



*a*  
**REVENGE**

*so sweet*



THE SAINTS OF SERENITY FALLS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LILY WILDHART**

# A REVENGE SO SWEET

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THE SAINTS OF SERENITY FALLS #2

LILY WILDHART

*A Revenge so Sweet*

The Saints of Serenity Falls #2

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If you'd have told me six months ago that this would be my  
life, I'd have laughed in your face.

*Money. Marriage. Murder.*

Three things I never thought I'd deal with, let alone all at  
once, but now those three words embody my entire world.

There's nowhere to run, not with the eyes of the country on us  
now.

With everyone watching, we can't afford a misstep, especially  
since bodies keep dropping around campus.

My only hope is that we can find whoever is behind the  
killings.

**Before they find me.**

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# WARNING

This book is a **dark**, college, why choose romance with some aspects of bullying.

It contains scenes and references of drug use (off page), abuse/sexual assault to a minor and sexual assault that some readers may find triggering, along with graphic sex scenes, cursing and violence.

# CHAPTER ONE

---



This is going to be a goddamn disaster.

I realized just how fucked up this was all going to turn out the morning she walked into my kitchen.

Dad had already told me what he expected me to do.

Befriend my new sister. Push her to Cole. Set them up. Have her be none the wiser.

Cole knew his job too.

It's why staying away from her was such a pain in my ass after we realized just how much we'd fucked up.

My dad's perpetual disappointment in me was just fueled further when they hadn't become a happy couple all of their own so-called volition after she'd been here a month. Obviously, that was my fault, but I couldn't tell him the truth.

I fucked her, and I didn't want to give her up. That night she walked into the party, I spotted her instantly. She was awkward, yet confident. Out of place, yet she could fit in anywhere. She was like the sun and the rest of us just shards of the moon, glowing in her light. I knew I had to have her, so I did.

I just never imagined she'd turn out to be who she was.

"Big night tonight, boys," Theo Beckett says with a huge grin as he slaps Cole's shoulder. Because, of course, tonight isn't just about Thanksgiving. Nothing in our lives has ever been remotely normal, and it's not about to start now. "Are you ready to jump further into the political spotlight?"

“Of course,” Cole responds tightly, and I grip my glass tighter.

“Glad to hear it. We don’t want anything going off plan for the next few months leading up to Chase’s announcement. You both being on board will make things much easier for the girl.” Theo’s voice is low, but polished in that way politicians have.

“Her name is Briar,” I counter, and he laughs in response.

“I don’t care what her name is, boy. As long as she’s a good little pawn and plays the game.” He glances over at Sofie, Briar’s mom, and takes a sip from his glass. “Pawns are easily replaced.”

Without another calculated word, he strolls away, having laid down his veiled threats intended to keep me in line.

Like we really have a choice in any of this at all. My life has always been dictated to me, and Cole was the same. I don’t know if that’s why we were drawn together the way we were all those years ago, like we knew this would be our lives, but I honestly don’t know where I’d be without him. The twins get off easier, usually, and I’ve been jealous of their ability to make decisions for themselves more times than I care to count.

But not tonight.

Tonight, everyone is getting well and truly fucking boned.

I glance over at the two of them—they’ve been arguing with their parents since before they arrived—and when Jessica and Susie walk in, everything falls into place.

More so when the blonde leeches beeline straight for them, their plastic smiles wide.

“I guess we’re not the only ones being set up,” Cole murmurs, shaking his head. He turns to face me, and it’s impossible to miss the tension in his shoulders. “She’s going to fucking hate us for keeping this from her.”

“We didn’t have a choice. It’s not like telling her would’ve made a difference,” I snap back at him, fully aware of the fiery reaction tonight’s announcement is likely to unleash in the wildfire brunette.

“I don’t know...” he trails off and moments later, Tobias interrupts the room to announce dinner. “Where is she?”

I glance around, noticing that the rest of the women have joined us—my father’s archaic ways don’t escape my notice, and there is very little I can do to change Chase Kensington—but Briar is missing.

I scrub a hand down my face, rolling my shoulders as I prepare to find her, and go to war to get her in here, when my dad’s voice booms across the room. “Let’s sit, shall we?”

The words are a command disguised as a question, and I watch in pain as Asher and Sawyer are forced to sit next to Barbie one and two, while Cole and I are seated with a space between us.

For Briar.

This is going to be a shit show of epic proportions and, of course, I’m driving tonight, so I can’t even fucking drink.

The door opens and I suck in a breath when I see her, smiling wide on Tobias’s arm, but I force it from my lungs when I notice the look on my father’s face.

He hasn’t worked it out yet exactly, but he knows something is going on with me. To say I’m not looking forward to him finding out what happened is an understatement, but I can’t help but react to her.

She’s like my very own poison.

A beautiful nightmare that haunts me every time I close my eyes.

And it pisses me the fuck off.

Her smile drops when she glances at the twins, more so when she looks at me.

She moves to her seat and Cole stands, pulling her chair out, playing his role perfectly.

Fuck this.

I finish my one and only drink in one swallow and slam the glass down on the table with more force than I intended as

she sits. Risking another glance, I take in her confusion and ball my hands in my lap. I know there isn't a damn thing I can say or do to change anything right now.

All I can do is sit here and play my part, even if I am screaming on the inside.

Sofie starts up some inane conversation with Erica, the twins' mom, while Dad and Theo start talking business as Tobias and the other staff bring out the mountain of food that's been prepared for today.

The sheer amount of food here is obscene, but that is my dad all over. A show of wealth is a show of power, and power is *everything*.

When the table is laid and the staff leave the room, Dad stands, tapping his spoon against his glass before clearing his throat and droning on about how family is everything—lies—and how we all have so much to be grateful for this year—more lies—before leading grace.

The meal is nothing more than a show. Everyone saying what they think will keep them in favor. It's laughable that people who are intended to be allies, friends, family, are really just clinging to one another as a way to stay in power.

My dad would say he's the most powerful, because he has the most money.

Theo would say he's the most powerful, because he has the clout.

Thomas would say he's the most powerful, because of his darker connections.

It's disgusting, and the minute I get the chance to escape, I am running away and never looking back.

My eyes go wide when I finally hear her speak. She's been silent throughout the entire meal, like she knows something is coming. It's little more than a whisper to Cole, but I might be the only person at this table actually paying attention to her.

“What the hell am I missing?”

I open my mouth to speak, but Cole responds first. “I’m sorry.”

I’m pretty sure he wants to say more, but Dad stands—again—and starts yet another of his speeches. “This year we have so much to be thankful for; my new wife, and stepdaughter; for my new venture; the support of my friends. But we also have another announcement.”

My fingers grip my thighs so hard I’m going to have bruises. I glance at her, and it’s like watching a car crash in slow motion and not being able to do a thing to stop it.

She grips the edge of the table and I try to relax, in case she’s picking up on my anger.

“Smile,” I say as quietly as I can.

I know she’s going to hate me. It’s why I didn’t bother playing nice like the others. I knew there was no way we could be anything other than what we’re about to be as soon as I realized who she was.

“This year,” Dad continues. “We get to be thankful for the joining of our families. So, to Cole and Briar, congratulations on your engagement.”

“I’m sorry, what?” she screeches next to me, and Sofie smiles at her like she’s dim, like her daughter just hit the marriage lotto.

“Congratulations, sweetheart! This is so exciting. To have found such happiness in such a small amount of time.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Briar’s voice is fraught, like she might actually kill her mom if she gets too close. She pushes back from the table and stands.

“Briar, sit down,” Sofie insists, her cheeks reddening while everyone watches in fascinated horror at the drama playing out at the table. “You’re causing a scene.”

“A scene?” Briar barks out a laugh. “No, this isn’t a scene, but I can cause one if you really want me to, Sofie.”

Her gaze pierces into her mom, and for a second, I swear I’m almost proud of her. And jealous for having the ability to

tell her mom to fuck off.

“Briar—” Dad starts, and her glare cuts to him.

“No. Absolutely not. You can take your money, and your house, and your fucking degree. You can shove it where the sun doesn’t shine. You will *not* dictate my life to me.”

Without another word, she storms from the room, like a hurricane leaving a deathly quiet in its wake.

I press my lips together to stop the smile that wants to form.

Chase turns to glare at me and slams his hand down on the table. “Travis, fix this. Right fucking now. You had one job!”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes at him, I nod. “I told you it wouldn’t go well, springing it on her like this.” I take the napkin from my lap, wipe at my mouth and throw it on the table, nodding to each of the boys. “Let’s go clean up their mess, shall we?”

---

“This is seriously fucked up,” Asher seethes. He’s been on a rampage since we came down to the basement half an hour ago. I’ve barely said two words since we came down here, because I know he and Sawyer are going to be almost as pissed at Cole and me as Briar will be when she finds out just how long I’ve known about all of this.

I don’t know why I didn’t tell them. We don’t usually hide anything from each other, but this...

Yeah, even I knew it was shitty.

At first, I agreed because I didn’t have a choice and Briar was a nameless, faceless girl who meant nothing to me. It’s easy to be the asshole when you’re not invested. Just ask my dad. He is the ruler of Dickville. He is Asshole Supreme.

Once I realized who she was, I tried to talk my dad out of his and Theo’s stupid fucking plan, but it’s like shouting at a brick wall. Absolutely fucking useless.

Fi and Hellion have just been lying down, watching Asher pace while Sawyer sits with the puppies.

“Our parents have all lost their goddamn minds,” Sawyer grumbles. “Did you see those airheads that Mom thinks are just perfect for us? Gag me on a dick, because no.”

I can’t help but smile at his ridiculousness. “Since when is anyone in our world of their right mind?” I counter.

“That doesn’t make any of this any better.” Asher crouches down and grabs a handful of his hair, taking his glasses off and pinching the bridge of his nose. “We need to find her. She’s already dealing with Serena’s death, Penn being MIA, Crawford being an absolute dick,” he pauses, looking directly at me. “Which is entirely your fault and you need to fix it, just FYI. And she’s still fucked up about her mom’s pregnancy, even though she’s pretending she isn’t, and now this. Why aren’t you angrier? Did you know?”

Cole opens his mouth to speak when the door to the basement opens and Tobias appears.

“Sir, it seems Briar took the Porsche. The tracking has her back at the campus.”

I nod at him, letting out a deep breath.

At least she didn’t run.

Well, not yet anyway.

“Thanks, T. What would I do without you?”

He grins at me widely. “Do your own tracking, sir?”

Sawyer snorts a laugh behind me. “Good one, T.”

Tobias winks at me and I let out my first laugh of the evening. “Thank you, T. What’s happening upstairs?”

“You don’t want to know, sir. Trust me. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I shudder at the thought of what could be going on up there. Some things really should be kept under wraps.

Tobias leaves and I turn back to the guys. “I guess we should head back home, give Briar some time to calm down before we go find her.”

“Sounds like a plan. Speaking of Serena, any update from your cop friend, Cole?” Asher asks.

Cole lets out a sigh and swigs back his drink. “Not yet, but I’m going to chase him this week. If he doesn’t have news, I’ll go down to the station. Especially since it links to Briar.”

“Especially now that she’s your fucking fiancée,” Asher snarks from across the room.

I let out a sigh, knowing this particular bone of contention isn’t going to be eased anytime soon.

“I wouldn’t call her my fiancée, considering she may as well have fled the country at the announcement,” Cole retorts. “And it’s not like I chose this. You know how my dad is.”

“Even if she’s yours to the world, she’ll always be mine,” Sawyer adds, stroking Shadow’s head. “We agreed to share, you don’t get to renege on that.”

“You know I never would,” Cole says, staring at Sawyer.

I keep my own opinions out of it. They know where I stand with her. I can’t touch her. No matter how much I want her. It would put her more at risk than she already is, and between a fucking stalker, her mom, and my dad, she’s got enough bullshit to carry.

She doesn’t need anything else working against her.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I shut their voices out as I read the message from my dad.

Asshole Supreme:

Find the girl. Get her on board. You already know the consequences if you fail. For you both.

Me:



She's at campus, I'm going to let her cool off, but I have a plan. I'm fully aware of what's at risk.

I pocket my phone and crack my knuckles, trying not to let fear overwhelm me. My dad and his fucking threats. The problem is, I know they aren't idle, especially if they involve Katy. Everything I've done since Mom died was to keep her safe, and no matter how much I want Briar, no matter how much she makes my soul feel at peace, Katy comes first.

Always.

My phone buzzes again and my hand shakes a little as I read it.

Asshole Supreme:

Good. Because I'm sure that isn't a funeral you want to attend.  
Do not push me, Travis.

"We need to head home," I announce as I stand. Phoenix lets out a yip as he bounds over to me, and I bend down and scoop him into my arms.

"What's wrong?" Asher asks, watching me closely. These three are probably the only people in the world who know my tells.

"Just my dad," I say, brushing it off. "Let's worry about Briar for now."

He continues to watch me and, after a few seconds, nods before letting out a whistle, and the dogs all rush to him as Sawyer and Cole stand. "I changed my mind. Let's go find her."

---

The car ride back to campus is tense as fuck and I hate it. It's rare we let our parents' bullshit get between us. I don't think it's actually happened since eighth grade, after the whole birthday fiasco, so it pisses me off that they've managed to do it now.

Even if it is because of a girl.

If anything, it pisses me off *more* that it's because of a girl, but if it was ever going to be any girl, of course it's her.

At least this storm matches my mood. Rain like this is fucking rare in November, but it's fitting. Thunder cracks through the sky as the lightning illuminates the world around us.

I crank up the music in the car to drown out the silence, *Deep End* by I Prevail filling the space, and tap my thumbs against the steering wheel along with the beat, singing the lyrics like it'll fix everything. There is nothing quite like screaming a song at the top of your lungs while driving to expel all your demons.

At least for a time anyway.

This song is way too fitting right now though.

I turn the volume up even louder, trying to push through my fear and anger as I sing it out. Cole ends up tapping against the dash in time to the drums of the song and I hear Sawyer singing along too.

Music is one thing that has always helped us all. Our own personal escape. Our own little rebellion against the lives set out before us.

It draws to a close before I'm ready, so I put in on repeat and Brian Burkeiser aptly sings, "everything is not o'fucking kay."

My phone starts to ring mid-song, and I glance at it in its cradle, shocked to see Briar's name on my screen.

I hit the button on the steering wheel to answer the call, stopping the shrill ringtone.

Her sobs fill the car and it's like every single one of us just got hit by the lightning outside. Fear runs through me, freezing my black heart.

“Briar?” I call out, the others staying deathly silent. The sound of the thunder echoes down the line, drawing out her sobs, so I call out her name again, but she still doesn't respond.

“Fuck,” I shout, hitting the steering wheel. “Briar! What the fuck is going on? Where are you?”

Her sobs continue, but then her voice comes through the speakers so fucking quietly I almost miss it. “Travis, I think I killed him. I think he's dead.”

## CHAPTER TWO

---

BRIAR

There isn't another soul around. Here in this darkness, it's just me and what I've done.

My fingers are numb, and I can't even really feel the rain drops on my face anymore.

I wonder if this is what life always had in store for me.

There is poetry in finding an ending in something that you thought so magical, so beautiful, that brought you so much joy.

Lying in the wet mud, the weight of his body against mine, I can barely breathe. I don't know if it's panic for what I did, or for what he did, or even just the weight of him... but filling my lungs with air feels impossible.

"BRIAR!"

I blink in the rain and realize Travis is still on the phone, screaming at me.

"Briar, where the fuck are you?"

"Behind the library," I manage as my teeth start to chatter. A storm in November is a rare thing of beauty, but I didn't intend to be out here this long, and I can't move.

*Oh God, I'm going to die.*

"We're coming, Briar." That voice doesn't belong to Travis. It's too soft. Too kind.

He must be with the others.

He would never speak to me with such fear laced in his words.

“I don’t know who’s dead, she didn’t say.” The voice filters down the line, but it sounds so far away.

My eyes flutter closed, and I find refuge in the darkness. It’s like all the fear has left me, and the calm that I usually associate with darkness finds me. The sounds of the storm fill my senses as the weight of his body slowly crushes me.

“Briar!” The shouts of my name reach me and I open my eyes, noticing the streams of light in the distance.

I open my mouth to call out, but it’s all I can do to breathe. It’s like my body is shutting down after everything. I never considered how heavy a dead body is, but now I know that it’s absolutely crushing.

“Briar! Fuck!” Asher’s voice is like a warm balm to my frozen soul. I can’t see him, but I can hear them, the grunts that come before the relief of the weight on my chest, as air rushes into my lungs. I cough and splutter at the cold air as it hits me.

“Who is it?” I hear Cole ask between the sounds of the still-raging storm.

