.

I bite my lip, deciding to let them sleep and plan on calling Margo. I think my phone is somewhere in the kitchen. I try to scoot up, my skin slipping easily with sweat between theirs but then Cape shifts. He throws one of his legs over me, not too dissimilar to how Julian did and now I'm completely pinned.

Oh, my god. I'll never be able to get out of this bed on my own. Do they have some subconscious system that alerts them when I move? I throw my head back and commit to sweating a little while longer. If it wasn't for my worry about Marney, I wouldn't even consider getting up.

I would happily lay here, baking alive, and bask in the way not one, but two men have me wedged between them in a

protective vise. I always slept alone. It was the only way I could sleep.

There would be times when Kyle passed out next to me and I laid there, stiff as a board, anxious and unable to sleep even with one eye open. And then even alone, I felt vulnerable. But here? Now? I could sleep through a bomb going off because what would I have to worry about with one on each side of me?

“Go back to sleep,” Cape grumbles suddenly, eyes still closed.

My bottom lip falls open as I stare at his peaceful face. How long has he been awake?

“How can she sleep when you are playing tug-o-war with me?” Julian’s voice is smooth as if he hasn’t been asleep at all.

“Maybe you should wait your turn, and then I wouldn’t have to.”

Julian scoffs and peeks his eyes open, looking at me. “You okay, baby?”

“She’ll be better if she goes back to sleep.” Cape grips me and yanks me into his chest, snuggling his lips into my neck.

“Actually...” I squeak. “I want to check on Marney.”

Cape’s eyes open and they find Julian’s. They look at each other, holding a gaze over my body and sharing a sort of resignation. I feel both their anxieties mingle with mine and then they slowly untangle themselves.

Chapter Sixty-Three

The ICU is on the third level, and even though Margo said nothing has changed, I feel an unease in the center of my chest as we take the elevator up. The line between Cape's brows has reappeared and his body has gone stiff. The only thing keeping me from the urge to throw up is Julian.

He has a hold of my hand and is rubbing comfortingly with his thumb. His chin is held high with all the optimism I wish I had and it's clear he really believes Marney is going to pull through.

I hope that in the last half hour something *has* changed for the good, that Marney is awake, and Dillon can go back to his regular antsy self. I shudder to think what deep end he's going to go off if Marney—

No.

I'm not even going to think it because that is not a possibility. That just can't happen. I have sleepovers planned and more recitals to go to and a sister to watch grow up. And I'm going to try harder with Dillon for Marney's sake. She doesn't deserve to have a weirdo for a brother. She's going to be fine, and I'm going to win over Dillon, and everything is going to be okay.

One look at Cape as we step off the elevator has me second guessing all of that though.

Right.

Don't look at Cape.

I curl closer into Julian's side hoping to steal some of his confidence and I nearly trip when he halts. I look up to see Dillon standing in front of us.

He's in the same clothes as when I found him in the closet and they're crumpled, stretched out and saggy. His hair is sticking out on the side like he's been tugging at it and his face is blotchy, lips dried and cracked. If I didn't know any better, I would think he's a patient that needs attention.

"Any news?" Julian asks mildly, clearly ignoring the demented look on Dillon's face.

Dillon's puffy eyes dart between Julian and Cape and the one black eye gives him a foreboding shadow to his usually boyish face. I find myself shrinking in on myself, but Cape takes a step closer to me as if noticing this, and I relax an inch.

"We are in a hospital," Cape says to Dillon. "So you can try it if you want. They will bring you back when I put you down," he speaks low enough that the nurse that passes us doesn't hear him but deep enough that my stomach tightens, because I do not doubt that Cape will kill him.

I hear Julian's jaw clamp, and I know what he's thinking, that Cape isn't helping the situation.

Dillon's chest expands as he takes a choked breath in but it does nothing to calm the ire in his eyes. They flick to my hand in Julian's and when he looks up at me I feel pure hatred boring into me. He pushes past us without breaking eye contact and gets into the elevator.

Marney really needs to wake up soon.

When we make it to the waiting room, Margo is standing with her lips set in a firm line. At least she doesn't look green in the face anymore and isn't wringing her hands. She seems to be more solid, except for the sling on arm. Thankfully, that was her only injury, excluding a myriad of bruises that she got from her tumble down the stairs.

“Good. You’re here.” She doesn’t wait for us to come to her and instead meets us in the middle of the room.

There is only one other person in the room, an older woman with a rosary wrapped around her wrists and she gives Margo a disdainful look. Margo side eyes the woman and then huddles us over to the far corner.

“What’s going on?” Julian asks.

“Don’t mind that right now.” Margo waves a hand. “Listen. We have to have a meeting about Marney and everything that’s happened... and Dillon.”

“What did he do?” Cape barks, and the woman snaps her head up at us.

“Nothing!” Margo glances at the woman and gives a flat, patronizing smile to her before turning back to us. “But he’s not doing so well and I think I might have to speak to a doctor on his behalf.”

“For what?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath. “I was hoping that there would be better news about Marney by now but I don’t think the waiting game is doing Dillon any favors. I can’t force him to talk to a doctor or take any medication that he used to be on but—”

“Have him fucking committed,” Cape snarls.

Margo narrows her eyes at him. “That’s a last resort, you hear me? I can’t even fathom what was going through your mind when you—” She eyes the woman again and speaks lower, “*tied him up in my closet,*” she seethes.

“I was thinking that he’s a fucking liability.”

“He’s family,” she snaps.

“Family doesn’t want to fuck their mother,” Cape grinds out through his teeth. My stomach rolls at his words, and the woman in the room gets up abruptly and leaves.

Margo's eyes flash, and I realize that she knows this but didn't expect us to know. Was she aware of it that night in her room? Has she known longer than that? Why would she not have done something about it sooner?

"Yeah, Ma. I'm not fucking stupid. Even Marney knew," Cape says.

Her chin falls. "What?" The horror in her eyes has Cape repositioning his stance.

"She suspected," he concedes, and Margo takes a deep breath.

"We need to have a meeting. All of us." She shakes her head. "No more tying people up and no more secrets."

"You're one to talk," Cape drawls, and I shrink away as Margo shoots out a hand and slaps him across the face. The sound echoes in the empty room.

His head barely moves, and when she pulls her hand away he clenches his teeth.

"You do *not* talk to me like that," she breathes.

"Ma..." Julian frowns and shakes his head.

"I don't want to hear it," she says and looks back at Cape. "You were out of line and you needed a good smack to knock some sense into you. Dillon is your *brother*, we don't hogtie brothers. You didn't think that maybe doing that would make everything ten times worse?"

Cape rolls his jaw and stretches his cheek before he speaks again, and I'm surprised by how much restraint he has in the face of being slapped.

"I *thought* that I was preventing the FBI and SWAT from swarming our homes. Because if I had let him go at that moment, he would have led them right to us. And by the way you're acting right now, you know I'm fucking right. So are you going to tell me what happened, why that lady was looking at you like you're

a pariah or you going to keep lying while preaching to me about secrets?”