“Fuck!” Sawyer shouts before I hear his brother’s voice again.

“Shit, Briar,” Asher hisses. “She’s fucking frozen.”

“Sawyer, Cole, go get another car,” Travis instructs, and I hear Sawyer’s objections fade into the storm.

Asher’s face appears above mine, his hand on my face. “Can you move, Beautiful?”

I try to open my mouth to speak, but I think shock has me in its grip, because I can’t move or say a thing.

“Fuck this,” I hear before I’m lifted into the air. “She needs to get out of this cold. Wait here for the others, and deal with that.”

“She needs to get warm, Travis,” Asher argues. “She needs medical attention and I can look after her.”

“So can I.” Travis holds me against his chest and I think I might actually be delusional at this point. Warmth seeps into my cheek, but I can barely feel anything else.

I blink and then he’s strapping me into the car. “I’ve got you, just stay awake for me.”

The yips from the puppies tug at the corners of my consciousness, and I feel a wet lick on my cheek.

“Keep her company, buddy,” Travis whispers, and I realize Shadow is sitting with me. The door slams closed, and my eyes drift shut, despite the whimper from the puppy on my lap.

In the back of my mind, I know that Travis is in the car and we’re moving, the warmth from the heaters blasting at me along with the heated seats, but I can barely feel it. It’s just made the air super thick, and I can feel my throat drying out.

I don’t know how much time passes, but the next time my eyes open, I’m back in Travis’s arms as he opens the door to the house. A piercing whistle cuts through the sounds of the storm, followed by the yips and barks of the dogs before he strides into the room and gently places me down on the couch. He stays crouched with me, brushing my wet hair from my face. “We need to dry you off and warm you up. Can you undress?”

His voice is softer than I think I’ve ever heard and I blink at him, trying to make my brain actually work.

“I can do that,” I croak. “Was he dead?”

“Don’t worry about that right now. That piece of shit can rot for all I care. Let’s get you dry and warm, and then you can tell me what happened.”

“Okay,” I say with a small nod. He offers me his hand and helps me to my feet. My legs are shaky but he anchors me while I peel off the sopping wet clothes that thud to the ground when I drop them.

Any sort of modesty I should have is living far away in the depths of my shock-addled mind. I can barely feel right now, so caring about him seeing me basically naked again isn't exactly top of my list.

He runs a thumb over my throat and I wince at how sore it is. His face darkens but he takes a step back and withdraws his touch.

Once I'm down to my underwear, and he seems sure I'm not going to fall or pass out, he heads upstairs, returning with a towel, a pair of sweatpants, and a giant hoodie. "You need to get warm. Dry off and dress in these while I start the fire and get you a hot chocolate."

Usually, compliance isn't my default function, but I can just barely operate, let alone be willful enough to argue.

Did I really kill him?

I close my eyes and my breath hitches as his face flashes in my mind.

*Don't think, just do, Briar.*

I push the thoughts away. He might not be dead.

Please, God, don't let him actually be dead.

Instead of dwelling on that, I focus on doing what I can, so I finish undressing, towel off, and put on the sweats Travis gave me—ones that smell distinctly of him—before sitting in front of the fire he made for me. He hands me a mug of hot chocolate just as the front door opens and the other three pile into the room, soaking wet and covered in mud.

They all turn to look at me and my heart drops. Their stares telling me all I need to know. "He's dead, isn't he?"

---

Sitting with my knees pulled up to my chest, my arms wrapped around them and Shadow pressing into my side, I've been lost to my own spiraling thoughts since the others got



home. Travis hasn't let me out of his sight, like he thinks I'm going to run to the police and confess everything.

They wouldn't tell me anything until they cleaned up and got changed, but their silence told me enough.

I just don't know what happens now.

Do I go to the police? It was self-defense after all, but who is going to believe me?

Shadow whines as he adjusts himself, pressing his nose into my neck, and the wall of ice I've put up to try and keep myself in check cracks a little. I suck in a shaky breath before pressing my forehead against the top of his, and scratching between his ears. "It's okay, little guy."

The three of them appear at the bottom of the stairs and Travis hands out coffee to everyone, filling my now-empty hot chocolate mug before they come and sit on the couches. Asher sits beside me, Sawyer and Cole sit opposite, while Travis remains standing by the fireplace.

"How you holding up, Sunshine?" Sawyer asks softly as he leans forward, his elbows on his knees, his forehead scrunched with concern.

I shrug and take a sip of my coffee, barely able to taste it, but it's scolding hot, and that's about all I want to feel right now.

Pain keeps me sober and my emotions locked down.

Pain is my friend. Always has been.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Cole asks quietly as he mirrors Sawyer's stance. I glance over at Travis, who is watching me intently, but he doesn't say anything.

I take a deep breath and tell them what I can. "Honestly, I don't remember much. I was reading in the library when the storm hit, and I was so worked up that I went out into the storm. They're a weird love of mine. Not important, but whatever." Pausing to take a sip of my drink, I distract myself from the reality of what happened by fussing over Shadow. "I was out screaming into the storm, it was so dark and loud that

I didn't notice he was there until he was on top of me. I tried to run..."

My voice shakes and Asher reaches over to squeeze my thigh. I take another deep breath, trying to calm myself, but it's impossible to hide my shaking hands.

"But I tripped. Everything after that is a bit patchy. I just remember him being on top of me. Choking me," I say, rubbing my throat. "I tried to get him off of me, but he was too big. Too strong. All I remember is thinking I had to fight, and then there was a rock... then there was his dead weight on top of me, and I called you."

The four of them look at each other, a silent conversation happening before my eyes.

"Do you know why Noah wanted you dead?" Travis finally asks.

I shake my head. "I have no idea. He said some shit, but none of it makes sense. I thought he was just my professor, that he disliked me for whatever Sawyer said to him at the start of the semester... I never thought..."

I trail off again and try to swallow around the lump in my throat.

"Where is the body?" Travis asks, and Cole turns to face him.

"Buried. The rain should have washed away most of the DNA, but we burned the body in the hole just in case."

I blink rapidly, trying to process what he just said.

"We need to burn our clothes from tonight, just to be sure, get the cars detailed, make sure there are zero traces linking us to him."

Asher stands up and stretches. "I'll jump on the cameras, make sure nothing was picked up and scrub what I need to."

"I can go to his place, see if I can find anything that might link him to Briar," Sawyer says, standing too.

“Wait!” I shake my head, trying to make sense of this. “Why? Why would we cover this up? I didn’t do anything wrong. He attacked me.”

Cole turns to face me, frowning. “He’s a beloved tenure professor at one of the most elite colleges in the country. You are you. From the outside looking in, who would you believe was at fault? Add that on top of Chase’s campaign and you being linked to my family, there was no way we could let the police handle this officially. We have friends in the department, but you need to trust us, this is the best way to handle it.”

My eyes go wide and I squeeze my hands together, trying to stop the tremors.

“This can’t be the best way,” I murmur. “If someone finds out, we’re going to look even more guilty. You guys didn’t need to do this for me. Now you’re in it just as much as I am. Holy shit.” My chest tightens as panic rises and I struggle to breathe.

This can’t be happening.

Holy shit, I’m a murderer.

And they got rid of the body.

I clutch my hands to my chest, trying to breathe, to stave off the panic that grips me, but when the edges of my vision start to fade, I know I’m fighting a losing battle.

“Briar!” Sawyer’s panicked voice cuts through my internal fear, and I feel his hands on my shoulders before I’m lifted and wrapped in his arms. The pressure of this touch wrapped around me helps to reduce the fear the smallest amount.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs in my ear as I close my eyes, trying to focus on nothing but him, despite the fear gripping me. “It’s going to be okay.”

I lose track of how long we sit like that, but when I open my eyes, Asher and Cole are gone, and Travis is still watching us from where he’s leaning against the wall by the fireplace.

“Are you back?” Sawyer whispers to me, his thumbs tracing circles on my stomach where he has his hands tucked up against my bare skin.

“I’m good. Sorry,” I murmur back, trying not to be embarrassed about my complete meltdown. All things considered, I have no idea how any of them are staying so calm.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” he responds, squeezing me again. “I’ve got to run and check out Crawford’s place, but T is going to stay with you, and Shadow is here too.”

“Okay.” The word seems so small, like I should be offering him the world for what they’ve done for me so far, but I have no idea where we go from here. What any of this means for us all.

He lifts me from his lap and puts me back on the couch, where Shadow instantly curls up on my knees. Travis moves with him to the door where they speak in hushed tones, but I try not to focus on that.

Once the door closes and I’m alone with Travis again, he comes and sits on the couch opposite me, elbows on his knees, his chin resting on his steeped fingers. “We need to talk through our story. The body is dealt with, we know people, and the guys are working on making sure there’s no traces of tonight, but we still need to make sure your alibi is intact. You said you were in the library, did anyone see you leave?”

I rack my brain, but shake my head. “I don’t think so. The library was quiet and I don’t remember seeing the librarian as I left, but I don’t know if there are cameras in there.”

“If you’re on a feed, Asher will find it and we’ll deal with it. Do you remember seeing anyone out in that field other than Crawford?”

I shake my head again. “No, I don’t think so.”

He nods before leaning back against the couch. “Then there’s no reason that you won’t get away with murder.”

## CHAPTER THREE

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Asher

Travis breaks every speed limit in existence as we head toward campus. This might be the only time I'm thankful for his intrusive, spying ways. We have her location, thanks to the tracking on the Porsche and her call with Travis, so we don't need to waste time trying to find her.

After the line went dead from her phone, I'm pretty sure my heart stopped, and all it's done since then is race in full panic mode.

We didn't get much from her, other than someone might be dead. We have no idea if she's hurt, who might be dead, how anything happened.

All I know is she was crying and it broke something inside of me.

The tires on the Range screech as they try to grip the road, despite the weather, as we pull onto the campus by the library.

Travis slams the car to a stop, and without another thought, we all pile out, flashlights on our phones slicing through the darkness, yelling through the storm as we try to find her.

It's so fucking dark out here, and the rain is so heavy it's impossible to make out anything past the reach of my arm.

I stumble across the empty space toward the tree line and pause when I notice what looks like a giant lump lying on the ground.

Oh, God, please don't let her be dead.

“Briar!” I yell as I start running toward the black shadow, my dress shoes slipping in the wet mud.

The others notice my direction and start running toward me.

“Shit,” Cole grunts as he slams into the back of Sawyer and they both tumble to the ground.

“Stop fucking around, and help me move whoever this is off her,” Travis commands, and it takes a second for his words to register.

The shadow isn’t Briar. She’s beneath whoever that is.

“Briar! Fuck!” I curse as I scramble to the body.

The two of them stand and we each grab a part of the man lying on top of her, grunting as we lift the dead weight. We flip him onto his back as he drops back in the mud and I run my flashlight over his face.

Shit.

“Who is it?” Cole asks, and I put the light on his face again.

Noah fucking Crawford.

“Fuck!” Sawyer shouts, but I don’t waste any more time on the very obviously dead professor and move to my girl.

“Shit, Briar,” I hiss as I reach down and touch her face. “She’s fucking frozen.”

“Sawyer, Cole, go get another car,” Travis barks, and Sawyer objects but does as he’s asked when Cole drags him away.

I move to look down at her, reaching down to check her vitals. Her pulse is slow and her skin is icy. If we don’t get her out of this cold, she’s at risk of way too many things. But I’m scared to move her because I have no idea what other injuries she has and I can’t access her properly here. “Can you move, Beautiful?”

I wait, very fucking impatiently, as Travis paces beside her, but despite the recognition in her eyes, she doesn’t move or

say a thing.

“Fuck this,” he shouts before he lifts her into his arms and huddles her against his chest. “She needs to get out of this cold. Wait here for the others, and deal with that.”

“She needs to get warm, Travis,” I argue. “She needs medical attention and I can look after her.” I might only be pre-med, but I know what the fuck I’m doing.

“So can I,” Travis argues as I hear another car pull up. I know there’s no point in arguing with him, not when he gets like this. “You three deal with that,” he says, nodding toward Crawford’s body. “Then come back to the house. I’ll look after her.”

“Travis—” I start to argue, but he cuts me off.

“Do not push me right now, Asher,” he snaps, and I pause, the tremors in his hands apparent, even as he holds her.

“Get her out of this rain, get her warm. We’ll be there soon,” I tell him, and without another word he strides to his Range, taking our girl and the puppies home. Sawyer and Cole reach me just as the lights of the Range come on, and I wait for the car to pull away before I turn to face them.

“What’s the plan?” Sawyer asks. “The rain is going to get rid of most of the evidence of anything happening here, but we have him to deal with. Is he actually dead?”

I move over to Crawford’s body and crouch down, pressing my fingers against his neck.

Nothing.

I check his wrist, just in case, because the carotid artery is a bastard when a body is cold, but still nothing. “Yeah, he’s dead.”

I grimace at the thought.

If only this were our first dead body.

“Cole, do you want to call your dad and have his people deal with it?” I ask, knowing that that is exactly how we

handled it last time we ended up in this fucking situation. Albeit, a little different circumstances, but still.

He shakes his head and wipes the rain from his face. “No, he’ll hold it against her. I don’t want to give them anything else to hang over her head. We need to deal with this ourselves.”

“You guys know we’re not gangsters, mobsters, or anything else like that, right?” Sawyer shouts. “We’re just fucking rich assholes who’ve seen some bad shit. How the fuck are we supposed to get rid of a body and make sure it doesn’t come back to haunt us?”

“You might just be a rich asshole, but I’ve got this covered,” Cole retorts. “Help me get him in the trunk. The rain should do most of the work here, but make sure to grab that rock too,” he says, pointing at what I assume is the weapon Briar used, considering the hole in the back of Crawford’s head.

We slip and slide in the mud as we carry the body, and while this storm makes it an absolute dick of a job, it also helps keep us hidden from sight. I already know I’m going to have to go over the campus surveillance with a fine-tooth comb if we’re going to protect her ourselves rather than outsourcing.

I can’t afford to fuck it up.

I won’t put her at risk.

With the body stowed in the trunk, we run across the field a few times to try and cover up any existing footprints and just have to hope the storm does the rest of the job for us.

Once we climb in the car, I run my hand through my soaking wet hair and look to Cole in the driver’s seat. “What now?”

“Now we burn and bury the body. We need to make sure there’s nothing linking any of us to him tonight. So we need to go to his place and check through his shit, burn our clothes, and clean this car,” Cole answers, his voice an icy calm. I knew his dad was into some shady shit, that he kept us from



some of the shit he's had to deal with... but I would never have guessed he'd be capable of this.

Then again, I never thought we'd all fall for the same girl, and I'd be lying to myself if I thought we were doing this for any reason but her.

He starts the engine before I get a chance to ask where we're going, but I don't need to know. Not really.

I already know I'd do anything for her.

Including burying this body.

---

Once we're back at the house and I know Briar is safe, even if she's not okay, I start to relax a little. Sawyer filled me in on her panic attack earlier, and we all agreed after that, without saying a word, we would camp out with her and the dogs in the living room.

She didn't want to move, and none of us wanted to not be near her, so she's asleep, wrapped in Sawyer's arms opposite me, while I'm sitting with my laptop on my lap, combing through the campus surveillance, making sure there's no trace of her or us tonight. Cole is in the armchair, asleep, but on edge. He wakes up every fifteen minutes or so and just watches her.

I have no idea where we go from here, how we go back to pretending none of this happened, or what life is going to look like considering the last twenty-four hours, but I also know I'm not willing to give her up.

Neither murder nor marriage is enough to keep me from her.

If anything, both make me want to protect her even more than I already felt the urge to do.

Travis skulks around the kitchen in the dim lighting, like he's trying to keep himself busy. He hasn't sat down since Cole and I came down after Briar's panic attack. He might not

have wanted to own up to her about how he feels, but after tonight, I'm not sure there's a way to hide it.

Not that he won't try. Travis Kensington isn't anything if he's not stubborn.

"Anything?" Cole asks as he yawns, stretching out in the chair. I shake my head as I continue to loop through the various cameras covering that part of campus.

"Not yet, the storm seems to have knocked out some of the systems, so some cameras were down anyway, others didn't cover the area, and those that did... well, it was too dark to pick anything up. I think our biggest issue will be if anyone in the library saw them." I push up my glasses, pinching the bridge of my nose, trying to stave off the pressure headache that's pushing at the back of my eyes.

Standing, I head into the kitchen and pour another cup of coffee that I so desperately need. Cole follows me in and I hand him one too. The clock on the wall reads three thirty in the morning, and I groan. At least tomorrow is Saturday.

"We need to get to bed, if we're going to act like nothing happened, that this was just a normal shitty weekend after a crappy dinner with our folks, nothing can seem out of place." They both nod at my words, but they have to have been thinking something similar.