“If I keep secrets, it’s to keep the peace.” Margo’s chin shakes and her eyes start to water.

“Against your own flesh and blood?” Cape takes a step back.

“I don’t see you talking about Marney like that.” A sob escapes her. “Would you want her committed too if she had a mental illness? Would she not be your family if that was the case?”

“Ma...” Cape sighs and leans back in. “You know as well as I do that Dillon doesn’t just have some mental illness. He’s a sociopath. I let it go the past few years because we aren’t exactly saints but what I don’t get is why you’re in denial. I know you’re smart, Ma. You see it. So why? Why are you protecting him?”

A tear rolls down her cheek as she opens her mouth to speak but after a moment she closes it and lifts her chin. She swipes the tear away roughly and straightens up.

“I’m going home to take a shower and then I expect you both there.” She steps around us before turning back. “Also, they are letting us see Marney for a few minutes at a time. Just ask the nurse.”

Chapter Sixty-Four

The room that Marney is in is dim and solitary. The blinds are shut against the sun, and the only sound is the quiet beeping of the heart monitor. I inch closer to her bed and it feels like my chest is going to cave in on itself with how much it hurts to see her like this.

The hitch in Julian's breathing tells me he feels the same. I can understand why Cape didn't cross the threshold and instead went back to the waiting room. I think he would have been strong enough to come inside but I also know that he feels this is his fault.

"Hi," I whisper and put a hand over Marney's. I don't know if she can hear me or not, but it would feel weird not to greet her.

Julian steps around me and goes to the other side of the bed. He eyes her up and down and runs a rough hand down his face. Marney has a tube going into her mouth and probably down her throat. Her head is wrapped in gauze and there are wires coming out of her hospital gown. If Julian doesn't like the sight, I can only imagine Marney wouldn't be too happy with how she looks either.

Tentatively, I reach out and try to fix some of her silky hair that's trapped beneath the gown. At least it's not soaked in blood anymore, and I'm grateful to whatever nurse cleaned her up.

"You're handling this very well," Julian says, and I become aware of his eyes on me.

I shrug and go back to holding Marney's hand. There isn't anything I can say. I don't *feel* like I'm handling it well but I

probably don't look as shaken as I feel. That's something I can thank my past for at least. When bad things happen over and over again and no one cares, you start to bottle it up and hide all the pain.

"I really didn't want to believe what you told us about Dillon, but I guess you were right," he continues. "I guess everyone was aware except for me," his voice becomes husky. "I would never have left you alone if I had known Dillon wasn't stable. I should have known."

"It's fine. I'm not afraid of Dillon," I lie. I *am* afraid of Dillon but I don't think now is the time to be concerned about it. If anything, I'm still hoping I can be friends with him for Marney's sake. I've endured worse. Maybe if I whispered that in her ear, she would wake up.

"Well, I'm glad you are at my house now." He steps back around the bed and grasps my free hand. "And you are still okay staying, aren't you? With everything going on? You aren't afraid?"

I bite my lip and duck my head. "I am afraid... That Marney might..." Surprise tears spring to my eyes faster than I can stop them. "But I'm not going anywhere. The whole Tortellis family could invade the house and I still wouldn't run." I look up at him. "I know I should be afraid of all this but it barely crosses my mind because I'm more happy to have all of you than anything else."

I sniffle to try and stop crying, but Julian pulls me against his chest and the tears become a full on flood as I sob into him.

"But I need Marney to wake up," I say. "She can't..." God, I can't even say it. "She just can't. I know I haven't known her for long but I love her like a sister. I love her as much as I love you and Cape. I love Margo too and I can learn to love Dillon if Marney would just wake up."

Julian wraps his strong arms around my back and grips me tightly, tucking his chin over my head.

“She’s going to wake up,” he hums. “And she thinks of you as a sister too.” He chuckles softly. “She was painfully outnumbered by the men in this family... and I don’t think she relates to her friends as much as she lets on.”

I think of the kids that came to the Halloween party and think Julian is probably right. Had any of them lost their parents? Did any of them have families that talk about getting rid of someone? She probably struggled having to hide what the Rossi’s actually do. Her preppy ballet friends would probably cry to their parents—their living parents—if she ever slipped up.

I vow to be her confidant, an avid listener. I’ll be her best friend, her sister and her safe place if she would just wake up.

I quickly reign in the tears and extract myself from Julian to straighten myself out. I need to be strong for Marney.

“She’s going to wake up,” I state, fiddling with the bracelet on my wrist.

“Yes.” Julian nods and leans over me. He places a kiss on Marney’s forehead. “But in the meantime, I think Cape is right that Margo is keeping secrets.”

As if my stomach isn’t already twisted and now I have to decide if I should mention my other theory. The one that maybe the FBI file is correct and Margo did have something to do with Marney and Dillon’s parent’s death. It’s the only thing I can think of that would explain why a no-bullshit woman like Margo would put up with Dillon’s antics, because she feels guilty.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Julian doesn't mention to Cape what I told him on the drive to Margo's as we sit in the dining room waiting. Margo is still upstairs and the longer she takes, the more I start to worry if I've made a mistake. What if I'm wrong and I'm causing more drama when we should be focusing on Marney?

Cape has a boot kicked up on the table with his arms crossed over his chest, as if he doesn't have a care in the world, but I know better. He's only one wrong word away from exploding.

He loves Marney more than he shows or he wouldn't go to every one of her recitals and dress up as a bear for her. I know he's internally ripping himself to shreds thinking it's his fault that she is in a hospital bed. Add to that the mess with Dillon and the tension with Margo? And I can't even comprehend how he's appearing so unaffected.

Maybe Julian is doing the right thing by not mentioning my theory to Cape. He probably knows his brother better than anyone, and if I'm right, how will Cape react?

The sun has already set by the time footsteps sound on the stairs, and I'm surprised when it isn't just Margo who walks into the dining room.

Dillon has showered and is in a different set of joggers and muscle tee but no amount of steam could help the despondent drape of his jaw or his red rimmed eyes.

Cape slides his boot off the table, immediately going to stand, but Julian shoots a hand out in front of him. He gives his brother a minute shake of his head, and Cape leans back in his chair.

Dillon drags his feet to take a seat and Margo sits beside him. She pats his shoulder—a move that makes Julian tense—and clears her throat.

“We’re going to get to the root of all the animosity and put it behind us. We have bigger problems right now than all your testosterone squabbles. Now is not the time to be divided.”

Cape scoffs.

“Are you honestly disagreeing with me right now?” Margo snaps. “Marney is in a coma and I have a detective with an FBI agent in his back pocket breathing down Alec’s neck.” She smooths a hand over the table, composing herself and taking a breath.