Not that any of us make a move to go upstairs, instead choosing to stare at Briar and Sawyer while they sleep on the couch.

"Can we hack into Crawford's email? Have him contact the Dean with a family emergency or something to explain him not coming back next week?" Travis asks, glancing at me before settling his gaze back on Briar.

"I can do that," I say with a nod. "Finals are starting soon too, so we need to make sure she's as focused as she can be for those if we're going to try to just be as normal as possible."

"You really think she's going to be able to just pretend last night didn't happen?" Cole asks with a snort. "She isn't like us."

“I wouldn’t underestimate her. She might not be like us, but how much do we really know about what she lived through before entering the shit show that is our lives?”

Travis laughs under his breath. “I know plenty. You think our dads would bring them into the family and set her up to marry Cole if they didn’t?”

Movement from the couch makes us pause, and I swear I practically hold my breath, because this is a conversation we need to have and it’ll be easier if she’s asleep for it.

Sawyer stirs, grinning down at her when he realizes where he is, before glancing over at us. I’m not sure what he sees over here, but his smile drops and he slowly extracts himself from our girl before padding barefooted over to us.

“Coffee?” he asks, and I nod at the machine. “What did I miss?”

I run him through the whole lot of nothing I’ve found, Travis’s email idea, and bring the conversation back to where it needs to be. “We were just talking about the engagement.”

Unsurprisingly, Cole is staying extremely quiet about it.

Sawyer glares at the two of them. Like with everything else, he’d somehow managed to block that little doozy out. “Oh, yeah, that fucking shit bomb of gross glitter. Where the fuck did that come from?”

I move to stand beside him, my back to our girl, trying to protect her from whatever is about to spew from their mouths.

“Our dads have had it in play since before Dad married Sofie,” Travis confesses, and I ball my hands into fists.

Of fucking course he’s known this entire time. It explains his iceman routine with her a little more.

“And you didn’t think to share with the freaking class?” Sawyer hisses at him. I clench my jaw, because if I say one goddamn word, I’m going to flip my shit cause this is utter bullshit.

“You were already in too deep with her. From the moment you saw her, I could tell,” Travis explains, and I bark a laugh.

“And what’s your excuse for not telling me? I wasn’t even there that night.”

“Our dads told us not to say a word,” Cole interjects. “They wanted us to get close to her, to befriend her, have it happen organically.”

“And not telling us helps that how?” Sawyer asks as he runs a hand through his hair, tugging on it, exasperated.

“What were we supposed to say? Oh shit, the girl we all slept with is going to be my wife, back off and help me trick her into a relationship?” Cole deadpans, and I roll my eyes.

“Yeah, exactly that. Since when do we let our parents’ bullshit get between us?” I retort, glaring at him.

“Arguing about it isn’t going to make a difference,” Travis says coldly. “These are the facts of our lives.”

“And what if we won’t give her up?” Sawyer counters, crossing his arms across his chest while I try to take deep breaths and glance back at our girl. Her face is scrunched up in her sleep and I can’t help but wonder what’s haunting her dreams, hoping it’s not Crawford, even if it is foolish to hope.

“Did I ask you to?” Cole throws back. “This wasn’t my idea, I got as much choice in this deal as you did. As she did. Have you ever tried to stop my dad from doing anything? I have, and it doesn’t end well. The only way to protect her was to go along with it. I was willing to do that before I knew her, so how do you think I feel now?”

“How *do* you feel now?”

My breath hitches at her voice and I turn to face her, knowing the others are all feeling as caught as I do.

“Well?” she says, tilting her head as she watches us. “How do you feel now?”

# CHAPTER FOUR

---

BRIAR

*My breath is ragged as I run across the darkened expanse, his laughter taunting me, getting closer no matter how hard I run.*

*“You need to keep fighting, Briar.”*

*Iris’s voice rings through my mind. Something that used to fill me with warmth and joy, now sends an icy shiver down my spine.*

*What if this is the last time I hear her?*

*I trip in the darkness, hitting the ground with a thud, his laughter ringing in my ears.*

*“There’s nowhere for you to run, Briar. I will always find you.”*

*Except, that can’t be right. I was running from my professor. Not him.*

*No.*

*He can’t have found me.*

*Not again.*

*I won’t survive him again.*

*I barely escaped last time.*

*I push to my knees, my body screaming at me in pain as I try to stand. I just need to keep running. If I keep running, he can’t catch me. And if he can’t catch me, I’ll be safe.*

*Running always keeps me safe.*

I'm wrenched from my nightmare by raised voices, and it takes a second for me to calm my breathing and accept this reality, despite my brain telling me I need to run.

"And what if we won't give her up?" Sawyer says, his voice cold and harsh. I don't think I've heard him sound like that before, but I use his voice as an anchor to connect me to where I am. Sitting up, I tune into what's going on across the room, since no one seems to have noticed that I'm awake.

"Did I ask you to?" Cole responds icily. This might be as close to an argument between them as I've ever witnessed. They don't seem to break rank too often in front of people. They might avoid talking to each other and disagree with their actions, but they never argue. "This wasn't my idea, I got as much choice in this deal as you did. As she did. Have you ever tried to stop my dad from doing anything? I have, and it doesn't end well. The only way to protect her was to go along with it. I was willing to do that before I knew her, so how do you think I feel now?"

Huh. Didn't see that coming.

After everything else that happened tonight, I almost forgot about my impending engagement, complete pile of bullshit that it is, and I'm absolutely not going through with it. Not after everything.

They should have just told me.

I take advantage of the pause in their conversation and speak up. "How *do* you feel now?"

They turn to face me, a mixture of shock and 'oh shit' running across their faces as they realize I'm awake and privy to their conversation.

"Well?" I say, tilting my head as I watch them squirm. "How do you feel now?"

I don't ask it of anyone in particular, but my gaze doesn't leave my supposed fiancé.

“You definitely seemed to feel something when you fucked me during halftime,” I bite, quirking a brow as I lean back against the cushions of the couch, folding my arms across my chest. “You didn’t seem to mind pretending to want me when it benefited you that way. Or was that just a part of your plan? Fuck me, hope that I fell for you, so when daddy dearest announced his plan, I’d just get swept up in the joy of a wedding? At having been plucked from poverty like this is some sort of Cinderella story?”

“Briar—” Travis starts, and I cut my gaze to him.

“I wasn’t asking you, Travis.” I’m harsher than I should be, considering how much they’ve saved my ass tonight, but I’m trying not to think about that right now. “I was speaking to my *fiancé*.”

Cole visibly gulps, but seems to slide his cool mask into place and looks totally indifferent.

“That isn’t what that was,” he says, folding his arms over his wide chest. “That was just us. I wasn’t exactly thinking about my dad while I fucked you.”

Sawyer laughs and ducks out of sight, further into the kitchen space.

“You still didn’t answer my question. How do you feel now?”

“This is ridiculous, we have more important shit to deal with right now, Briar. Like you killing someone,” Travis interjects, and it’s like he poured a bucket of ice water over my head. “How about we talk about that, and the fact that we’re basically your accomplices since we dealt with it? How about you think of that before you attack us for shit we had no control over?”

I press my lips together, clenching my hands to fists to hide the tremors in them, even with my arms folded over my chest.

“I didn’t ask you to do any of that. I would have called the police, explained that he attacked me.” I adjust my position,



curling my knees against my chest as I brush a hand against my bruised throat.

*Hell, that hurts.*

“Even if no one believed me, it would have been the truth. Evidence would have been on my side. I would have dealt with the consequences of it, like normal people do.”

“You ungrateful—” Travis starts, but Cole slaps a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“Don’t,” he says lowly. “She doesn’t understand any of it, so of course she thinks that way.”

“What don’t I understand?” I challenge, and Asher moves to come and sit with me while Travis and Cole head out the back of the house into the yard.

My eyes follow them out and I notice the sun is starting to paint the sky already.

God, how long was I asleep?

“What you don’t understand,” Asher says softly as he sits on the coffee table in front of me, placing his hands on my knees. “Is that if you’d have brought that sort of attention to the Kensingtons, and, well... some things in life are worse than death. I know you’ve known struggle, but having someone like Chase actively working against you to put you down and keep you down? Add the Becketts to that? That is a grave you’ll lie in—alive—and slowly suffocate. We couldn’t let that happen to you.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, musing through his words. It still doesn’t make any sense to me. The truth always wins out, right? That’s the whole point of the justice system.

When I say as much, Sawyer laughs and comes to join us. “One thing I’ve learned from my dad is that justice is a lie. The people who win court cases are the people with the best story. The truth doesn’t mean shit. The best liars always win. That is the truth of the real world.”

I cradle my head in my hands, pulling at my messy hair. “This is all freaking nuts.”

“It is, but we did what we thought was best to protect you. Cole dug that grave shoulder to shoulder with us, to protect you. Do you really think he’d have done that if he didn’t feel something for you? We could have called in his dad’s people, but he didn’t want to give Theo more to hold over you. Chase already seems to have plenty with your mom.” Asher’s reasoning makes sense, but it still doesn’t sit right.

None of this sits right, and my brain just can’t make sense of it.

Like the fact that up to this point, I’ve felt absolutely nothing about the fact that I murdered a man last night. Even if it was in self-defense. It’s like the part of my brain that deals with that is completely shut down. I should feel fear, guilt... something. But all I have is anger. Anger that they lied to me about the engagement.

It’s as if focusing on that is the flimsy lock keeping everything else hidden in a box beneath the surface.

“We’ve got you, Briar,” Sawyer says as he sits beside me and tucks me under his arm. “We’re not going to let anything hurt you. And that means Crawford, our families, or hell, even yourself. You just need to trust us.”

I huff out a glimpse of a laugh. Yeah, because trust is just that easy.

---

After getting nowhere with Travis and Cole, the twins and I retreated to Asher’s room with the puppies, though Fi and Hellion stayed with the other two.

One day I’ll win them over.

Maybe.

We’ve been bingeing *Supernatural* in bed all morning after showering again with me as the filling in this twin sandwich. I will never complain about them indulging that particular love of mine. We’ve all drifted in and out of sleep throughout the morning, but now they’re both asleep and my bladder is

making me squirm as I try to find a way to wiggle out from between them and the puppy pile at the end of the bed without waking everyone.

“You okay, Sunshine?” Sawyer whispers sleepily, bringing his hand up to my cheek and stroking it before brushing my hair out of my face.

“I’m good, just need the bathroom.”

He smiles at me, his eyes still half closed, and wraps his arms around me before rolling onto his back, pulling me over him as he does. I press my lips together so as not to laugh too loudly and wake Asher. “There you go, problem solved.”

I shake my head and laugh as I stand before dashing into the bathroom. Once I’ve sorted myself out, I stare at my pale reflection in the mirror. The dark bags under my eyes make me look haunted, but the purple staining my throat steals the show.

I guess turtlenecks are all I see in my near future.

The twins already talked me through how we have to pretend like everything’s normal, which it seems is fine with me, because I’ve somehow detached myself from everything that happened last night.

It’s beyond messed up, but it’s like it happened to someone else.

I don’t *feel* anything about it, despite knowing I should. I *should* be afraid we’re going to get caught, I *should* feel guilty about what I did, I *should* be confused about *why* he attacked me, but I can’t even bring myself to think about the why.

It’s like my brain finally broke and decided we’re a full *nope* about everything that happened.

Unhealthy? Most definitely, but if I have to act like nothing happened, then I’m not going to question my insane detachment since it’s going to help me. I’m not foolish enough to think it won’t catch up to me at some point, I’m just hoping that by then, we’re past the point of getting caught.

I splash my face with water and pull my hair up into a messy bun on the top of my head with the elastic from my wrist.

I can do this.

I glance at the bruising again, feeling shame filter through me. The last time I had bruises like this...

*Nope, not going down that rabbit hole.*

Letting out another deep breath, I dry my face and pad back out to the bedroom, Asher's t-shirt skimming the bottom of my ass. He's still asleep when I reach the bed, but Sawyer is lying there, his arm tucked behind his head, watching me approach.

"Ready to get some more sleep, Sunshine?"

I give him a small smile and nod. Moving to straddle him since he just grins at me rather than moving, I shimmy back into my spot, Shadow yawning loudly as I tuck my feet back against him. He lifts his head and rests it on my feet as if telling me I can't move again.

At least, even if everything else blows up in my life, I have this little ball of squish.

I get comfy and Sawyer turns behind me, his front pressed against my back, and bundles me in his arms again, pressing his lips against the bruise on my neck. "I hate seeing his handprints on you."

I wrap my arms around his and tighten his hold on me. "Me too, but I survived, and that's what counts."

He presses his lips against my shoulder and I loosen a breath. I already know I'm not going to be able to sleep. It should be because I killed someone, it should be because I'm worried about what the guys did, it should be because we could all get caught.

Yet all I can focus on is the fact that I heard her voice when I was in danger, and that's never happened before. Even when I've been in bad situations, I've kept her locked so far down that nothing but survival matters.

But I heard her, and I know it was just a trick of my mind. Logically, I couldn't be more aware of it. But irrationally, I can't let it go, despite knowing it's not real.

I'm not the sort to go and find danger, but hearing her voice again... it might almost be worth it.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Asher murmurs, his eyes fluttering open in front of me, and Sawyer's hold on me tightens.

"You should be asleep," I whisper, and a tired smile dances on his lips.

"I could say the same about the both of you." He pauses as he stretches and turns so he's fully facing me. "Now what was that look about?"

"Look?" I ask, trying to be coy, knowing exactly what he's talking about.

He rolls his eyes at me and Sawyer laughs in response. "Oh, lord, not the eye roll."

"Yes, the eye roll," Asher snarks. "And you, Beautiful, the look like you're about to run into a burning building. That look."

"Oh, that look," I respond quietly. I consider lying, but I'm so tired of lies and secrets between us, and I'm fairly certain that the twins haven't lied to me once. I have no doubt they have secrets, but telling them some of this doesn't really affect them or their lives. "That look was about Iris. My baby sister."

Asher glances over my shoulder at Sawyer, doing that twin conversation thing they do that nobody else is in on, but neither of them actually speak. Instead, Asher reaches forward and intertwines his fingers with mine before bringing my hand to his lips and kissing my skin softly. Neither of them push me to keep speaking, but it's like hearing her voice, uttering her name, cracked the dam that I keep my memories of her behind.

"She was six years younger than me, a surprise for my mom, but she became the center of my universe. She was the light of my day, the spark of joy in the dark and twisty that was the rest of my existence. She gave me hope that things

could be better. I could survive the bad stuff if it meant she didn't go through it. I could deal with being hungry if it meant she wasn't. She gave me hope, she gave me purpose... and then my mom killed her.”

The words are like ash on my tongue. Everything turns bitter and the warmth leaves the room.

They both stay quiet while I work through my feelings, trying to find the words to tell them the truth of what happened. I close my eyes, because I can't see the judgment or pity in their eyes while I tell them about her.

Tell them the reason that I'll never be worthy of having the life being offered to me by being here at Saints U.

The reason that I should be rotting in a cell, that they should have just let me go to the police and be met with overdue justice.

“I went out one night. I was sixteen and my friend Emerson persuaded me that going out was the best thing to do. I was young and dumb, so I figured why not? What was the worst that could happen? My mom was home, so Iris would be safe. Or so I thought. I should have known better. I *did* know better, but I wanted to be a kid... just for one night.” I pause, taking a shaky breath. “My mom might have killed her, but it was all my fault.”

“Briar—” Asher starts, but I shake my head, knowing if I don't tell them now that I never will.

“We weren't far away, our part of the city was dingy and dirty, but it was home. Emerson just wanted to flirt with some guys a few streets over. When I heard the sirens blaring through the streets, I don't know how I knew, but I just did. I ran home, knowing with every piece inside of me that something was wrong. Once I finally reached our ramshackle, crumbling one-story, I found the house ablaze and my mom outside lying on a stretcher, oxygen mask on her face as she was being put into an ambulance.

“I looked for Iris everywhere, but a cop had me in his grip. He wouldn't let me get any closer to go and find her despite

my kicking and screaming that I had to find my sister. There were people everywhere, but nobody would listen to me. All I could taste was the ash in the air as the smoke filled my lungs. Panic took over my entire body because, deep down, I knew. I knew even before I got there that she was gone.

“But it wasn’t until I saw the tiny black bag being wheeled out of the house as the firefighters still worked on putting out the rest of the fire. In that moment, everything clicked into place for me. I found out later that my mom had tried to cook dinner. Except she got so high that she passed out. The stove caught fire and it took the entire house with it. She was found first because she was by the door, but Iris... her room was attached to the kitchen. The firefighter found Iris under her bed, the place where I told her to hide when things went bad so no one could find her, and she burned just like everything else in my life. It turned to dust, and I’ve never forgiven my mom, or myself for it. Tonight... tonight I heard Iris’s voice in my head, and I can’t figure out how I feel about it.”

“Briar,” Asher says softly, squeezing my hand as Sawyer holds me tighter. “I am so sorry about Iris... but that wasn’t your fault.”

I shake my head, wiping away the errant tear that slips down my face. “It was my fault as much as last night was my fault. Some things cling to your soul forever and tear into it. It seems fitting that the biggest tear of my life was present for the second. Now I just have to learn how to live with more scars. But I survived everything else, I can survive this too.”

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I pull the Batmobile up in front of the small but cozy-looking two-story house and feel instantly nervous, which is insane.

“Come on already!” Penn commands, before practically bouncing out of the car. I wish I could inhale some of her excitement. When she invited me for dinner with her family, I said yes, but now that we’re here, I’m so nervous.

This new world of mine has come with so many new parts, but one thing I don't think I'll ever get used to are the family meals and the big extreme that everybody seems to go to.

We reach the door and Penn pauses, turning to face me with a grin. "Oh, and I should probably tell you... I'm adopted."

My jaw practically hits the floor, but she doesn't give me a chance to ask questions. Instead, she just opens the door and loudly announces our arrival before pulling me in behind her. The shouts of hello are loud, the people a little overwhelming as they hug her before she gets yanked off into what I think is the dining room with the crowd, and I end up standing there like a lost cause.

I walk further into Penn's parents' house, wondering why the hell I agreed to this, despite the fact that I'm supposed to be acting normal, because people are so not my thing.

And there are so many of them here.

"Briar? You must be Briar! I'm Camila, Penn's mom. It's so lovely to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you. Please, come in, come in." I blink at the golden-skinned, dark-haired woman who positively glows with warmth as she greets me. Yep, I'm glad Penn told me she was adopted, because well... this is a trip and a half. I mean, sure, I know Dante, and I know they look nothing alike, but cousins don't have to.

I shake my head so my insanity doesn't spill out of my mouth and refocus on Penn's mom, who is still waiting on me. Camila waves as she pushes me further into the hall, and I hear cheers in the dining room, or what I assume is the dining room, where Penn went. The laughter is loud and there are so many voices. The sound of children laughing and playing as they run through the house. It's so... different.

They may not have much in the way of money if I go by what Penn has told me, but it's very obvious to me that these people are rich in ways that the Kensingtons are not. They have love, they have family. And honestly, it's more than a little overwhelming.



I have never experienced something like this in my life.

Even when Iris was alive.

Most of the time, it was just the two of us. Three if Mom could sober herself up long enough to join us. But that was all the family I ever had.

Seeing the way the Kensingtons work, while it's not familiar, is closer to what I've always known. But this... this is a whole other world.

I enter the kitchen at Camila's insistence and find what I can only assume are more of Penn's family. There are half a dozen women of all ages in here, and I get lost in a whirlwind of introductions and names that I'm never going to remember, because Penn fully abandoned me the moment she was swept into the dining room.

Once the introductions are finished and I'm sitting at the table, I'm given a bowl with dough of some sort to knead. I have never kneaded dough in my entire life, so I have no idea what I'm doing, but I smile and I nod, listening to the exuberant sounds that go on around me from the chatter of the women in the room that bounces between Spanish and English. Half of which I have no understanding of because Spanish is not something I'm fluent in. Despite every attempt to the contrary in my education, languages are just not my thing.

But there is something about the love and warmth of this house. It might be small and crammed full of people, but I have never felt so instantly accepted and *protected* in my entire life.

Penn eventually comes to find me, having extracted herself from the insanity that is her very overwhelming family, and sits down beside me. Taking the ball from in front of me, she rolls her eyes as she grabs more flour and adds it to the sticky mess that I've created in the bowl.

She speaks in Spanish to what I assume is her grandma, because the word 'abuela' sneaks in and that's one word that I actually recognize.

*Thank you, TV.*

I sit and listen while trying to pick the sticky dough from my fingers before giving up and finally washing my hands, just enjoying feeling like I'm a part of something so healthy and warm.

"Briar, I didn't expect to see you here." I turn at the sound of Dante's voice, smiling instantly. He grins back at me from the doorway he's leaning against.

"I could say the same about you," I counter as I move toward him. It's only when his stare glances over my shoulder that I realize the chatter in here has stopped.

"This is my family, Briar, of course I'm here." His smile is still wide and he's playful, but from the hiss behind me, I get the feeling he's just fucked up while I stand here baffled.

Penn turns and glares over at him. "It's her family now too, idiot."

All of the women in the room stop, turning to also stare at Dante, whose eyes go wide, and he holds up his hands in surrender. "I didn't mean anything by it. I was just coming to say hello because Grandpa's asking when food is going to be ready and is too much of a coward to come and ask himself."

I laugh and shrug it off as I take my seat back next to Penn. It's all good. I'm not offended. I'm very aware that I stick out like a sore thumb here. This crazy, loving insanity is beautiful, but it's not mine.

"It will be as long as it takes," their grandmother says, heavily accented in Spanish, before saying something else that goes completely over my head, but from the look on Dante's face, he got so *told*.

I send him a look of apology, and he gives me a small smile before he hightails it out of the kitchen, back to the fun of the other room, where moments later there's a huge roar of laughter.

I guess they heard the ear bashing he got in here.

“So, you know my Dante, Briar?” one of the women at the table asks, and Penn snickers under her breath.

I turn to the woman who looks almost identical to Penn’s mom and nod. “Yeah, I met him in the City before the summer. I had no idea he was Penn’s cousin until the first football game.”

She smiles warmly at me, but I swear I can see the cogs in her mind whirring. I open my mouth to tell her that we’re just friends, but Penn stomps on my foot beneath the table and shakes her head, so I keep my mouth shut.

The chatter starts up again, and Penn leans in close. “You try to say you’re just friends, and she’ll have the two of you married off before the year is done.”

I choke on a laugh. “Oh yeah, cause that hasn’t happened enough already this year.”

She looks at me, confused, and I realize that in trying to keep with acting normal, I didn’t fill her in on the events that happened at Thanksgiving dinner. I give her a super quick run down, avoiding any mention of Crawford, because the last thing I want to do is drag her into that mess too.

“We’ll be right back,” Penn announces, but no one really pays attention as she drags me from the table. I follow without much choice as she pulls me down the hall, up the stairs, and into what I assume is her bedroom. “Spill, in much more detail, right the hell now. Engaged?!”

I let out a deep sigh and sit on the bed, picking at the skin by my thumbnail while I try to settle my mind enough to give her the full rundown of everything. By the time I finish, her jaw is agape, and she’s looking at me like I have two heads.

“So, you’re really engaged? Rich people trip my mind the fuck out,” she exclaims as she drops onto the bed beside me.

“I have no idea, but I’m going with no. I didn’t accept anything, and I’m not letting Chase dictate my life to me. I’d rather he took away everything he has given me than let that happen. I haven’t really had time to talk it over with Cole yet either, but I intend to.”

“Girl, you live with him, you’ve had time, you’ve just stuck your head in the sand.”

If only that were true, but I’m not about to tell her the truth of it all.

“Penelope! Dinner!”

The cry from downstairs has Penn on her feet in an instant, and she giggles. “I wonder if that fear ever really leaves.”

I look at her, confused, not understanding why she’d be afraid of being called for dinner. She pulls me to my feet and loops her arm in mine, still laughing softly. “Come on, I’ll take you down, and then you’ll see.”

# CHAPTER FIVE

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“Are you sure you’ve got this?” Sawyer asks as he pulls the car up to the curb.

“I’ve got this as much as I’m gonna have it, so I might as well just get on with it. There’s nothing I can do to change what happened. And if we’ve got to pretend like nothing’s changed, then that’s what I’ve got to do,” I say, letting out a deep sigh.

Nobody else can know what happened. I’m very aware of that, and Travis has made it perfectly clear that I’m sworn to secrecy until the day I die. Because obviously, I’m some foolish idiot about to go and spill my guts to the world. “I know you guys did what you did to protect me. So I’m not about to ruin everything for you guys or what I have here.”

My words, hopefully, sound more convincing than I feel because I’ve been a whole bag of nerves and anxiety since I woke up this morning.

“While I know that Professor Crawford chose to attack me—even though we don’t fully understand why yet—I do know that what happened is not entirely my fault,” I tell him, and I’m slowly coming to grips with that, thanks to Asher constantly drilling it into my head over the last couple of days.

Sawyer smiles sadly at me. “I checked his house from top to bottom and didn’t find anything to do with you. So at least there are no traces for anybody to pick up there. It’s on my to-do list today to break into his office on campus to make sure there’s nothing in there that could lead back to you, and Asher

sent an email from his account to the dean to say that he needed an extended break. So we should be in the clear for a while.”

I take a deep breath, nodding at his attempts to reassure me, and open the door to exit the car. I move to climb out, but Sawyer grabs my forearm and pulls me back into my seat. “You think you’re getting away from me that easy?” he asks mischievously, before pulling me across the center of the car and kissing me, stealing my breath.

My toes curl as my hands ball in his t-shirt. I swear, every time he kisses me it’s like he fills me with his own brand of sunshine and all I see are fireworks. It’s cheesy but it’s true.

When he pulls back, he’s grinning at me, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “That is how you start a morning. Now you can go to class,” he says with a cheeky smile while brushing his thumb across my lips.

I shake my head, trying not to laugh too hard at him. “It’s definitely one way to start the morning.”

I grin before trying once more to climb from the car, successfully this time as I try not to think back on the way I actually started my morning with him and Asher. Now is definitely not the time to be thinking about that.

Once I close the door, he pulls away, heading off to wherever it is that he’s off to this morning, and I pop my AirPods in as I make my way across the quad to the coffee station that I know Connor will be working at. I might have already had a coffee this morning, but it’s been drilled into me that I need to act like everything is normal, that nothing has changed, so that means hitting the coffee cart first thing this morning, which is something that I do most mornings before class. Any deviation from my routine just isn’t acceptable right now.

I’m not about to cause suspicion with something as simple as coffee, especially when denying myself the good things right now isn’t something I want to do. I wait in line with *Hail to the King* by Avenged Sevenfold playing on my old school pop punk playlist. The line is freaking crazy this morning and

by the time I reach Connor, I've only got minutes left before our class is due to start.

Psych as a Profession isn't something that I want to be late for. The professor might not be an asshole like Crawford was, but I don't want to piss off anybody else. Especially not with finals just around the corner.

"Morning, Briar, did you have a good Thanksgiving weekend?" Connor asks while making my drink without even having to check my order.

We make small talk and I try to be my normal mopey-yet-bubbly self. Snarking where I should snark, trying not to overanalyze everything that comes out of my mouth.

Lying is something I should be better at, and I'm not terrible at it, but it makes me feel so freaking gross. Like each lie is a cold, wet, slimy bug crawling down my spine.

I take my coffee from him with a smile and a *thank you*, and make my way into class. I save the seat next to me for Connor, like usual, before opening up my laptop.

Turns out that trying to act as normal as possible feels weird as Hell. I smile at people I would normally smile at, ignoring the rest of them because people are not my thing, and everybody seems to have worked that out finally.

It only took a whole semester.

By the time Connor walks into class, followed swiftly by Professor Rainwater, I'm just about ready to go and prepared for class.

Connor drops into his seat beside me with a tight smile. Something is definitely wrong, but Professor Rainwater starts talking so I don't get a chance to ask him what it is.

I try to brush it off, telling myself there's no way he noticed something off with me. That he couldn't possibly know anything that happened, genius or not.

We sit through class, barely talking unless needed, and I try to focus as much as I can, knowing that finals are coming.



Just as Professor Rainwater starts to wrap up her lecture, my laptop pings and a notification pops up in my inbox.

I'm not ready for what I find waiting for me. An email from an unknown sender—I have no idea how that's even possible—with the title 'I know'. My stomach drops as I click on the message and I think I'm going to be sick. My hands go clammy and I feel the blood drain from my face as I read the short sentence on my screen.

*I know what you did, but it's okay. Because I'll protect you too.*

What the fuck even is my life right now?

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Walking to Intro to Psych with Sawyer by my side, I'm absolutely sweating bullets. I've made it through the first two days of college this week without stressing too much about Crawford. Somehow, Penn hasn't noticed that anything's wrong with me up to now, and Connor hasn't said anything either. Everything's just been as normal as I've been able to make it. Apparently I'm a better actress than I thought, because my nights have been riddled with nightmares of what happened.

I'm certain that the twins are starting to go a little nuts with their levels of concern for me, but there isn't anything I can do. If Crawford isn't chasing me in my dreams, then I see Iris burning.

Sleep really hasn't been my friend.

Today is Wednesday, which means it's supposed to be Crawford Day, which also means that I have to sit there and watch while people question where he is and I have no idea how I'm going to handle it. I vomited first thing this morning and haven't even managed to drink coffee. My stomach is in knots and I can barely focus.

I know I'm just going to have to pretend I'm sick, because I look like death and I feel like it too. It's like ice has seeped into my bones and taken hold. I'm just thankful that the sweater-weather excuses my jeans, hoodie, and beanie combo, because they're helping to hide just how awful I look right now.

Sawyer is walking me into class for a change rather than letting me go in alone, like he normally would, because the guys freaked out when they saw me this morning.

The change up would seem abnormal, but considering he's been attached to me like glue the last few weeks, thankfully, it doesn't seem odd.

I hope.

But his insistence also wasn't something I was willing to fight him on this morning. I'm too drained to fight anyone. I thought I should have a sick day after a conversation with everybody this morning, but Travis insisted that it might just look a little too suspicious for me to miss today with Crawford being gone.

So I'm here, despite the fact that I'd rather be anywhere else.

Hell, I'd take being back at the hellhole that I used to live in right now compared to being in this classroom.

I take my usual seat, Sawyer on my left, an open seat for Connor to my right, my foot bouncing on the floor as anxiety rips through me. Connor is going to have questions. While he might not suspect me of foul play, or anything nefarious in general, he's at least going to direct his questions to me. I'm the only person he speaks to in class, so who else would he talk to?

While I know logically he's not going to be questioning me, my stomach tightens again at the thought of trying to seem nonchalant about it, considering Crawford's disdain for me was known by everyone in this class.

Pulling out my laptop, I go through my normal routine for before class, reading through my notes from my last lesson.

The day before Thanksgiving.

The day before I killed my professor.

Considering everything that's happened since then, it's not a surprise that it feels like a lifetime ago. It's not surprising I feel like a neurotic fucking mess.

But here we are, trying to pretend like everything is normal.

Connor enters the room with my coffee in his hand, smiling at me as he makes his way up the stairs toward the seats that I have for us.

"Morning," he says, sitting down and dropping my coffee onto my desk. He glances at Sawyer, his normal frown in place for the twin as he opens his bag. "I didn't know if you'd still be here so I didn't bring you anything."

Sawyer shrugs it off, barely even looking up from his screen. "Coffee isn't really my thing anyway. No sweat."

I notice that he has my emails open on his laptop and, while I don't know when that happened, I'm not angry about it. After I got the weird email Monday, I had no choice but to let the guys know about it, and Cole thought it would be fun to tell them about the note I got after Serena died too. To say that Travis flipped his shit is an understatement and now my entire life is under a microscope.

I haven't had anything else pop up in the last day or so, but it has everyone spooked enough to be watching my every move, both digitally and in person. My life has become a fishbowl where they're concerned, and while that should probably piss me off a little, I'm too busy freaking out about not making myself seem suspicious that it's almost a relief to have them worry about the other stuff.

Is having zero privacy driving me insane? Not yet, though I'm sure it will.

Am I prepared to live through it for right now considering everything I've got going on in my life? Yes, yes, I am. I don't have to like it to want to stay alive. I can be a snarky bitch but still have a sliver of survival instinct. Which, for now, means

just dealing with what I've got and letting them help, despite having never accepted this much help before in my life.

I glance up at the clock and notice that ten minutes have already passed, but no one has shown up to teach yet.

I can't help but wonder what happened with Crawford's lessons earlier on this week because this can't be the first class he has.

Connor lets out a sigh of frustration. "What the hell is going on? Where is he?"

I shrug, biting my nails, trying not to panic that someone's gonna burst through that door and just scream, 'She killed him! She killed him' as the seconds feel like hours.

I know that the guys have done everything physically within their power to make sure that nobody finds out what happened on Thursday, but somehow, that doesn't really set my mind at ease. We're not exactly criminal masterminds over here. And it's not like everything that happened was quiet, even with the storm.