“But we shouldn’t have to worry about that. They don’t have anything but suspicion and as long as we—” She shoots a look at Dillon but he’s staring off into a corner of the room. “—stick together, then everything will be fine.”

“We aren’t the ones threatening to—” Cape starts.

“Dillon was worried for Marney,” Margo cuts him off, waving a hand through the air. “He didn’t know what he was saying. He feels better now that he got to see her. Right, hon?” She looks at him and he perks up a bit at the word ‘hon’.

He turns just his head, and while it hangs limply from his neck, his eyes are no longer vacant and trained on Margo like she’s a bone that was just dangled in front of his starving mouth.

I cringe. It’s so obvious that I peek from under my hair to see if Julian is seeing what I’m seeing. He gives me the tiniest of nods and clenches his jaw.

“No offense, Dillon, but I think you should probably sit this family meeting out.” Julian says, leaning forward. “You’re dealing with a lot right now and you don’t need to worry yourself with business affairs.”

The smooth way he says this almost has me believing that his excuse to get Dillon out of the room is the only reason, and not

so he can bring up what I told him.

“Yeah, don’t you have a puppy to torture somewhere?” Cape says, and Julian’s placid words are quickly erased.

“God damn it! What did I just say?” Margo smacks a hand on the table, and I jump.

Dillon doesn’t flinch and instead scoots his chair closer to Margo, sudden energy in his movements, and leans in her ear.

“You see?” he whispers but loud enough for everyone to hear. “You see how they treat me? They aren’t the golden boys you think they are. They’re threatened by me.”

I bite my tongue at what he’s saying. He’s delusional. I don’t think Cape or Julian could ever be threatened by anyone.

“He’s off his rocker, Ma...” Cape drawls and is surprisingly still calm. “Are you really going to sit there and defend him?”

“Caperson,” She warns and scoots a bit away from Dillon.

Dillon scoots with her in a desperate motion. “You see it right?” He shoots a glare at Cape. “They are trying to make me out as crazy because they can’t accept what we have.”

Margo squeezes her eyes shut and clasps her shawl together. “Dillon...” She shakes her head, and I can see how pained she is.

“What the fuck do you mean ‘*what you have*’?” Cape’s voice raises and he stands. This time Julian doesn’t stop him. “Are you really that fucked up in the head that you think—”

“I don’t *think*. I know,” Dillon snaps. “She keeps it a secret because she knows you two wouldn’t approve, because you’re children that can’t share and you have her wrapped around your fingers, keeping her in this blood sucking business, getting people killed, getting my sister hurt.”

Now, I’m positive that he’s delusional because Cape and Julian have no problem sharing. They share me just fine.

“Ma.” Cape is trembling with barely contained rage. “I’m going to fucking kill him if you don’t acknowledge what is

happening right in front of you.”

“See?” Dillon seethes. “He wants to kill me!” He turns his chair to face Margo, who is blinking rapidly, and I can tell she can’t think of a way to stop what’s happening.

“Don’t you see?” Dillon pleads. “They want me out of the picture so you can’t be happy. They see how much you love me and if you just tell them how you feel then we can be together and there won’t be any more accidents or deaths or police.”

The air is caught in my chest as I watch him unravel before me but I’m frozen to my seat, unable to run away even though I know that Cape is a second away from snapping Dillon’s wrists for clasping Margo’s hands.

Julian slowly stands like he knows things are about to go sideways, and my stomach twists.

“Margo, please.” Dillon pushes his chair back and gets on his knees as he grips her hand.

The only reason I can think that Cape hasn’t lunged yet is because he must be just as shocked by Dillon’s display as I am.

“Please,” Dillon sobs and tears flow down his red face. “I love you.”

Margo takes a shaky breath but keeps her chin up. “Stop this right now, Dillon. You know this is inappropriate.”

“But you love me,” he whines and chokes. “Everything else doesn’t matter. I know you love me and I need you right now, please. I know you love me.”

“Not like that.” Margo clears her throat as her cheeks redden in embarrassment.

“I *know* you love me,” Dillon’s voice turns hard and he lets go of her hand to pound the floor. His knuckles crack on the marble, and I wince.

The sound seems to shake Cape and Julian out of their stupor and they both take a side of the table, advancing towards Dillon.

But it's not fast enough, because Dillon quickly stands and grabs Margo's head. He presses his face to hers and it takes me a moment to register what he is doing because I can't believe it.

He mashes his lips to hers, and she makes a muffled shriek. She pushes against him with her one good arm, but he doesn't let go, continuing to kiss her with desperation and force.

Cape shouts something but I can't hear him over the look of disgust on Margo's face. I'm trapped in her anguish, in her helplessness and disbelief.

And then Cape has Dillon by the back of his neck as he rips him off his mother. He throws him to the ground a good few feet away, and Margo gasps for breath.

Her voice comes out shaky but clear. "Don't. Don't. Cape, don't."

Cape towers over his mother as his chest pumps. "Why?" he booms. "Have you lost your mind too?"

"Cape," Julian tries.

"Shut up!" Cape shouts and a tremor rolls through him. He squeezes his eyes shut as if trying to contain the rage, and all I can picture is the way he dissolved into nothing but a murder machine when he killed my dad.

It's part of the reason I don't say anything as Dillon gets to his feet, just out of sight from Cape. Julian doesn't say anything either and actually whips his head towards the door when Dillon looks at him.

The rare vein in Julian's forehead that matches his brother's permanent one is present, and I don't doubt that he feels the same as Cape but he has more control, and must know that if Dillon doesn't get out of here, that Cape *will* kill him.

Dillon doesn't hesitate as he scrambles out of the room and disappears around the corner.

“Fuck!” Cape shouts when he hears the front door slam and gapes behind him to see that Dillon is gone.

“You let him go?!” he growls at Julian and makes to go after Dillon.

“Stop.” Julian steps in front of him. “We don’t need another body right now,” he grits through his teeth.

“There isn’t going to be a body left once I get done with him.”

“There’s something we need to discuss before you do that.” Julian looks down at Margo.

She’s staring straight ahead into nothing, a shaky hand over her mouth and a tiny bit of mascara on her cheek.

“What?” Cape narrows his eyes but he doesn’t try to push past Julian.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Julian sets a cup of tea down in front of Margo, who finally has some color back in her face. Cape has been pacing small circles in the corner, and Julian whispered to me to not let him leave before he went to the kitchen.

“I appreciate the effort but I think I need something a little stronger.” Margo pushes the cup away and hoists herself up.

She pours some amber liquid in a crystal glass from the bar cart and sits back down.

She takes the whole thing in one gulp and places her hands in her lap. “That’s better.”

“Good, because someone needs to start talking.” Cape comes to the table. “Before I lose it for that little weasel putting his hands on you.”

Julian walks calmly around the table and takes his seat back next to me.

“Do you want to tell us why you are so adamant on keeping Dillon around?” he asks. “Because Cape is right. There is a reason why you haven’t handled this.”