Anyone could have been out there in the shadows, watching what happened to me.

Watching what I did.

The email from Monday proves that somebody out there knows what I did, and I have no idea who they are or what they want from me.

Another twenty minutes pass and Connor has sat typing away on his laptop while I sit here, picking at the skin by my nail, waiting for *something* to happen.

Finally, someone enters the room, but I've never seen them before. I glance at Sawyer and he shakes his head subtly, just once, so I turn my focus back to the blond guy moving toward Crawford's desk.

"Morning, everyone. Sorry I'm late. I'm Drake, one of Crawford's TAs. Professor Crawford needed to take an extended break after the holiday so I'm filling in for him until his return. We haven't got a date on that yet, so until then, I'll

be helping you through your finals. It might be that you don't see him again if he's not back at the end of semester, and I'm sure you will hate that prospect."

Laughter rings out across the room, and Drake grins widely as he pulls a laptop from his bag and places it on Crawford's desk. It takes him a few minutes to get started, but I use the time to try to regulate my breathing without either of the guys beside me noticing that I'm basically having a panic attack.

Drake starts off the PowerPoint on Healing the Mind through the Brain, picking up exactly where Crawford left off last week with treatment of psychological disorders. I blink in shock at how *normal* it all is.

So far, nobody seems to have questioned anything. Even Connor looks happy that Crawford isn't around. Not that anybody likes Crawford, but still, I expected someone to question it.

I guess that Asher's email to the Dean from the professor's mailbox really did curb any questions that might have been asked.

Fifteen minutes before the lecture is due to end, Drake wraps up his PowerPoint and sits on the edge of the desk. "So, finals. I know it's a bit shitty of Crawford to disappear just before them, but lucky for you, I'm his favorite TA, so I've got some cheat sheets for you to help with studying."

He hands the wads of paper to Barbie in the front row, Crawford's usual suck ass, and she walks around handing them out to everyone, glaring at me as she hands me mine. I still have no idea why she hates me so much, but if she thinks glaring at me is going to make a difference to my existence, this bitch has no idea about real life.

Once the sheets are handed out and she heads back to her seat, the TA dismisses us.

I pack my bag up, trying to not throw up again. This all feels too easy. Like the other shoe is going to drop at any second and our lives are going to blow the hell up.

Sawyer takes my hand, kissing it before leading me from the room, and I'm very aware of everyone's eyes on me. This is probably a bad idea, especially since Chase and Theodore have called a 'family meeting' to discuss my supposed upcoming nuptials, but I don't stop him.

Why would I?

I don't want to be engaged. I didn't even agree to it, so I have zero desire to live up to Chase's expectations. And for all intents and purposes, Sawyer and Asher have been the only constants in my life since I arrived here. Asher even more so than Sawyer.

I'm aware that I'm spiraling in my mind, but better on this than the other mess I'm carrying.

At least with this, I can be angry at Travis and Cole for not telling us about it.

It still blows my mind that they didn't tell the twins about their dads' stupid plotting.

You wouldn't have thought from the outside looking in that the four of them have never kept anything from each other. But what I'm discovering, the more time I spend with them, is that looks are deceiving.

While they are as close as can be, everybody has their own nuances.

Cole's relationship with his dad is absolutely baffling to me, especially with the little things that I've seen. It's like when I saw Chase bitching Travis out in his office, talking about how much of a disappointment and a let down he is.

I don't understand how he can put up with everything his dad does, hate what he stands for and still strive to be just like the man. The way he chases after his dad's approval, disregarding the cost—even if it's *my* future—blows my mind.

I shake my head, aware that I can't afford to go down this rabbit hole either.

It's finals week next week, and I have so much studying to do on top of being summoned to the mansion to discuss

whatever it is that they want to talk to us about now.

“You okay?” Sawyer asks as we approach the cafeteria. I glance behind us, noticing Connor a step behind, before turning back to Sawyer and nodding.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, and paint a smile on my face as we approach Penn. “Everything is totally fine.”

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I don’t remember ever having been so stressed in my entire freaking life. And you might think that could be about my supposed engagement to Cole Beckett, you could think it would be about the fact that I killed my professor. You could, but you’d be wrong.

The most stressful part of my life right now is that it’s Thursday of finals week. I have taken five of my finals already, but today? Today I have my Abnormal Psych final and even with Professor Crawford not here, it’s like he is haunting me from the grave and every detrimental thing he has ever said to me is circling in my brain.

I can’t focus on anything, because all I can hear is his voice in my head, telling me how much I suck and how badly I’m going to fail.

I am officially a ball of stress. Scratch that, I’ve evolved from a simple ball of stress and progressed straight into a quivering mass of anxiety blanketed with insomnia and I’ve barely eaten all week. Asher has been losing his shit at me for days now because I’ve survived on coffee and cherry Lifesavers. Apparently, that isn’t the best kind of diet to pass final exams.

What he obviously doesn’t know, is that there have been weeks where I’ve survived on little more than water. But then, he’s never been in a situation where he’s had to fight to survive each day, not that that’s something I’m going to start thinking about right now.

Because hi, hello, I have to finish this final today and actually pass. Otherwise, my life plan—albeit a somewhat new plan—is going to go completely off the rails.

If I fail this semester, I can already see Chase pulling the plug on my tuition, and all that will be left for me is this stupid arranged marriage to Cole because that is the option I've been handed.

Yeah, I am not down for that. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not anytime in the future. I refuse to be a trophy wife. Forever and ever. Amen.

So now I'm sitting here, in this hall, preparing myself for this final, trying to make my brain work. But all I can think of as I look down at the paper in front of me is, *what are words?* It feels as though I can't even read the words on the page, let alone comprehend how to string together a sentence to make the jumbled thoughts in my mind make sense to answer whatever the Hell it is that this thing is asking.

I take a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before letting it out, trying to tell myself that this isn't the end of the world.

If I fail this final, at least Crawford won't be the one teaching the course if I have to retake it next year. That doesn't exactly sit that well with me because I'm very aware that fact is my fault, but I'm trying to find some sort of silver lining in this giant, fucked up mess.

And oh, look, there's my stress back again. Yay me.

I honestly thought that my US Government and Politics final would be the worst thing that could happen to me. That or, you know, Intro to Statistics. But it turns out that Asher and his math genius brain have somehow manipulated my 'I hate math' brain into being able to function with numbers.

The boy is a genius.

I don't know how he's managed to trick my brain, but he did and I'm not sorry about it. I mean, my Intro to Stats class was possibly the easiest one I've ever taken.



No, wait, my Wellness one was the easiest thing I've ever done, because all I had to do was upload my step tracker and keep a journal of the exercise I've been doing. That is, by far, the best subject of the semester.

A professor I don't recognize enters the room and starts talking at the front of the class. I can't even focus on what she's saying because my heart races and my palms start to sweat. I feel like some nineties kid chirping Eminem lyrics here because I might just go throw up mom's spaghetti all over the place.

The next three hours of my life are fucking terrifying and I can't stop how much my mind races while I stare down at the text as it swims on the page.

I just write whatever pops into my head as I try to decipher the questions while not stressing too much about what I don't know. I don't even really know what my answers are.

My last final of the week is done, and I have to tell myself what will be will be, because there isn't a damn thing I can do about it now. God knows I have enough other stuff to stress about. Especially since the end of finals means Christmas is here, and I fucking hate Christmas.

I head outside and find Asher waiting for me with Shadow at his heels, who goes crazy when he spots me. This puppy might just be the brightest spot of Serenity Falls for me, and if anyone tries to take him from me, maybe I'll kill them too.

I laugh at my own twisted thoughts as Asher lets go of the leash and Shadow runs toward me across the quad, launching himself at me. I just about manage to catch the giant fluff ball, scrubbing his tummy as I lift him into my arms. "At least you're happy to see me," I murmur, smushing up his face as he licks my cheek.

"And why wouldn't I be happy to see you?" Asher asks as he reaches me. I already know that he's here to take me home and there's going to be some sort of family meeting about the stupid dinner that got postponed, and I'm going to have to deal with it.

“You already know why.”

He responds, looking at me like he read the thoughts as they went through my mind moments ago. “Yeah, I know. But it’s not your fault that everyone’s parents are a big bunch of dicks.”

“Any news on your supposed, er... set up?”

“Sawyer and I are speaking to my parents later tonight. So it looks like there could be fireworks all around. I wouldn’t worry about it though because Cole and Travis reportedly have a plan to get you out of the engagement.”

My eyebrows shoot up, surprise all over my face because why doesn’t anybody ever include me in these conversations? Maybe I have some input that could help, but no, I’m just a stupid little poor girl thrown into the wolves’ den, expected to play along with everything.

Again, like he can read my mind, Asher laughs. “Don’t think the worst. Just come home with me and we’ll talk it all out. I swear it’s not as bad as it seems.”

So I put my faith in him, because he has yet to do me wrong, and follow him back to the car, Shadow licking at my face and neck as we go. I probably shouldn’t let the dog do that considering, you know, disgusting, but also, he is the cutest thing in existence and I’m not about to deny him one thing in my life.

By the time we get back to the house, Shadow has calmed my nerves into nothing but a distant memory. All of the fear about my finals sits in the past with just sheer joy from the puppy dog at the forefront of my mind. That is, until I walk in the house and find Travis sitting there with Sawyer and Cole.

The conversation stops abruptly as we enter the room.

“Oh yeah, because you guys obviously weren’t talking about me at all,” I snap as I put the puppy down. “Someone at least give me a hot chocolate before we have this conversation. I need calories in my life and if any of you have tacos to go along with this little meeting, that isn’t exactly going to go amiss either.”

Sawyer laughs and heads to the refrigerator, pulling out what looks like a wrapped burrito. “I went and got this for you earlier, knowing that you haven’t eaten a proper meal all week and that all of”—he waves his hand at the boys—“this would be happening. And this is why I should be your favorite.”

I laugh at him as he puts the burrito in the microwave, reheating it for me. “If you keep this up, you might just become my favorite.”

Asher laughs behind me, shaking his head at his brother’s antics.

Everybody waits until the burrito is warm and in my hands before starting the next steps of the conversation. Travis doesn’t even wait for me to swallow my first bite before he opens his big stupid mouth.

“I know how to pause the engagement,” he says. “My pops—my grandpa—is coming for Christmas. He would not approve of an arranged marriage, so my dad isn’t gonna cause too many waves if I tell him what’s going on. You might think like I do, that he’s a monster, but even monsters have things they fear, and my grandpa is exactly what my father fears.”

I look at him, taken aback, wondering just how someone called Grandpa and Pops could be so good, yet instill such fear in someone like Chase Kensington. I shrug, regardless. “If your grandfather’s so against it, why don’t you just tell him Chase’s plans outright, rather than using him as a decoy so that we don’t have to deal with it just yet?”

Travis looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Pitting Kensingtons against each other has never ended well in the past,” he says ominously. And that’s definitely a conversation I want to have more insight on, but he continues talking as if it’s not something he wants to go into. “What I know is that while my pops will take our side, we might have to play the long game with this. If I just go in now, my dad will have time to come up with another way to torture us to get what he wants. He’s not about to give up on his political career so easily. Even if he is absolutely terrified of my pops, he and Theodore will find something else, something potentially worse. They always

do. But if I tell my dad that you might make a fuss about the whole situation in front of grandpa if they keep pushing the way they have been, they'll likely give it up and let it slide. At least until my grandparents go back home. This isn't our first rodeo. So for now, we need to bide our time and bite our tongues."

"Okay, so we have a plan. I'm not sure why everybody looks so solemn," I respond, glancing around the room at everyone. This seems like a solid plan to me, so I just don't get it.

"Because my dad is still going to be a problem. So Chase might let it go and play it cool for now and encourage my dad to do the same, but my dad isn't afraid of Pops. He has nobody telling him to slow his shit down. He's already started stuff for the campaign that has us showing up together, so it's not going to be as simple as it might seem." Cole blows out a deep breath, effectively taking the wind from my sails.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, it seems. I'm beginning to think that there isn't a way around this if I stay.

Maybe that is the answer? If I leave, I know I can survive. It might not be this charmed existence, but it's not like it's not something I'm used to anyway, and I haven't been here long enough for it to feel like I'm losing too much.

I suggest as much and the twins stare at me, horrified.

"Okay, so bad plan? But in that case, what can we do?"

Sawyer smiles at me, patting my thigh from where he sits beside me, while Asher rubs my shoulders from behind. "This is where we come in," Sawyer says gleefully, like he's enjoying this. "Our parents tried to sell us off to the highest bidder too, which, obviously, we're not down for. So what we're going to do tonight, to take the heat off of you, is tell them as much. And hopefully it causes enough commotion that everybody forgets about your engagement just for one night, so we'll have more time to come up with a way to deal with Cole's dad."

He looks so proud of his plan, but I can't get rid of the twist of worry that slashes through my stomach. "Are you guys sure that's a good idea for you?"

Asher takes the seat beside me and shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not, but there's no way we're going along with their stupid little plan anyway, so it makes sense to save you in the process."

I nod, unsure how I feel about them sacrificing themselves for me, but by the looks on their faces, I know there isn't one damn thing I can do to change their minds. So I take a deep breath, nodding again, and push my chair back.

"I guess I better go get myself ready for this circus of a night then."

The boys all murmur in agreement, and I head up the stairs with Shadow at my feet. It's going to be one hell of a dramatic evening. I need to find something to wear and I have a feeling that jeans and Converse just aren't going to cut it.

## CHAPTER SIX

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Travis

Staring at the ceiling while I lie in bed is getting me nowhere, yet I haven't moved for hours. Briar and the others left earlier for their exams—I had my last final yesterday—and all I've done since is wonder what my life would have looked like right now if my mom was still here.

My dad has always been a dictator, but somehow my mom's warmth made it seem not so bad. It's impossible to ignore what she must have gone through to make sure I had some semblance of normal.

Because God knows since the day she died, my life has been one giant fucking mess after another.

I'll never forget the day of the funeral, when my father stood beside me with nobody else there because he'd shipped my little sister, Katy, away, and God forbid anybody else knows the insanity that was our lives behind closed doors. God forbid anybody know that he couldn't save her from being taken from us. That the great Chase Kensington was fallible. That there was something he couldn't beat.

But what that really meant, was that all I had was my sadness and devastation at losing the one person who actually gave a fuck about me, at being left with the monster that was my father.

My only solace was that my pops was still around.

He showed up later that day and the screaming match that ensued between him and my dad was legendary. I remember

being eleven, sitting in my closet, hands clapped over my ears, tears streaming down my face because my mom was gone and I knew my life was never going to be the same.

My pops came upstairs once the shouting stopped and sat with me in the closet, an arm wrapped around my shoulders, trying to tell me that I'd be okay. That I'd always have him in my corner.

He might be the only person in my life who has never let me down. He really has always been in my corner since that day, which gives me hope for tonight.

The problem is my dick of a father.

Everything I've learned since that day has taught me that I will never live up to his expectations of me. I will always be a constant disappointment, and nothing I do will ever be enough, despite the fact that I continue to try and become everything he wants me to be.

Being his greatest disappointment is something I've come to terms with, yet there is a part of me that still does every single thing he demands of me, striving to finally meet his expectations, because that little boy standing at the side of his mother's casket just wants to be loved and accepted again. So, if I can win him over, then I'll have defeated all of the monsters in my life, even without the love of my mother beside me.

I hate that my last memories of her are in her room, hooked up to machines as cancer slowly stole her away from us, watching her day by day, withering away to nothing. Yet the smile on her face and the light in her eyes never dimmed if I was in the room.

It's only since she left that I realized just how much she protected me from my dad. I was just a kid, how was I to know the horrors that really existed behind closed doors? But once she was gone, there was only me to deal with his mood swings, to shoulder his expectations, to bear the brunt of his anger.

I think it's one of the reasons why the boys and I are so close. They became my new escape. My new family, the only people I could trust that understood what it was like to live this life. Cole, especially, because his father is just as much of a monster as mine. To have people that understand the pressures that come with living this sort of life was a game changer for me.

Everybody always says how lucky I am to have the things that I have. And while I don't disagree, I am lucky in that respect, I would give up everything I have tomorrow for a semblance of a real family, for the warmth and love that I see in other families.

To have my mom back.

Instead, with the privilege that so many are jealous of, all I have is a dictator telling me what my life should be, and me constantly not living up to any expectation he has of me.

But now Briar is caught up in this mess and I don't know how to fix it. Every single fiber of my being wants to save her from the monster that he is, from everything her mom has put her through, even though I still don't even know the full scale of that.

All I know is what the private investigator file for them both says, but we both know that there are some things even a PI can't uncover. Like the things that created the darkness I see behind her eyes.