She shakes her head. “He’s not mentally well,” she says but doesn’t meet Julian’s eyes.

“That’s not a fucking—” Cape snarls, but Julian holds up a hand.

“Even so. There’s something you aren’t telling us, Ma. We know you and you wouldn’t tolerate this without good reason.”

Margo presses her lips together and looks away.

Julian sighs. “Is it because you put the hit on John and Macala?”

I still at the mention of Dillon and Marney’s parents’ names.

Cape balks at his brother as Margo whips her head to look at Julian. Her eyes have gone wide and whatever solace the alcohol gave her has disappeared. The look on her face lets me know that my theory is correct and I suddenly feel like throwing up.

“You did what?” Cape barks.

“You don’t know what you are talking about.” Margo narrows her eyes at Julian.

“Ma, you have to tell us what’s going on because none of this makes any sense.” Julian remains calm. “When I was twelve, I saw you break the pinky of a man who groped you at a holiday party. There’s no way you would let Dillon do what he just did or has been doing—” Julian’s fist clenches at his side. “—if you didn’t have a reason. So unless you are actually in love with our step brother then I suggest you—”

Margo puts a hand up and her face turns green. “Stop.”

The quiet tension eats at my ear drums and I can see the wheels turning in Margo’s eyes. I don’t for a second believe she is in love with Dillon. I know what it looks like when someone

forces themselves on a person without any invitation. I've seen it in my own reflection and Margo did *not* want Dillon to kiss her.

"I made the hit," she says at last, and Cape's jaw hits the floor.

"They weren't even a threat, Ma," Julian says. "Why would you want them out of the game? Macala was your friend."

She shakes her head quickly and bangs her fist on the table. "I didn't want Macala dead. I wanted John dead," she snaps. "The whole thing went to shit." She stands abruptly and pours another drink.

"I don't understand," Cape says. "I thought it was an accident. You said it was an accident."

"It was an accident. It was only supposed to be John in the car."

My mind is reeling. Why would she want just their father dead? That doesn't make sense if she was trying to eliminate the competition like the FBI folder said. She would have needed to take out Macala too since she was the one that had the connections from Margo.

Margo swallows the next drink in one gulp and then pours another before she sits back down.

"I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," she muses and spins the crystal glass in a circle.

"What does that even mean?" Cape growls.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that." Margo levels a glare at him. "You're my son but you don't know everything about my life."

Julian leans forward. "Then tell us, Ma. We just want to understand."

She takes a deep breath. "Dillon is more like his father than I anticipated. Marney though, she's more like Macala." She smiles tightly to herself and then downs the rest of her glass.

Julian leans over the table and pulls the empty glass away from her. "You aren't making sense."

She doesn't look at him though and instead finds my eyes. "I think you'll understand this the most, Peach."

From my peripheral I can feel Cape's look of confusion on me and my bottom lip falls a little. I have no idea what she's talking about.

After a moment, she releases me and cocks her head at Julian. "Your father was a good man. But before I met Luca, I knew a lot of not so good men. I refuse to go into the details but I'm sure by the state you found Hailey in, you can make some guesses."

I dip my head and hide behind my hair as Julian looks at me. I never wanted to assume that someone as strong as Margo had been through anything similar to me but I see it now. In the way she didn't press me in the laundry room when she saw my rib or in the way she welcomed me with a knowing gaze. She knows all too well.

"When you go through something like that, it changes you, makes you sick with vengeance. So yes, I have snapped a few fingers for getting handsy with me but that's not what tortures me when I lay my head down at night."

"I don't see what this has to do with Dillon," Cape huffs and goes to the bar cart. He pulls the top on the crystal bottle but doesn't grab a glass and instead drinks from the bottle.

"Dillon's father John was not a good man," Margo continues. "And Macala wouldn't leave him. I begged her to leave him but she wasn't at that point yet. Sometimes we stay all the way till we break, but I couldn't let it go that far. I know what it's like to break and you can never put the pieces back together. I didn't want that for her. So I put the hit on John."

I know exactly what she means. As much as I've found happiness here, I still have pieces of myself that are missing and I'll never get them back. How many times had I wished that someone would kill Mr. Canes? Or my Dad?

“I never intended for Macala, or Dillon and Marney to get hurt. They weren’t supposed to be in the car.” Her eyes flood with unshed tears.

Julian shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks on the balls of his heels while Cape pauses with the bottle half way to his mouth.

“And you thought it would be a good idea to bring in the children whose parents’ you had killed?” Cape shakes his head. “No wonder Dillon is trying to bring us down. He wants revenge.”

“No.” Margo blinks the tears away. “He doesn’t know.”

“Ma...” Julian sucks air in through his teeth. “If he’s ever spoken to the FBI then they would have told him that they suspect you had something to do with it. The FBI already knew.”

“Jesus.” Cape slams the bottle down on the table. “I thought that was bullshit. You told us it was bullshit and we believed you during the custody battle.”

“I was just trying to help a friend, and neither Dillon nor Marney have any idea. They think it was an accident.”

The tone in her voice, regretful and self loathing, tells me she is positive that they don’t know. Dillon isn’t a mastermind. He’s impulsive and erratic. If he knew, there is no way he would have been able to keep it a secret the few times he’s lost it with me. He would have already done something about it, unable to control himself.

“I don’t think he knows either,” I say to calm down Cape.

“Great, so he’s just unhinged for no reason.” Cape picks the bottle back up and paces into his corner.

Julian ignores him and sits down next to his mother. “So, you’ve kept this to yourself all these years?” He grabs her hand.

“It was my cross to bear.”

“Fine, Ma. But you can’t let your guilt cloud that something is not right with Dillon. You can’t let him do this to you.”

“How long has he been trying to...” Cape prowls out of the corner. “Trying to... You know what I mean.”

“I’ve noticed it for a few years now.”

“Fuck!” Cape squirms in his skin.

“But he’s never gone as far as he did tonight,” she clarifies, and I take a breath of relief.

“He needs to go,” Julian says calmly.

“I can’t,” Margo says. “I can’t do that to him.” She pulls her hand away from Julian and turns. “I don’t know if he’s really like his father or if what I did, what he endured because of me, has made him like this.”

Cape’s eyes bulge out of their sockets and he cracks his neck at her refusal.

“I’ll make him go back to therapy,” she says. “I’ll force him to take any medication they provide.”

“Jesus, Ma. There isn’t a pill that can make you stop wanting to fuck your adoptive mother,” Cape snaps.

Margo clutches her stomach at Cape’s poor choice of words, and I feel for her. I also feel bad for Dillon. He watched his mother die and it’s no wonder he has a mommy complex. I can understand why Margo is so adamant to not abandon Dillon, because she feels responsible.

I don’t condemn her for what she did and I don’t care if that makes me wrong. I know that if Marney had a man hurting her, I would have him killed as well. No one can possibly understand if they haven’t gone through it. Men like that don’t deserve to live. If Margo cared for Macala as much as I care for Marney, then I understand.

It’s just unfortunate that her efforts also took Macala’s life.

Chapter Sixty-Six

The beach is colder than I thought a beach could ever be, considering they are only depicted as warm destinations, but it feels nice right now. The sand chills me through my pants and the silence, followed by wave after wave, is cleansing.

Julian and Cape think I'm somewhere in the house, taking a breather, and probably wouldn't be okay with me sitting outside by myself but I'm beyond worrying about the Tortellis and I can't listen to them argue with Margo anymore.

I know for a fact that both of them would end any man who hurt a woman, but neither of them can come to terms with Margo's choices. I think they are struggling to imagine Macala's experience. Men can be so simple and unless it's staring them in the face, they can't illicit the feelings.

I think part of it has to do with Dillon as well. They want him gone, and I get that. He's a threat to the business, to their peace of mind, and to Margo. Who knows how much more unstable he can become? And if Marney doesn't... Well, I don't want to know.

I can't get the image of Dillon kissing Margo out of my head. A steady stream of nausea has been present ever since and I breathe the cool salty air deep into my lungs to try and rid it.

I'm not knocking Dillon's attraction to older women, but *Margo*? She's raised him since he was fourteen. She's basically his sister's mother. Margo doesn't even flaunt herself either. She's pushing maybe her mid-fifties but dresses like she's already ninety. I'm not saying she's not attractive. I just don't see how he

ever got the idea in his head to be attracted to her when he's twenty-one and all she wears are floral muumuus.

God, I can imagine how disgusted Cape and Julian felt. Watching what might as well be their brother kiss their mom. I'm surprised by Cape's control though. Do I think he probably would have hurt Dillon? Yes. But not kill him. I'm starting to think I don't give him enough credit.

Maybe if I had told him to stop when he was arched over my dad, he would have. But I don't think I wanted him to stop.

I let that sink in as I watch the white foam of the waves ebb and flow up the shore.

"Hailey."

I turn slowly at the low and raspy whisper, wondering if I'm hearing things. I blink against the light of the house but can't see into the shadows it creates.

"Hailey."

The voice sends shivers into my muscles and I suddenly feel just how cold it is as I squint into the darkness.

A lump suddenly appears, hobbling towards me, and my heart thumps quickly as I realize how stupid I am. The Tortellis are going to get me and I'm not Margo. I'm not a bad ass.

"I fucked up so bad." The person sobs as they come into the moonlight.

I sag in relief. "Dillon?"

He rubs his arms, shaking profusely as snot dribbles from his nose. If it's possible, he somehow looks worse.

I make to stand, but he falls onto his knees in front of me.

"They are going to kill me." He grabs at the sand and cries.

I inch backwards. Has he been out here hiding this whole time?

“Hailey. I’ve been trying to tell you. They kill people and now they are going to kill me. And Margo doesn’t love me. I thought she loved me but she doesn’t.”

“No one is going to kill you.” I put a hand out to soothe him but then think better of it. He may be having a breakdown but I’ve seen what he’s like when he’s angry. “They just want to help you.”

By having him committed, I think, but don’t say that. And really, I don’t think Margo would allow it.

“No, they don’t.” He snuffles. “They’ve been waiting for me to mess up and now I did. And god—” He pounds the sand, and I notice his knuckles are bleeding and bruised. “Marney can’t be left with them.”

“They aren’t—”

“Listen!” He snaps his head up and his eyes are wild. “After they kill me, you have to take Marney and run. You see it don’t you?” he whines and squirms.

“Dillon, they aren’t going to kill you.” I peer over his shoulder, hoping either Cape or Julian are starting to look for me.

“Yes! Yes, they are!” He swerves his head into my line of sight and spittle flies at my face. I shimmy a couple more inches away from him.

“How do you not see it? Margo can’t even get away from them. You have to get out *now*.” He takes a deep breath, sniffing and nods to himself. “And take my sister with you. She likes you.”

He starts shivering again and throws his forehead into the sand. My god, he’s losing it.

“Dillon.” I risk a hand on his shoulder. “Dillon, listen to me. You made a mistake but no one is mad at you. They know you are just worried about Marney. And she’s going to wake up, and you’ll feel better, and everything will be okay.”

He goes still beneath my hand, and I think maybe I got through to him. Until he starts to laugh. The sound makes my stomach twist and I pull my hand back.

“You are so *stupid*,” he seethes, straightening. Gone are the tears and in their place are tight features. The moon makes his red face a shade of purple and his bared teeth have a sinister glow.

“How can you be so stupid?!” He grabs his hair and squeezes his eyes shut. “Is it because you’re a child? A stupid fucking child?” He rips at his hair and his eyes pop open. “Or are you so blinded by their dicks?”

I cringe at his choice of words.

“Is that it?! You like the way they fuck you?”

“Dillon—”

He reels and grabs my arm, yanking me against him. “Do I need to fuck you so you believe me?”

My stomach rolls and my heart pounds as he shakes me. I suddenly can’t see anything but Kyle and I know with every fiber of my being where this is going.

“Don’t,” I try but it comes out breathy and garbled.

“Margo doesn’t want me so maybe I should try someone more my age.” He laughs, and tears pool in my eyes as he shoves me down.

The air is stuck in my throat as he pulls at the waistband of his pants and jams a knee between my legs. I squeeze my eyes shut before he frees himself. I don’t need to see. It’s better if I don’t see. Because this isn’t happening, right? Cape is going to appear and throw Dillon off of me. Or Dillon is going to come to his senses. Anything but this.

“This is the shit you like, right?” He pins my wrist into the sand. “Being taken advantage of? It’s the only reason you would side with them right? Because you like being fucked?”

I should scream. Someone might hear me. But my mouth is sealed shut, Mr. Canes invisible hand clamped over it. It will only be rougher if I scream.

He digs his fingers into the band of my pants, his nails nicking the skin, and I pray for numbness. It's the only thing I ever had to protect myself and now trying to recall it feels futile.

If anything, everything I buried comes crawling back to the surface. Mr. Canes hand over my mouth as I struggled to breathe through the pain. The way his bulging stomach flattened my chest and how his sweaty hairs scraped against my skin.

The noxious taste of gasoline as Kyle pushed his fingers into my mouth, getting off on me gagging as he scratched at my throat. His bony hips bruising my inner thighs.

The way Julian laid him out.

The last image comes suddenly, and my throat opens just a bit. I drag cold air into my lungs and blink away my tears. Julian didn't hesitate throwing the palm of his hand into Kyle's nose.

The crunch and flush of blood.

Picturing it lets me breathe a little better. This is Dillon, not Kyle. I'm not in Bridgerock. And I don't want this. I don't want to take this.

"Stop," I say.

Dillon doesn't even hear me as pulls at my pants. He grunts when he sees my underwear and scrambles to grab at them.