While I know about her sister, I know that alone is not the reason for the terror she feels. For the fear that appears in her eyes when she's cornered. And I don't know if anybody else sees it, but I see it. I've seen it since the moment she stepped into that kitchen and was faced with the reality of our new situation.

I know that her mom has all of these wants and needs, that she thinks that this life is all of her dreams coming true, but eventually she'll start to discover the truth of who my father really is. He might seem soft and loving right now, but the honeymoon period will end. Even with her carrying the next Kensington inside her. Life will change once she pops the kid



out, because then she has the expectation too, and if that kid isn't a boy, my father's archaic ways will just become even worse, despite the fact that he already has an heir.

A small part of me wants it to be a boy, because then I can abdicate the fake throne that he's put me on and let somebody else deal with the pressures that come with the Kensington name. Maybe then, if he has another heir, I can finally live my life the way I want to. Maybe then I can be the person I've always wanted to be. The person I was before my mom died. Right now, any semblance of that is nothing more than a dream. A whisper in the wind. A wish upon a star from a foolish little boy who still cries for his mom to come back and save him.

But I'm not that kid anymore, and I already know that even if the baby is a boy that my father would accept, I'd never put this shit on anyone else. It's just not who I am. It's why I'm trying so hard to save Briar from it.

Why couldn't she have just been a money-grabbing skank? That would have made all of this much easier.

But no, she had to be someone with as many shadows as I have, and like calls to like.

So now I need to save her too. Because maybe in saving her, I can save myself.

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The car ride to my dad's is silent and so thick with tension, you could cut it with a knife. Briar is wedged between the twins in the backseat with Cole up front beside me, and I've white-knuckled the entire journey. As much as I love my grandfather, I already know that my prick of a dad is going to be on major high alert because my grandfather is in town, which means that while Pops being here gives me some breathing space, it also doesn't. Because Dad is going to be twice as hard on me as he usually is.

This plan could completely backfire, and I'm already thinking up contingencies, but my grandfather also called me

this morning to tell me that he needed to speak to me about the ‘family business’, so, I already know tonight is going to suck.

I haven’t told anybody else about the call from my grandfather, because everybody’s dealing with enough bullshit right now as it is, and the family business is my own cross to bear.

Once I’m through the gates of the property, it’s like the tension goes up tenfold and it feels like I can hardly breathe as I pull into the underground garage and shut off the engine.

The car falls completely silent as the music stops playing.

“Just remember what I said, try to play everything as cool and calm as you can. Don’t talk about the engagement and let us handle my father,” I say to Briar as I glance at her in the rearview mirror. She looks up at me with her hands clenched in her lap. Other than that, she looks cool and collected.

“Yeah, I know what you said, I’m just going to try and hang out with Tobias in the kitchen. You guys can go up and deal with all of the crazy family drama. The longer I can go without seeing my mom and dealing with her personal brand of batshit, the better.”

I keep my eyes on her for another beat before climbing from the car, the doors closing echoing around the cavernous space. Some people might look at this place and think that it’s wonderful, that the space and the luxury of it makes me lucky.

If only they knew the horrors that haunted this house. They would probably run away screaming if they knew the truth of everything.

We make our way through the basement level, and I can practically feel the air around us all change to that masked energy as we head up the stairs to the main level.

When we get into the kitchen, the twins hand Briar over to Tobias, who is well aware of the situation and my plans. They handle her with such care, it makes my insides twist. I don’t give myself a chance to stop and take in the warmth of the greeting that Tobias gives her.

I barely allow myself to smile at him as I walk straight through the room, heading toward the rest of the house, because I need to steel myself against what's coming for the rest of the night.

I don't have to turn around to know that Cole is behind me, and as we start walking up the stairs toward my father's office, I know the twins fall into line behind us too.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" Cole asks as the soles of my shoes echo on the wooden stairs.

"We don't have any other option," Sawyer responds to him. I could try to reassure them, but my mouth is dry and my hands are clammy. My thoughts are racing as my heart hammers in my chest at the thought of everything that could potentially go wrong tonight. My grandfather has always been resolutely against the whole political marriage thing. It's why Chase hasn't tried to marry me off yet. And it's that thought that has me second guessing my approach with my pops.

The last eight years since my mom died, Chase has tried all sorts of weird and whimsical plans to gain him more money and give him more footing and build his platform, but my grandfather has always stepped in and put his foot down.

Maybe if I tell Pops what she means to me...

I shake my head. That isn't going to work, my pops might be open minded, but I'm pretty sure even he draws the line at being with my stepsister.

I sigh, trying to work out how I can get my pops to help me against my dad once more. I'm not sure how much longer he's going to be here to help me deal with all of this, but I'm hoping it's a long-ass time. He's stubborn as a bull and I'm almost sure that he would fight death every single day if he had the opportunity, but no one can escape time.

I see it every time I meet with him now, the fragility that grows on him with each passing day.

"There you are, my boy!" Pops's voice reaches me as we enter my father's office, and he strides across the room. All

my previous thoughts vanish because he looks younger and more alive than he has in months.

He opens his arms wide and pulls me into a fierce hug, slapping my back for extra measure.

As he pulls back, he examines me closely. “You haven’t been getting enough sleep, Travis, I can see it written all over your face. You’re a kid, you’re supposed to be enjoying these years of your life.”

I shake my head, barking out a laugh. “You know it’s not that simple, Pops.”

He steps further back and I notice that my father isn’t in the room, which gives me pause because there is no way he would let my pops in here without him.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask as the boys shuffle into the room, moving straight to the drinks trolley.

“Your father had to step out on a call, which gives me a minute to say hello to you without him around. How’s he been lately? I heard his latest plans for political power yet again. And I have to say, I’m not very impressed.”

Yep, there goes the plan. I guess all I’ve got is the truth. All or nothing.

I take a deep breath and scrub my hand down my face. “Pops, if you had any idea of the crap that he’s been up to... you’d lose your shit and I’m not prepared to give you a heart attack right now.”

He frowns at me, his brow furrowing.

“Tell me what’s going on, Travis, and tell me everything because if you don’t... I can’t help. Why haven’t you said anything in our conversations throughout the week?”

I deadpan at him and he laughs. “Like I said, old man, if I told you everything, you’d have had a heart attack, and then I’ll be left to deal with him on my own.”

He lets out a hearty laugh, clapping his hand against my arm as Cole brings us both over a glass of amber liquid. I take

a swig of the whiskey and enjoy the burn as it works its way down my throat. We all move to take a seat on the couches.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to face my pops, who is watching me expectantly.

“Come on, out with it. And don’t try to bullshit a bullshitter, son. I’ll know if you’re holding back.”

I glance at the guys, our agreement to tell him everything passes silently between us. Briar was right earlier, this should have been our plan all along.

Taking a deep breath, I run Pops through Dad’s latest insanity, marrying Briar off to Cole, him working on St. Vincent’s to gain even more holding via their contacts. Them trying to marry the twins off to other people. As well as the other insanity he’s had me trying to work on on campus.

Pops’s face turns more and more red the more I tell him, and this was exactly what I was afraid of. He leans back in his chair, and I can see the anger in his eyes as he grips his glass tighter.

“I think it’s time your father and I had a chat. Thank you, Travis. You boys shouldn’t need to be worrying yourselves about this. I’ll handle it, do you hear me?”

I nod at my pops, the guys mumbling their agreement before Pops stands.

“That’s enough of that for tonight, and for the holiday season. Let’s get through Christmas and then I’ll handle your father, okay?”

“Sure thing,” I respond with a nod. There aren’t many people in this world that I’d trust with my life, but my pops is one of them. The guys leave, but my pops puts his hand on my shoulder to hold me back.

“Tell me about this girl,” he says with a raised brow. “I can see it written all over your face.”

“I—” I start, and he shakes his head.

“We don’t lie to each other, Travis. It’s a deal you and I have always had.”

I nod, looking down at my shoes before looking back up at him. “She is joy and light and everything that’s missing from my world. She’s fierce and loyal and sassy as shit. You’re going to love her.”

His eyes light up as he smiles. “Sounds like I’m not the only one.”

“She’s my stepsister.”

He lets out a laugh and claps his hand on my shoulder once more. “And since when did we give a fuck about technicalities, kid?”

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After watching the others drink more than they should and listening to my grandfather bitch out my dad for what was likely the last hour, I realize that we left Briar to the she-beasts of our families for probably too long. While Tobias will have tried to protect her as much as he can, I know all too well what those vapid socialites can be like.

After pointing this out to the guys, I drop a message to Tobias, who confirms she got swept away with everyone and they’re in the drawing room.

We find her sitting with my nana, her mom, and my uncle Bentley. I head straight for my uncle Bentley. It feels like forever since I saw him. He joined the Marines a couple of years ago and spent an eternity being away without being able to tell us anything that he was doing, and now he works as a PI for those rich enough to procure his special skill set.

He’s one of my favorite humans in the world. He’s the complete opposite of my dad and I’m pretty sure if he hadn’t been away when my mom died, then I would probably be a little less broken than I am. He would never have allowed my dad to get away with the shit that he did.

Bentley never wanted Kensington Enterprises, which made my very narcissistic father happy. “Uncle B!” I call out, and he stands when he sees me, wrapping me up in the tightest hug of

my life. Something about being here with him and Pops makes me feel stronger.

I feel like I'm going to be able to get through this day and deal with this whole engagement thing.

"I see you've been having fun," I tease, nodding toward Briar, who looks terrified now that his attention is distracted from her.

"Poor girl had no idea what sort of shark-infested waters she was swimming in. So I tried to be a lifesaver for her. She seems nice, too nice for this lot." I nod at his uttered words as he takes another sip of his drink.

"She is, she's nothing like our usual crowd," I murmur. "And with that in mind, I need your help."

After making sure the vultures on the other side of the room are too deep in their gossip to overhear me, I give him a quick rundown of everything that I already told Pops earlier, figuring every extra body we have in our corner is a win, and his jaw clenches.

"Does your dad ever get off his crazy train? I know I've been gone for a while, kid, but this is insane."

"You have no idea," I respond to him. "This is just the tip of the iceberg. If you had any idea about all the crap that's been going on around here, I'm pretty sure you'd just stay gone forever."

"Kid, I'd never leave you alone in the dark for that long."

I scoff at him and roll my eyes, and he looks a little guilty because we both know that he's left me with my crazy father for much longer than anyone should have had to endure. I don't blame him for it though. If I had a way to get out of here, I totally would.

I motion for Briar to join us and the relief on her face is palpable. She excuses herself from the conversation with my nana, who's barely looked at me since I entered the room. Finally, she does and gives me a tight smile.

It's very apparent which parent my dad got his psychotic ways from. He's just like my nana. I have no idea how my pops put up with it for so long with both of them. Uncle B is more like Pops. They're 'salt of the earth' kind of people, and the ones that I would strive to be like more than my dad any day of the week.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," Briar says quietly as she finally joins us. "I don't know how you all do this small talk thing for so long. I've never wanted to disappear into the wallpaper as much as I have tonight. And that's saying something."

A flicker of her shadows passes through her eyes before she smiles tightly again.

Bentley captures her attention with some daring tale of mayhem and intrigue from his days in the Marines, and it *almost* feels like a normal family gathering for a few minutes. Her laughter for Bentley is genuine, telling me she's just as smitten with him as everyone else he meets. But, like all good things, even this little happy moment must come to an end. I take a deep breath as I hear voices coming down the hall.

Moments later, my dad, Theodore, and the twins' dad, Thomas, enter the room with Erica, the twins' mom, followed closely by Tobias.

"Dinner will be served in three minutes. If you'd like to head into the formal dining room and take your seats."

Tobias scurries away, grinning at me as he does, and I laugh, shaking my head.

Yeah I'd scurry away if I were him too. Serving my nana is never much fun. Add her personal brand of crazy to this dysfunctional melting pot, and everything just becomes a potential for nuclear fall out.

We all move to take our seats and I make sure that Briar is wedged firmly between myself and Cole, with Bentley on Cole's other side since he seems to be on board with the whole, let's not get engaged thing.



Once everyone is seated and Pattie tops up everyone's drinks, my father clears his throat to do his yearly Christmas family speech. I groan internally because I'm sick of his pomp and bullshit.

I try to tune out the drivel, trying not to worry about how much my dad's going to flip his shit when Pops talks to him. I should try to relax because I know Pops isn't going to cause a scene tonight—he'll wait till later to talk to Dad and Theo—but I can't help but feel nervous for Briar.

I glance down at her, the formal black dress she has on floating down to just above her knees, her feet wedged into the heels that she said were absolutely necessary for the dress, and her hair pinned back from her face.

Pops might have basically given me his blessing to go after the girl, but my dad is still never going to be okay with it. I'm also not sure that after the way I've treated her she'd want me again anyway.

Everything inside of me tells me that I want her, but my brain knows I can never really have her. Even if she wasn't my new stepsister. She's meant to be Cole's. Or the twins', I can feel it in my bones. I've done way too much shit to deserve somebody with as much inner sunshine as she has.

She might come across as snarky and sassy, and a big old walking thundercloud. But really, deep down, she's just permanent sunshine.

I know I don't deserve her.

My attention is drawn away from her to the opposite side of the table where the twins are sitting with their parents, bickering already before we've even managed to have food served. Nana tuts at them, scowling harshly, when the twins' mom stands, shouting, "This is not the time nor place to be discussing this, boys. We will have this conversation. In. Private."

Asher drops his napkin onto the table, standing to face his mom. Sawyer stands too so that they're shoulder to shoulder. "No, Mom, I think this is the absolute right time to have this

conversation. We will not, under any circumstances, be a part of your insane plans. I don't care what sort of crazy games you guys have cooked up or what threats you make. We will not be pawns in your game. Not with something as significant as the rest of our lives."

I glance at Briar, who is white as a sheet, and I have to clench my fist to stop myself from reaching out to her.

"Boys," Pops starts. "Take your seats."

He pauses a beat for them to be seated, before turning his gaze to their mom and waiting for her to sit. "Tonight is about family and joy so, with all due respect, your mother is right, this is not the time or place. That said, we do not deal in human trafficking or arranged marriages. Not under any circumstances."

Pops pauses again, making eye contact with every 'adult' at the table. "Do I make myself clear?"

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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Sitting at this table between Travis and Cole gives me all kinds of flashbacks, but they asked me to trust them. And I'm trying.

Which is why when the twins stand up and start full-on arguing with their parents across the table from me, I keep my mouth shut and my eyes down on my plate. I am absolutely not getting in the middle of this.

I didn't want any of this. I might not have been happy with my life before, but it was at least mine to dictate. I had my freedom and I got to choose my own path.

Even if they were shitty options, they were still *my* options.

Being thrown to the sharks in the form of the wealthy and crazy is not something I ever expected to have to learn to swim through, but what I'm learning right now is that these waters are not calm and still. They are choppy, with animals lurking beneath the surface that you can't see trying to drown you every moment.

"Boys," the man who I assume is Travis's pops says as he stares at them. "Take your seats."

He pauses a beat while they sit, before turning his gaze to their mom and waiting for her to do the same. "Tonight is about family and joy so, with all due respect, your mother is right, this is not the time or place. That said, we do not deal in human trafficking or arranged marriages. Not under any circumstances."

Pops pauses again, making eye contact with every ‘adult’ at the table. “Do I make myself clear? Arranged marriages are not the way that we do things. If the boys have said no, then the boys have said no.” He glares at the twins’ parents, who seem to cower beneath the glower of the old man.

I don’t know what sort of power it is that Travis’ grandfather holds over these people, but I sure am glad that he’s on our side.

To be fair, if that glare was pointed in my direction, I’m pretty sure that I would cower too.

The twins nod at Travis’ pops and stand, moving behind their dad until he scoots along a seat so that they’re sitting next to each other rather than between their parents.

“And with that in mind,” Pops says. “No arranged marriages will be happening for anybody at this table.” He glares directly at Chase, who grips his cutlery so tight I think he might actually throw his fork at his old man.

“I will not stand for it. That isn’t how we do business. We don’t traffic in people. We never have and we’re not about to start now. Am I making myself clear?”

Chase stares at Travis, who isn’t looking at his father, but I’m pretty sure from the tensing of his hands under the table, he can feel the glare on his head.

“Understood,” Chase responds before Pops glances around the table, smiles at me, and nods again.

“Good. Now that’s cleared up. Let’s have dinner, shall we? This is meant to be the season for family and happiness.”

The rest of the evening passes in a blur. Considering this is a pre-Christmas get together, it couldn’t be further from festive. The house isn’t even really decorated, which I find absurd for people who have this much money.

I thought they’d like to put on a show for everything, but my mom was quick to inform me when I arrived that the decorators are coming tomorrow, despite the fact that Christmas is only three days away. Something about them being busy and her not being able to decorate in her condition.

Decorators who, since I'm not around, they had to hire at the last minute.

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes so far back into my head that I could see brain matter at her dig. Christmas isn't my thing and we haven't decorated for Christmas since Iris, so why she thinks that I was going to decorate this year is absolutely perplexing to me.

By the time Tobias comes to collect the dessert dishes with the other staff, I'm full, anxious, and beyond ready to be out of this house. Knowing that we're going to have to stay here over the Christmas break fills me with dread, but at least we have the weekend before we have to come back here on Monday, ready for Christmas on Tuesday. Especially since, apparently, Travis' grandparents are staying at the house.

This seems like a walking disaster if you ask me. It's the perfect recipe for any kind of nuclear bomb to go off, and I'm very glad that we are not going to be around for the start of it.

Hopefully, anything that goes off happens before we get here, then maybe Christmas will be canceled and all of my dreams will come true.

My ideal Christmas is just staying in bed, hiding under my duvet and not having to move, but I get the feeling that isn't going to happen this year, despite the fact that that's how I spent Christmas the last few years.

This will be the first Christmas in a while that my mom has been sober enough to actually register that it's Christmas. She probably doesn't even remember one since Iris's death where I haven't left my bedroom the entire day and not done anything.

We finally make our escape from the dining room and I make my way straight down to the car. I don't care if I haven't said goodbye to anybody. I've had to sit and hold my tongue all night and play nice.

I am done.

I am mentally and physically exhausted. My peopling battery is officially depleted, and I just can't anymore. All it's

going to take is one snide comment with my battery being this low and I'm going to absolutely flip my shit.

I've almost made it to the car when I hear my mom calling my name behind me. I let out a deep breath and lean against the car, waiting for her to reach me.

"Briar, I know that a lot has gone on tonight but you have to believe me when I tell you that marrying the Beckett boy is the best thing for you. It's the best thing for us both..." She pauses, as if waiting for me to respond, but I stay cold and quiet, waiting for her to finish whatever this is. "I know that Travis's grandfather said that arranged marriages were not to be allowed and that Chase agreed, but I already know what his plans are. He won't want to go against his father, but that doesn't mean that all of his hard work should go to waste. I need you to do this for me. For us."

I laugh in her face, because the audacity of her is out of this world. If she was a guy, I'd say she had balls of freaking steel. "Mom, do you have any idea what you're even asking of me? How much I've already sacrificed in the name of you and us and everything? Why? Why would I give you this? When all you've ever done is take from me. You don't deserve my help anymore. All I ever did was try to do everything I could to keep us afloat. And then you dragged me here to this fucked-up situation and you don't care what they want to do to me so long as it keeps you sitting pretty."

Her eyes go wide as my heart pounds in my chest, anger flooding through me.

"Briar, I know—"

"Mom," I say, cutting her off. "I am so done with your bullshit. I'm finally in a place where I don't have to look after you. And I've never been more grateful to anybody for that. But even me being grateful isn't enough for me to marry somebody that I don't want to. Marriage is forever. And it's not something I ever saw for myself. So no, I will not play your games, no matter what you ask of me. Because I've given enough. I deserve to be selfish now, and this is going to be my time. You don't get to ask this of me. Not ever again."

She opens her mouth to respond when footsteps echo through the parking garage. I look over her shoulder and see the four guys walking toward me. She purses her lips before pressing them together, nodding once before turning on her heel and walking away from me.

I think that might be the first time I've ever stood up to my mom.

And now I think I'm going to vomit.

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It is officially Christmas morning and I feel as joyful and festive as I anticipated. It is one hundred percent a 'beneath the duvet' kind of day.

I sigh within the fort of darkness I've created, foolishly hoping that the rest of my day gets to be like this.

The squishy bundle of joy curling into my side snuggles in closer, and I scratch between Shadow's ears. He might be the one thing that I have today to give me joy, because this day can go to fucking hell.

Christmas used to be Iris's favorite, and we would do as much as I could physically manage. I would do everything within my power to make sure she had the best day that we were capable of, giving her the joy in her eyes. The thought of Santa and presents and a big meal made her light up like stars in the sky.

Especially since we barely did Thanksgiving because I couldn't afford to make it happen twice so close together.

Since Mom was always gone, I tried to give Iris everything I could, but now she's gone and any of the light and joy that I once felt for this stupid holiday no longer exists.

Now, all this day represents to me is darkness and sadness. It's just a stark reminder of the light in my life being snuffed out because my mom is a selfish, reckless, idiotic parasite.



A creak sounds as the door to my room opens. I don't say anything because even though I know that it's only Asher—he's the only one who would enter my room so quietly—I'm just not ready to people today.

I already know that they're going to try and drag me out of this pit and take me to the Kensington McMansion—especially since I already fought against staying there Christmas Eve. I can't think of anything I want less than to face not only my mom, but all of the guys' parents, grandparents, and other family while having to pretend to feel some kind of joy today.

Most days I can fake it till I make it, but today just isn't one of them.

Today, all I want is my bed and the darkness, the puppy cuddles that are pretty much the only thing keeping me breathing right now, and maybe, just maybe, some ice cream.

Because that was mine and Iris's tradition. We'd have ice cream for breakfast every Christmas. It's the only thing I've continued to do since she was taken from me. It's the only thing that has ever drawn me out of bed on this day. And even then, I usually retreat back to my pit once I've collected the ice cream and a spoon—there's no need for bowls here, we're not fancy like that.

“Briar, are you awake?” Asher asks as the door closes softly. I hear his feet pad across the room before I feel the duvet lift, letting all of my stored up body heat out into the world. I glance up at him before focusing back on the puppy that's now moved to lie on my chest. Asher doesn't say a word, he just crawls under the duvet with me, bringing the top back down so that my fort is firmly back in place, and lies silently with me in the darkness.

This man just seems to understand everything I need and I almost hate that he can read me so well.

Asher lies with me, not asking anything of me. All he does is pull me into his side so that my head is resting on his chest and lies quietly with me. He already knows about my sister, but he doesn't know about Christmas. I'm pretty sure I hinted

about my hatred of this day and he accepted that, but he's never asked any questions as to why.

I guess I kind of love that about him.

He never pushes beyond what I'm willing to tell him.

I lose track of how much time I lie there with his fingers running through my hair, and I swear he almost lulls me to sleep with that alone. He kisses the top of my head, and I loosen a breath before words start falling from my mouth.

"This day used to be all about Iris, all about making this the one day of the year that was perfect for her and seeing the joy spill all over her face. It was the one day of the year where I would make sure that I wasn't doing something. I focused entirely on her.

"We would bake cookies and eat ice cream for breakfast. I would pull together what I could to make us a Christmas dinner and do whatever it took to make sure that she had something under the tree. Christmas was her favorite. And ever since she died, I just haven't been able to face this day properly. Mom's never really cared. She's always had other stuff going on," I say, taking a breath and downplaying just how awful she's been.

"So I've been allowed to wallow in my misery and in my grief for the joy of my life that's missing now." He still doesn't say a word, but continues to play with my hair, his fingers massaging my scalp and running down the back of my neck.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," he whispers in the darkness before kissing my head again. "But thank you for sharing it with me."

I snuggle tighter into his chest and tell him some of my favorite memories of Iris. Of the Christmas where I managed to find her a trunk of old dress-up clothes that had been donated to a thrift store. I managed to get her almost every single Disney princess dress for less than five dollars. It was the absolute steal of my life.

It might have meant that I went without dinner for a couple of days, but it was absolutely worth it to make sure she had

that joy that was all over her face.

I tell him about the time where we put up the Christmas tree and it was so wonky that we called it the leaning tree of Pisa. About how we had pizza on Christmas day that year in dedication to our leaning tree of Pisa.

I tell him about the one year that Mom was actually sober enough to pay attention to us on Christmas Day, where she managed to somehow get a full Christmas dinner spread for us, and how we ate until we were basically sick, then kept eating some more. About how much we laughed that day.

I honestly don't remember having laughed that much since.

He lies with me and my memories, just letting me work through them, holding me tight when my throat gets thick. Thinking of Iris is always hard for me, but this is the one day of the year where I let myself wallow in all of the memories of her.

A knock sounds at the door, pausing my retelling, and Asher pops his head out from underneath the duvet. Travis's voice filters through to me, and I can only just hear what he's saying. "We need to get up and get ready. My dad's already texted me four times asking where we are. Everybody's waiting on us to start the morning thing."

I don't hear Asher's response, but a few seconds pass before the door shuts. I'm sure they're having one of their weird silent conversations that the four of them seem to be able to have, but I don't care enough to ask about it.

"Are you up for today?" Asher asks, and I shake my head.

"No, but we both know that I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"We could pretend that you're sick?" Asher says, and I shake my head again.

"No, we both know that that's not gonna fly. Chase would expect me to be there regardless. Plus, everyone's families are there and Pops is already trying to help this whole stupid engagement thing. If I'm home alone, God knows where my

thoughts will leave me today. I might as well go and face the music,” I tell him with a sigh.

Shadow grumbles as I pull him from my chest and place him on the bed before getting out and heading to my closet.

“You don’t need to stay with me,” I say to Asher, who is watching me closely as I go through my clothes trying to decide what to wear.

“I *can* stay with you if you want me to,” he replies, but I shake my head at him once more.

“No, it’s fine. I need to build my walls back up if I’m going to face all these people today, and as much as I appreciate you being here, that’s going to be easier to do if I’m on my own.”

He strides across the room toward me and wraps his arms around my waist from behind, pulling me tightly against his chest. “If you need anything today, you just ask. I don’t care where we are or what’s going on. If you need me, if you need to escape, you just have to say.”

I tilt my head back and lean against his chest, and he drops his lips onto the skin of my collarbone. “Thank you,” I say wistfully. “Thank you for everything.”

He kisses me again before leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I try to think about how this day is going to play out. *Why* I’m trying to guess is beyond me because nothing has gone to plan since I arrived in Serenity Falls a few months ago.

I know I have bigger things to worry about than the fact that it’s Christmas and that I’m sad about my little sister.

I have Theodore to worry about, his and Chase’s plans.

I’ve got the whole Professor Crawford thing to freak out about too.

But I’ve managed to somehow push both of those things right to the back of my mind along with the results of my finals. Because I’m fairly certain at this point, there isn’t anything I can do about any of those three things.

Whereas facing these people today, and putting my mask on, is something that I can deal with.

So that is what I'm going to focus on.

Except, then there's a knock at my door, and I find the four of them standing on the other side, each with a bowl of ice cream in hand, Asher with two.

Tears fill my eyes as they funnel into the room, puppies right along with them, and sit on the bed. Travis taps the mattress between him and Cole, so I climb over them all to sit with them, and Asher hands me the second bowl.

"Ice cream for breakfast is a new tradition I can get on board with," Sawyer says with a huge grin, lifting the mood a little as a tear slips down my face.

I can't speak around the lump in my throat, so I take a mouthful of the ice cream, listening to them all talk about the day, all while my heart starts to heal a little despite the pain... despite how much it hurts.

They let me be silent, and I join in the conversation where I can, but mostly I sit and I eat ice cream with the four guys I never imagined would become my family.

When we're finished, they each give me a chaste kiss, taking the puppies with them. I take a deep breath as I lean back against the door, telling myself I can do this.

I move across the room and pull a pair of dress pants from the closet with a fitted white blouse, and a bright red belt to go with the bright red heels that are in the bottom of the closet that Penn seems to have left here, 'cause they sure as hell aren't mine.

It's Christmassy while being formal and feels enough not like me that I can pretend to be whoever I want to be today. And that's exactly what I'm going to need to get through this.

I pull the clothes on and tie my hair back into a low bun with strands falling around my face before painting on my makeup. My eyes are lined and mascara enhances my lashes before I swipe my lips with red to match my belt and shoes.

I glance in the mirror and smile when I see that I don't look anything like myself. The reflection that stares back at me definitely isn't the girl I know I am. But for today, it's who I'm going to pretend to be, because the girl in the mirror looks like she can survive anything. She looks like a badass that can play within the circles of the wealthy and come out on top. She looks like exactly what I need to survive today.

So let the games begin.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Cole

If I was to say that today was an absolute shit show so far, it might just be the biggest understatement of my entire life.

From the moment we walked through the door to the ‘not-so-festive’ festivities, it has been one thing after another. My dad and Travis’ pops have done nothing but take jabs at each other all day about the engagement between me and Briar. About human trafficking, how politicians get away with more than they should and about dirty tactics.

I’ve tried to stay as far away from it as possible, but I also know my father. Once he sets his mind to something, there’s almost no turning back.

Back when I agreed to this madness, Briar was a nameless, faceless human who didn’t have a personality. Who didn’t have thoughts and feelings and goals and dreams of her own. When I agreed to it, I thought she would just be another vapid Barbie doll, like most of the other women in the society circles we run in.

I didn’t expect her to be the complete opposite of everything I ever imagined. For her to be everything I never dared to dream of.

So, while on the one hand, I would marry her in a heartbeat, I also don’t want to force her to do something that goes so firmly against everything that she wants. Even if that means I don’t get the girl at the end of it all.

I've been huddled by the tree with the guys for the last hour, trying to avoid the madness of our parents. Briar retreated with the puppies into the yard a while back, and we've just kind of let her be because of the sadness lying behind her eyes. It hurts to see her in so much pain and I can't force myself to even attempt to persuade her to come back in here.

Nobody else seems to have really noticed her absence, so I'm not about to be the one to draw attention to it.

I let out a sigh, sipping at the eggnog Tobias handed out to everybody a little while ago, disliking the taste. But I dislike the taste of most alcohol I get handed to me when we're at these functions. I've just learned how to swallow it down and enjoy the numbing sensation that comes with it. I might not enjoy the flavor, but the numbness is necessary for dealing with most of the people in our circle.

"Is Briar okay?" Sawyer asks Asher as he watches her. He hasn't mentioned a word about what happened with her this morning. I know it was bad, I could tell as much when we all went in for ice cream, but no one has said a damn thing about it since.

"How much do you all know about her little sister?" Asher asks.

"I don't know much other than the fact that she had one," I respond, though I have a feeling that Travis knows more than he's ever let on, whereas Sawyer just looks a little confused by the question.

Asher launches into the story of Iris, Briar's sister. About how she died and why Christmas is so triggering for Briar. My heart physically aches for her and everything that she's been through up to this point in life. Nobody our age should have been through so much and suffered so much, especially with so much loss.

I know that we've had it hard at times, but, in reality, what we've faced is nothing compared to the sorts of things that she's survived. From the files that I've read on her to the things that I've discovered through talking to her and the



things the others have told me, I'm amazed that she is the person that she is, that she functions so well.

I have a feeling if it was any of us that had been through what she's been through, we'd be a quivering mess in the corner, probably strung out on something while we tried to hide from reality.

Briar's mom starts talking about gifts and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes out fucking loud.

Of course, she's the one that wants to pull her daughter back into this crazy when she's the reason, at least mostly, that Briar hates today. The anger that rose up in me as Asher explained what happened to Briar's little sister was stronger than almost anything I've ever felt in my life. Knowing she went through that because her mom was too dysfunctional to be able to actually be an adult. It makes me want to tear things apart.

The problem with being such a big guy is that when I get angry, things tend to end up very broken, so I've had to learn how to manage my rage over the years. But every time I look at Sofie right now, all I want to do is help Briar destroy everything that made her life as dark as it's been.

"I'm going to go and get Briar," Sawyer says quietly and slinks out of the room. I'm only a little jealous of the fact that Briar is actually talking to him and Asher.

She's barely uttered a word to Travis and me since the night the engagement was announced, even with everything that happened with Professor Crawford. I can't say I blame her. I did sleep with her knowing what was coming, but that wasn't *why* I slept with her. I made her mine because I was finally done with denying myself the things that I wanted, even though I knew it was a bad idea and that I probably wouldn't get to keep her.

I finally wanted to do something that was for myself, I wanted to have a moment with her that wasn't tainted by what I knew would be coming. I wanted her to do something with me because she wanted to rather than because she felt she had to.

I'm not the kind of guy to force anything upon anyone that they don't want. So yes, it was selfish of me to take that moment with her, but I also can't make myself regret it because I know, in that moment, she wanted everything I had to give her... and I would happily give her the world over and over again if it meant that I could see her smile.

The girl who lights up my world appears in the living room, Sawyer at her side, with the puppies yipping at her feet. I'm jealous once again of how much affection she gives to the twins and to the puppies. I never thought I'd be jealous of the dogs and yet, here we are. This is what my life has boiled down to.