"Stop," I try again, louder this time.

He pauses for a second and cocks his head at me.

"So much for all those hours training with Cape." He sneers and tightens his grip.

Cape.

Cape throwing me on the ground.

Cape yelling at me to get leverage.

To survive.

To fight.

I pull one of my legs up, trying to get said leverage, but it makes Dillon angrier and he slams it down. My foot slides in the sand without a fight.

I'm not strong enough. God, he's right. I didn't learn anything with Cape. I couldn't beat him even when he was letting me. I panic and thrash, fear bubbling up inside me. In doing so, I accidentally catch a glimpse of Dillon's dick and... It's so small. The sight gives me pause. It looks the same as Mr. Canes. Nothing like Cape's or Julian's.

And it occurs to me that I may not have been strong enough to fight Cape, because Cape is a beast of a man, but Dillon isn't as strong as Cape. Dillon isn't anywhere near as big as Cape, in more ways than one.

I pull my knee up again and quickly dig my heel into the sand.

"Fucking relax. You're going to let both of them fuck you but what? I'm not good enough? I don't think so." He goes to put my leg down again but this time I'm ready, and it doesn't go down.

I take his tiny moment of confusion as the distraction I need and bring up my arm. I angle the back of my elbow as close to my throat as possible and then let it rip.

It jabs into his chest and I blanch at the pain, freezing. For a moment, I'm scared again. What consequences will that bring? But then he yelps and the sound licks up my spine in pure pleasure.

I hurt him.

And it felt good.

"Bitch," he snarls and his hand connects with my face.

My cheek hits the sand and my vision prickles. Little bright dots like stars in the sky, but he hits like my dad. Who hit like

Kyle. Who hit like every other man with a tiny dick. He doesn't know that I'm used to it and it's nothing compared to the way Cape drug me around the workout room like a rag doll.

A slow smile spreads on my face and a few grains of sand slip into my mouth. I grind them between my teeth as I realize how weak all these men are. Like little grains of sand that I can crush.

They aren't real men. Not like Julian or Cape and suddenly, I feel more capable than I ever have. If I learned to fight from real men, I can take out the fake ones with ease.

And with ease comes everything Cape taught me.

I'm not scared.

I'm not numb.

I'm *angry*.

I twist my neck to face him and his tomato face. He must notice something in my features because his bottom lips falls open, and I take the opportunity to snap my head up and crack my skull against his.

Fuck, that hurt. Cape never had us try it but he told me how to do it.

Dillon cries out, and I shake the pain away, scrambling backwards and tugging up my pants as he falls back on his butt.

"I'm sorry," he whines as he palms his forehead. "I don't know what—"

I don't let him finish as I stand and kick him in the ribs. He barrels over, and I kick again, as hard as I can.

He lets out a huff and coughs. That's it? One hit and he gives up?

I could run now. I could scream.

But I don't want to. I want him to know that he can never try that again. To me or any woman. I want him to be afraid to ever pull his tiny dick out again.

I lean over and rip at his hair, pulling his head up to look at me and then I ram my fist into his nose. The satisfying crunch blots out any damage my knuckles might have taken, and I do it again.

“Please,” he sputters as blood pours over his lips. “I’m sor—”

I bring my knee up and let it collide with his chin. He doesn’t get to be sorry because if it wasn’t for Cape, I would be laying in the cold sand right now while he rapes me. No amount of pleading would have saved me. It doesn’t get to save him.

His teeth rattle against each other, and I let go of his hair. He falls forward, face first into the sand, and I resume kicking him, using proper form like Cape taught me so I don’t hurt myself.

Is this what it felt like for my dad when he would kick me? Soft flesh giving in so easily, the knowledge of how delicate bones really are against rage? The only difference is that I didn’t deserve it. Dillon deserves it for what he tried to do to me, for what he’s put Margo through. He’s earned the pain he’s getting and then some. Some from what Mr. Canes did, some for what my dad did, and some for Kyle too.

It’s only as exhaustion kicks in that I notice shadows coming down the stairs and descending upon me.

“Shh. Shh. Shh.” Julian grabs me from behind suddenly and locks his arms over my chest.

“What happened?” Cape roars, trying to look me up and down but I flail against Julian’s grip, still trying to kick.

“Shhhhh.” Julian tucks his lips into my ear, and any other time I would melt at his breath so close, but right now, I am vengeance. “Shhh.” He tries again.

Shhh, what?!

The second I question it, I hear it.

Screaming, obscenities, snarls and shrieks.

And it’s me.

“What did he do?!” Cape grabs my face, pinching my cheeks between his fingers and examining me. His eyes go wide and I wonder what he sees.

He lets go roughly and turns while Julian picks me up and hauls me back. I finally go limp as I watch Cape slam his boot into Dillon’s head, satisfied that someone is still kicking him. Dillon rolls onto his side in fetal position, his pants around his ankles and his tiny flaccid dick on display.

“Did he?!” Julian’s voice is pure horror in my ear, but I can’t answer him as I watch Cape grab Dillon by the throat, pulling him up and holding him a few inches above the ground. He shakes him and slams a fist into his gut.

“Nooooo!” Margo appears out of nowhere. Her silk blouse billows in the air as she clamors at Cape’s bicep. “Put him down! Put him down!”

Cape doesn’t speak but he doesn’t punch him again, just holds him by the throat as Dillon sputters blood, choking and gasping for breath.

“Please!” she screams, giving up on trying to fight his strength and falling at Cape’s feet.

But Cape is gone, locked in position and as vacant as he was when he killed my dad. I hold my breath as I watch every vein in his body pulsate and the way his fingers clench and dig into Dillon’s neck.

I told Dillon that they wouldn’t kill him but that was before he tried to force himself on me. Now, I want him dead. I want him to die knowing that’s what killed him. I want Cape to crush the delicate bones in his throat and for him to choke on his blood.

The rage that’s simmered just below the surface my whole life is now boiling over and all I want to feel is the vengeance. I’m sick with it and I clutch my stomach, needing to bend over, but Julian has my back tightly against his chest.

Vengeance coils around my heart, suffocating me till I feel like I won't be able to breath until Dillon can't.

"Caperson..." Margo wails. "Jules, please, stop him! He's going to kill him."

I risk tilting my eyes up for a moment and I see that Julian's jaw is locked and his eyes are searing. He's fixed on Dillon and what could be his last few breaths. I look back at Margo on her knees, and I pity her.

Julian isn't going to stop this.

Because he thinks that Dillon raped me.

But he didn't. I didn't let him. I *stopped* him. Me.

The tense outline of Dillon's muscles cease and his body goes slack in Cape's grip.

"He didn't..." I rasp, my throat sore from screaming and I wriggle against Julian's hold on me. "I stopped him."

Margo lets out a shrill sound at my admission. "Cape, please, think of Marney."

Oh god, Marney. I completely forgot that the piece of shit being choked to death is her brother. I break free from Julian and stumble forward. How could I ever look her in the eye if I let the vengeance consume me? I don't think I could carry around a secret like that, like Margo.

If there's any chance that Cape will listen to me, I have to try. Because as good as it felt to kick Dillon, I'm not my dad. I'm not a man. I have mercy.

"Cape." I come up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. His skin burns through his shirt and heats my hand. "Don't," I tell him, eyeing Dillon and the last tiny bits of air bubbling in blood from his lips.

I have no idea if it's too late or if it's even the lack of oxygen that will kill him or the blow to the head. He's caked in blood at

this point and as much as it feels good to see him this way... How would Marney feel seeing him this way?

It makes me sick and I clear my throat. "Stop!" I shout at Cape. "Let him go."

A muscle twitches in Cape's wrist and I take that as he can hear me. I slip under his arm, side stepping Margo's sobbing body, and try to block his murderous gaze from focusing on Dillon.

"He didn't get to..." I think better of using the word and shake my head. "I stopped him. I fought, like you taught me."

Cape starts to vibrate, tremors rolling through him but he inhales a long breath through his nose and blinks. His pupils are still blown out though, and I try again, placing a hand on his arm.

"Marney loves him and you love Marney. Don't take her brother." I look to Julian for help but he too has murder in his eyes.

"Please." New tears wet the ones that dried to my cheeks. "Don't do this."

Cape grinds his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, and then a thud sounds behind me.

"Commit him or I *will* kill him," he growls, looking down at Margo.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

I snuggle deeper into Julian like a blind mole as Cape moves with me to stay close. We're nestled into Julian's bed while the fireplace by the window pops. My hair is still damn from the bath Julian made for me and I have ointment on my cracked lip that keeps getting stuck to the sheet.

I keep my eyes shut against the gloomy daylight that is creeping in through the window and breathe in Julian's warm scent. None of us have slept but somehow I feel more refreshed than I ever have.

Margo shooed us away as she called an ambulance, claiming a mugging, and we went without protest. I may have stopped Cape from killing Dillon but I didn't want to watch him get saved.

Margo texted a couple hours later and said that the CT came back okay and that she got him a room next to Marney.

Cape put his fist through the wall when Julian relayed the message, but I didn't flinch because I felt the same anger. I don't want him anywhere near Marney either.

Another message came through not long after that said she was going to have him psychiatrically evaluated and to tell me she's sorry.

But it's not her fault, and I don't blame her. In a sick way, I'm glad that it happened, otherwise I wouldn't feel the way I do right now. Like for once I'm in charge of what happens to me. That I can successfully fight for myself.

Julian presses his lips to my forehead and whispers he's sorry for the hundredth time.

"I'm sorry that I didn't kill him," Cape grumbles behind me and pushes himself against my ass.

"I can't believe you didn't," Julian says.

"I still will if Hailey wants me to."

It's a vicious sentiment, but a small wicked smile comes to my lips anyways. Just knowing that he would actually *kill* for me, *has* killed for me fills me with a heady sense of protection I've never had.

I grip Cape's hand and move it up my shirt, relishing the way his warm palm glides across my skin. The same hand that would have choked the life out of a man who hurt me if I hadn't stopped him.

I feel myself throb at the thought just as Cape grows behind me. He grips my stomach and pulls me into him.

"Cape..." Julian warns. "She just went through—"

"I'm fine," I say and latch onto Julian, pulling him against me so I'm pinned between both of them. Their bodies are like hot coals and my skin instantly perspires. I try to tug at my shirt and Julian helps me. His firm chest presses against my breasts, and I sigh in pleasure.

"We don't need these either." Cape hooks a thumb in my underwear and swiftly pulls them down. After a second, his are gone as well and I feel his cock nestle between my ass cheeks.

Julian places a hand over my slit. "Are you sure, baby?"

I nod, feeling like I need their touch to wash away Dillon's, and he slips a finger between me and rubs my clit. A moan instantly escapes me and I roll my hips. Cape growls and wraps his other arm around my body, trailing it up my chest and to my throat. He grips gently and I arch so he can kiss me.

His lips are fierce and demanding. I give into him, exhilarated knowing he would stop if I asked and intoxicated on the fact that I don't ever want him to.

Cape angles and I feel the tip of him nudge at my pussy. It's firm and hot, and I circle my hips in his direction. He easily pushes into me and I cry out into his mouth. He releases my neck and grips my breast as he pushes deeper, holding himself inside me.

Julian scoots away and then down, and Cape takes the opportunity to pull me onto him. He grips my waist as he holds me on his cock and with my back against his chest, he reaches an all new depth that has me gushing around him.

Jesus, the way he feels inside of me has me breaking in two.

Julian comes in front of us, where he can see Cape slide in and out and then he spreads my legs wider and lowers his head. He drags his tongue between me, and my legs shake at the wet warmth of his tongue. He holds them firm and then flicks my clit with the tip of his tongue. I get to see him lick his lips as he tastes me before my head falls back in ecstasy.

Cape pumps in and out of me agonizingly slow enough so that Julian can make circles with his tongue, and I realize that I don't even have to move. I let Cape fuck me and Julian lick me till I'm tense and panting.

When I think I'm about to cum they both stop suddenly.

"No..." I cry.

"We both want to feel you," Cape rumbles in my ear, and I realize that Julian is now on his knees and coming down over me.

Yes, I think and spread myself as wide as I can go.

He holds his cock against my entry, and Cape slips out just enough to make room for his brother. When I feel his wet tip against me, I squirm to get him inside of me and I'm thankful when he doesn't hesitate.

They both fill me, and Cape holds my legs open so I can take them deeper. We all rock in unison as I moan, but once Julian puts his mouth on my nipple I'm right back to being on the edge. He sucks and fucks me to the same rhythm.

I throw my arms around his neck as I feel Cape pulsate. I don't wait, thankful and ravenous that it's time, and I feel myself flood around them as my body shakes and I scream. Julian is barely a second behind and he bites gently at my breast as he cums inside of me.

They both slowly pump into me and I sag in satisfaction. My eyes flutter closed.

I think I can sleep now.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

I have my arms clenched around Cape's waist for dear life as he goes a fast five miles per hour down the street to Margo's. I think even Julian, who is walking at a leisure pace on the sidewalk beside us, is going faster than us, but I've never been on a motorcycle. I don't understand how we haven't tipped over.

I have no idea how Cape expects me to learn to ride on my own, but I can't help and admit how cute the helmet he got me is. It feels like forever ago that he came home with the Harley Davidson bag, but it wasn't until today that he reached inside and revealed the sleek black helmet.

I have no doubt that it's because Marney got to come home today.

For the past week, I started to lose hope, but then two days ago her eyes opened and they removed the intubator and she could breathe on her own.

Pure relief flooded through me so violently that I sobbed at her bedside till she rolled her eyes at me. Her throat was still sore from the ventilator and she couldn't talk, but I got the hint.

She's stuck on bed-rest now but she's sorely mistaken if she thinks I'm not going to squeeze in beside her and make us watch every single rom-com that's ever been made.

Cape suddenly lets go of the handlebars and I screech. "Stop!"

He chuckles darkly and grabs them again. "You were supposed to take them," he says through the muffle of his helmet.

I try to rear my head around so he can see how utterly terrified I am and that I will not be taking any handlebars anytime soon but I forget I'm wearing a helmet too and he can't see.

When we make it to the kitchen, Margo is sipping a cup of coffee in front of a pile of bacon and eggs.

"No muffins," she says. "I didn't have time to grab any."

"We're not here for muffins, Ma," Julian says.

She nods stiffly and my heart constricts for her. Things have been tense between everyone, and I only hope that once Marney is up and bossing everyone around that things will go back to normal.

"Well, go on up. She's sick of me fussing." She motions her cup towards the stairs, and I don't wait for Cape and Julian.

I take the steps two at a time and then knock lightly on her door.

"I'm totally fine," she pouts once I sit beside her.

I bite my lip to stop from snickering. Her ankle is in a colossal cast that sticks out from the blanket and while she doesn't have gauze wrapped around her head anymore, she still has a massive bandage behind her ear that has her hair sticking up and frizzy in that spot.

"I'm serious." She smacks my hand. "I don't have any headaches. I'm not seeing spots. I'm fine. I don't want to be stuck in bed," she huffs. "I want to go to the salon and see if Mipsy can put an extension in where I'm missing hair." She touches the bandage lightly.

I fight back a smile and shake my head. "Maybe let it heal before you go clipping things to your skull."

"They don't clip in! Mipsy only does fusions. It's where they use a keratin bonded with heat," she explains as I grab the remote.

It takes a good ten minutes of me flicking through options before I land on Titanic and press play. Cape and Julian come in for a few minutes but then leave when me and Marney swoon over Leo. We're barely to the part where they handcuff Jack to the pole when she shifts and speaks.

"Margo won't tell me what happened to Dillon."

My shoulders sink and I hit pause, turning to face her.

"She told me not to ask you but..." Her cheeks deflate and she looks down at the bracelet on her wrist. I hadn't noticed it before but it warms me that she put it back on so quickly after they had to take it off in the hospital.

"What did she tell you?" I ask, afraid of how big of a lie I'm going to have to go along with.

"That he couldn't handle me being in the hospital and that he needed to be with doctors who could help him."

I purse my lips. It's almost accurate.

"I know he used to have a doctor he talked to. Why can't he talk to them? Why does he have to stay at some institution? And I'm better now, why can't he come home?" she sounds so small, suddenly every bit the young thirteen-year-old that she is.

My heart breaks and I grab her hands. "Dillon wasn't okay even before your accident."

Her blonde brows come together, and I take a deep breath.

"You remember how you told me you thought Dillon..." I trail off. Maybe I shouldn't bring it up.

She squints at me for a minute and then sighs. "God, I hope he gets better because I can't be like Katie." She flicks her hair and faces the TV. "Do you know that Sylvia won't let Katie hang out with us anymore because of her brother Kirby?"

I can tell her mind is still turning but if she wants to change the subject, that's okay with me.

“Well, Sylvia sounds like a bitch,” I say, breathing a sigh of relief. Apparently, Marney got all the sanity and left Dillon with none.

“That’s what I said!” she exclaims and grabs the remote. “But then Jennifer told me she’s still going to have Katie over for her birthday and Sylvia is going to be there and it’s going to be great.”

She hits play and leans back, continuing to tell me about every girl in school, and even though I can’t keep up, I just listen, keeping the promise I made.

She falls asleep before the credits even roll, and I slink out of the bed, shaking my head. She couldn’t even stay awake for the whole movie but wants to go to the salon.

When I make it down stairs, I’m surprised to see muffins on the counter and the back of Margo’s head outside the french doors. Cape and Julian are nowhere to be seen, and I steal a chocolate muffin before I slip outside.

I haven’t had a chance to talk to Margo and I want her to know that I don’t blame her.

“Hi,” I say as I step around the chaise.

“Peach.” She looks up, and I suddenly see how tired she is.

She hasn’t bothered with makeup and the puffiness around her eyes tells me she’s been crying. She’s swaddled in a blanket, and there’s an untouched cup of coffee in her hands, the steam long gone.

I sit beside her, holding the muffin in my lap, not sure what to say or even if it’s the right time to say anything. I just know that she shouldn’t be alone.

She taps a finger on my wrist and eyes the muffin. “Where did that come from?”

“It was on the counter. There’s a whole box,” I say.

“Hm.” She tilts her head and a soft smile appears on her lips. “Probably Julian. If it was Cape there wouldn’t be any chocolate

ones left. At least I raised one good man.”

“Two,” I clarify, unable to help myself.

“Two,” she agrees. “But I couldn’t get the third right.” She turns to me and frowns.

“It’s not your fault,” my voice comes out as a whisper.

“Yes it is. It became my fault the day their car went off the cliff.”

“Margo...”

“No.” She shakes her head and takes the muffin from my hands, placing it and her cup on the table. “I was being stupid.” She grasps my hands and pulls them into the blanket.

“What you did, sparing Dillon that night, you’re a stronger woman than me.” A tear spills over her cheek. “If I were you I would have chopped off his—” she stops herself. “But that’s the same mentality that put us all in this position in the first place. Even now, the only thing I regret is Macala, not John. And I had no right to ask Cape to stop, considering I would have done much worse, but I’ll be forever thankful that you didn’t let him.”

“Margo.”

“No. I see who Dillon is now and I’ll be forever sorry that I let it go that far, that he almost... to you... and I’m sorry. I let my remorse blind me because I feel like it’s my fault he turned out the way he did.”

“It’s not—”

She shakes her head and grips my hands. “Nature vs Nurture.” She closes her eyes, shaking and bunching her shoulders up. “Doesn’t matter. Just know that I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I spit out before she can cut me off. “I don’t blame you for Dillon and I don’t judge you for John. You were trying to help a friend. The boys can’t understand, but I do.”

She studies my face and sucks her lips in. Tears flood her eyes. “Oh, Peach. Come here.” She pulls me against her, wrapping

her arms around me and smoothing the back of my head.

I grip her back with all the love I have in me, only wishing I had a mother like her to protect me when I needed it. Hoping with everything in me that Macala appreciates Margo's sentiment, no matter how vicious.

I rest my cheek on the shoulder of the woman who probably knows better than anyone what I've been through and hope she doesn't feel alone. Tears fill my own eyes as I clutch her and tell her the only truth I know.

"Us girls have to stick together."

Bonus Content

Thank you so much for reading Vicious Sentiments! If you enjoyed it then please sign up for my newsletter to get the first four chapters from **Julian's perspective** completely free!

[Click Here](#)