She makes her way over to us and sits next to Asher, with Sawyer sliding in on her other side. Shadow jumps up on her lap and the others sit around her feet. Fi and Hellion have been sitting with me and the boys ever since she went outside. They lift their heads to watch their puppies coming back, but then lower them back down as if nothing of any significance has happened.

Sofie bounces over to Briar and hands her a thin rectangular box.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," she says, drawing all eyes in the room onto Briar, and I can see her squirming in her seat. I clench my fists, knowing how much she hates the attention on her and how much she must hate it extra today.

"And where's my gift?" Sawyer asks, laughing beside Briar. And in that moment, I'm thankful for him for drawing attention to himself and making everybody laugh, distracting them from her.

Travis stands and heads toward the tree and starts handing out presents to everybody while Briar just stares at the box in her hands.

"What is it?" she asks quietly, looking at her mom.

Her mom doesn't answer her, and Briar's hands shake as she opens the small box. I watch as her eyes fill with tears as she takes a look inside. She closes the box and hands it back to

her mom. “I don’t want this. I don’t want anything from you. The only thing that I ever wanted, you managed to take away from me, so now I’m done.”

Briar stands and leaves the room once more. I gaze after her before turning to look at the twins. They both look bewildered.

“I’ll go after her,” I say quietly, and make my way from the room, trying to follow the sound of the clicks of her heels on the hard floors.

Finding her sitting on the staircase, tears streaming down her face, I perch beside her on the step and pull her into my side, letting her cry onto my chest. I don’t care about mascara running down her face or staining my shirt. I don’t care about any of it except her. Seeing her cry makes me want to tear her mom to shreds, consequences be damned.

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask so quietly that she doesn’t hear me, or maybe she just doesn’t answer me. She just continues to cry silently while I hold her and keep my mouth shut. So I sit with her, letting her be whatever she needs to be right now. All this while knowing that I’m probably not the person she wants sitting here with her, but also knowing that there isn’t anywhere else I would rather be.

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I sit in the suite the Kensingtons allocated to her and wait for her to finish in the shower. The sound of running water tells me she’s still trying to put herself back together after crying so hard that she needed to get away.

So I accidentally spilled my drink down her shirt, giving her the best kind of excuse to escape for a little while.

I stare at the bare room, wondering what it must be like for this to be her life now. I’ve never really considered her position before, or how insane all of this must be for her.

For the rest of us, this is just life: the plots, the planning, the twists and turns. This is what we learn to navigate before

we even hit double digits. But life was never like this for her.

Sure, she had challenges, but they were entirely different from the ones that we've had to face, and having heard about some of hers, I'm not sure I would have survived her challenges the way that she has, so gracefully battling through the horrors life has thrown at her.

The sound of the shower shuts off and I sit up straighter, waiting for her to emerge from the bathroom. When she pads into the room in just a towel, it's hard not to stare, and I shut down every basic urge that I have to run away with her every time that she's around. All I have to do is look at the sadness in her eyes and it's like a sharp slap of reality, throwing me back down to Earth.

"Are you feeling any better?" I ask her as she moves toward the bed and sits cross-legged in front of me. She just shrugs before patting down her wet hair with a towel.

I hand her a brush from the bedside table and she starts brushing it out while we sit in silence.

What should be an awkward moment just isn't, except for the whole engagement thing hanging over us.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you what my father had planned. And I'm sorry I deceived you. I'm also sorry that I slept with you without telling you about everything, but I'm still not sorry about anything that happened between us."

She looks up at me through hooded lids, and I swear my heart beats so hard against my ribs I think they might break.

"Okay," she says with a shrug, and I deflate a little. It's not like I expected her to just forgive me, but I'd hoped that maybe she'd started to forgive me just a little.

"Is there anything I can do to make this up to you?" I ask, and she sighs, dropping the brush.

"Honestly, I don't know," she mumbles, looking up at me with enough helplessness to gut me. "Maybe if you told your dad that you won't marry me, then this engagement thing becomes a moot point. Because if you won't do it, then it's not just all about me not wanting to do it."

I run a hand over my short hair. “It’s not that easy. My entire life has been about pleasing him and living up to his expectations.” I pause, trying to think of a way to explain it to her, but come up blank and end up rambling. “The only thing I’ve ever done for myself is playing football, and even that was a fluke. If it hadn’t been for Coach seeing me throw a ball around, it probably never would have happened on this level. But when Coach insisted that I join the team, my father didn’t want to say no. Not because I wanted to play, but because he didn’t have a good reason as to why I shouldn’t and it wouldn’t have been socially acceptable for him to have just said no.”

I take another breath, realizing how whiny I sound, so I suck it up and wrap up what I’m trying to say. “So I ended up on the football team. But trust me, I paid for that several times over in other ways. Saying no to him... it isn’t all that easy.”

She picks the brush up again and starts pushing it through her hair. “I get that. Really, I do. That you guys really need to learn to work on standing up to your parents. Just because they brought us into this world, doesn’t mean that they get to dictate our entire lives. If I’d have let my mom dictate my life to me, I would probably be dead by now or be somebody’s whore.” My eyes go wide at her confession, but she just shrugs. “I always knew that wasn’t the life for me, so I fought as much as I dared, even if that didn’t look like fighting. You guys all appear so strong, so stubborn, but realistically, you just act like scared little boys running back to Mom and Daddy every time something goes wrong. Or they snap their fingers, and you go running. They say jump, you ask, ‘How high?’ Have you ever considered what it is that they would possibly do if you said no to them?”

She pauses again, but continues before I can speak. “Everything in this world is about how it appears from the outside, so it’s not like they’re going to cast you out, and even if they did, it’s not like you couldn’t survive the fallout of it.”

I consider her words and realize that she’s right. I hadn’t ever really considered what the worst thing that could happen would be if I said no. I know Travis has Katy, so it’s harder for

him, but I don't say a word about that because I don't know if she knows that yet.

But for me, there isn't any big, deep, dark thing to keep me from saying no to my father.

What's the worst that could happen? My father disinherits me? But then I could just play football for the rest of my life, which is what I actually want anyway. It's not like my world would end.

"You're right," I tell her. "I hadn't considered any of that. I just do what I've always done because that is the way it's done."

In that moment, I make the decision to speak to my father and tell him that I'm done. I'm out. Because she's right, it shouldn't all be on her and this whole thing with Pops would have never started if I'd have just told my father no from the get go.

I don't tell her what I have planned, because there's no point in getting her hopes up yet, but I decide then and there to finally stand up to my father and do the thing I probably should have done years ago and tell him no.

She doesn't say anything else while she gets herself presentable for our parents again, drying her hair before putting on new clothes. She ends up in jeans and what looks like the softest sweater I've ever seen in my life, her hair falling in waves down her back, looking far more like the girl I know than the one that we arrived with.

"Let's go finish this stupid day," she says, and I can already see her wistfully looking back at the bathroom. Like it's her own personal escape.

"We don't have to stay for long," I tell her. "Most of the presents and everything would have been done already, and I'm sure one of the boys can fake a stomach ache to get us out of dinner if you really want to get out of here."

For the first time all day, I see a small glimmer of hope shining in her eyes.

“Yes, please,” is all she says in response. I stuff my hands in my pocket as I stand and nod.

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We won’t be here for more than another half hour. None of us really care about any of this anyway. Like I said, our lives are just a show.”

She smiles sadly at me and gives me a hug. “I’m sorry that this is what your lives are. My life might have been crappy, but at least it’s been authentically me.”

I rest my cheek against the top of her head, breathing her in as I hug her back, wondering what that must feel like to be so entirely yourself with no repercussions.

I make a resolution to myself to be the person that she can so obviously see I could be. Because the person in her mind is a much better man than I am right now.

Everything I am is because of who my father has tried to make me, just like he did in pushing me at her, but he’s going to have the shock of his life when he realizes that the girl he tried to push me toward is the reason I finally walk away from him.

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It’s been three days since the mess that was Christmas, and I think we might finally be getting somewhere with Briar.

Some of her walls are starting to come down and she seems to be more relaxed around us again.

It could be because we’ve barely left home since we got back from the Kensington’s on Christmas Day, or it could be the fact that the puppies make her seemingly defenseless every time they’re around, but in the last couple of days, she’s finally started talking to Travis and me again, and I’m not sorry about it.

I know Travis is still dealing with his own demons about everything to do with her, but I’ve made my decision, and my father is just going to have to live with it.

Today, the twins are traveling with their parents to see their family and Travis has made his annual trip to go and see Katy, which means that it's just Briar and me around the house.

And I, for one, fully intend on taking advantage of that situation, whether she realizes it or not.

I pad downstairs and find her sitting on the couch, curled up with Shadow in her lap and the others tucked in around her, while Fi and Hellion lounge in their beds across the room watching her with the tiny monsters.

"Morning. What are your plans for today?" she asks when she looks up at me.

"Morning, I was thinking we could just do food and a movie today. Have a proper lazy day. I know we've barely left the house the last couple of days, but it's been kind of bliss."

She grins wide at me and nods. "I am absolutely down for that. I really didn't cherish the idea of leaving the house anyway."

"Then that's what we'll do," I tell her with a smile. "What are we craving for breakfast?"

She takes the puppy from her lap and stands as I head toward the kitchen.

I hear her footsteps on the hardwood floors behind me and smile when she makes her request.

"Breakfast burritos?"

I smile wider because I already had a feeling that was going to be her request, and I happen to know we have everything to make them in this kitchen.

Asher went out and did a big shop yesterday to make sure that she would have everything she possibly needs, including topping up her hot chocolate station that makes me smile every time I see it in our kitchen.

"I can do that," I tell her as I start rummaging through the fridge to find everything I need.



“I can help,” she offers, and I glance over my shoulder at her and shake my head.

“No chance. You sit down and relax. Start thinking about what movie you want to watch.”

“Oh, I already know what I want to watch,” she tells me with a wide grin.

I groan out loud, but it’s more playful than it is real. She could tell me that she wanted to sit through watching *Titanic* eleven times and I would still gladly sit by her side while we did, even if my eyes did bleed.

“We’re gonna watch *A Nightmare Before Christmas*,” she says as I shake my head.

“I’ve never seen it,” I confess, and the gasp she makes as she presses her hand against her chest warms my heart.

“Well, that is just blasphemous. This is something every person should watch. Really, it’s a Halloween movie, but it’s also a Christmas movie, which makes it the best movie ever.”

“Do we even have it?” I ask her, and she rolls her eyes.

“Welcome to 2022, where every single movie that you could possibly want is ready and available to stream.”

I laugh at her sass as I finish pulling everything from the fridge, turning to face her where she sits at the island and dropping the ingredients where I need them on the counter. “Yeah, yeah, I know. I’ve never even heard of *A Nightmare Before Christmas*. Sometimes I think that you were born in another century and you just pretend to be our age.”

“No, I just like the good things and most of the good things are vintage these days,” she responds, her sass coming from her in waves.

It doesn’t take long to get everything for breakfast, and watching her mess around with the dogs while I cook is a new level of joy.

I never thought that this is what my life could look like. Thinking about being disinherited by my father never felt so good.

Once breakfast is done, I head over to the couch, joining her where she's sitting back with the dogs and hand her the breakfast burrito. The smile on her face makes my heart soar as she does her happy food dance thing when she takes her first bite, groaning around the food.

"This is so good," she mumbles, and my heart does that weird pitter patter thing again. She lifts the remote and hits play.

I exaggeratedly roll my eyes as the movie credits start. This might be the weirdest day that I've ever had, but it might also be one of the best, and I intend to enjoy every single second of it.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Asher

The drive to my parents' house is quiet and full of tension as Sawyer and I make our way to tell our parents how fucked up all of their plans are. We might have told them in front of everybody before Christmas that we weren't going to marry the girls they offered to us, but that doesn't mean they took it on board. Even with Pops trying to instill the fear of God into them about arranged marriage, it seems that our parents' political dreams have grown exponentially.

Apparently, this time, the fear of what the elder Kensington could do to them isn't enough for them to loosen their grasp on that potential.

They've quietly mentioned it several times to us over the holiday period, so we decided that since today is the day where Travis is going to see Katy, we would spend the day dealing with our parents and getting this wrapped up once and for all.

We pull up to the gates of our childhood home and I wish that this place still felt like home, but with everything that's been going on lately, it just doesn't.

When we brought Briar here just a couple of weeks ago, I realized just how empty and lifeless this house really is. I'd never seen it that way before, but with everything my parents have pulled since then, it's like they got caught up in the web of the Becketts and the Kensingtons and they've lost who they are.

Who they always said they would never become is exactly what they're working toward.

My mom always insisted that she didn't want to become the people my dad worked with. And yet, here we are, becoming those exact people.

"Are you ready for this?" Sawyer asks from the passenger seat as I grip the steering wheel before turning the engine off.

"Not even a little bit. I mean, what's the worst that could happen?"

Sawyer barks out a dry laugh, his normal, joyful disposition far from here. "The worst that could happen is they disown us, kick us out, take all of our things, unenroll us from Saints U, and leave us with nothing." He pauses and tilts his head, like he's lost in thought. "Though, worse than that, they could make us marry those two vapid, brainless blondes, and I can't think of much worse than that. I'd rather be poor and happy than have their money and be married to those two."

I laugh dryly because I agree entirely, but he knows that without me having to say a word. It's not like this is something we haven't discussed already.

We enter through the back doors of the house that lead straight into the kitchen and find our parents sitting at the dining table in there with brunch already set out.

Our house is much more informal than those of our friends, but I have a feeling that if my parents keep walking down the path they're on currently, that's not going to be the case for much longer.

"Boys," my dad says, standing when he sees us, dragging us both into a hug. "It's so good to see you both." I kind of get the feeling as I hug him back that a lot of this is Mom's idea and not his.

My dad's always been the more down-to-earth one of the two of them. While my mom is the one who never wanted to become those people, as she's always called them, I get the feeling that being around the people that we're around every

single day might finally have started chipping away at her perspective.

“I’m so glad you could join us today,” Mom says, standing up and kissing both of my cheeks before moving to Sawyer. Once the round of polite pleasantries is done, we sit down and I start loading up my plate with the array of breakfast foods laid out on the table.

Sawyer does the same and we start to eat in silence. My parents chat about nothing of any importance between the two of them. I pour myself another cup of coffee, smiling inside at how much Briar would enjoy this particular spread, when my mother’s gaze turns to me. “So, what brings you boys here today anyway? It’s not like you ask for our company very often.”

“We wanted to tell you, finally, once and for all, that we’re not playing these stupid games of yours,” Sawyer says frankly between mouthfuls, before placing his cutlery on the side of his plate. The clink echoes in the silence of the room as my mom just blinks at him before turning her gaze to me.

“You already know I’m with Sawyer. It’s nothing that we haven’t told you before. You always said you wouldn’t play these games with us and with our futures, and I don’t know why that’s changed, but our views on it haven’t.”

She lets out a deep sigh, any trace of happiness falling from her face. “I just want what is best for you both,” she says sadly.

“This isn’t what’s best for us,” Sawyer responds. “In what world would *you* picking our wives and us being absolutely miserable be what’s best for us?”

My father stays quiet, just leaning back and watching the conversation play out. Which tells me that my suspicions are correct. He wasn’t up for this plan from the get go.

“Those girls both have good breeding and come from a lot of money. It would set you both up for the rest of your lives. Regardless of what careers you choose. I wanted that for you.

We know what it's like to struggle, and I don't want you boys to ever have to suffer that."

I bark out a laugh. "Mom, when have we ever known struggle? You both come from comfortable families. Even if we aren't as wealthy as the Kensingtons or the Becketts, it's not like we've ever gone without food or shelter."

"And this way, you would never have to," Mom counters. "I just want to try and give you the best opportunities that you can have. And those girls' families offer that. What else are you going to do with your futures?"

"How about explore careers, explore the world, and find love on our own terms?" Sawyer responds, speaking my exact thoughts.

"If you boys don't want this, then it won't happen," my dad says, finally turning to look at my mom, who opens her mouth to speak but closes it. "We already had this discussion before Christmas when Jeffery Kensington told us it was off the table anyway. I was never on board with it in the first place, so if you really are against this as much as you seem to be, then I'm not going to force it. And your mother will stand down too."

My mom clasps her hands together before putting them on her lap and nods solemnly. "Yes, if you really really don't want this then I'm not going to push it. It just seems like such a large opportunity to waste."

"Life is more than opportunity and money," I tell her, reaching across the table, but she keeps her hands firmly in her lap. "I know you were doing what you thought was right, but you also said that you never wanted to become those people. You never wanted to be a part of this world. And you never wanted to lose sight of what was truly important to us: love and family."

She gazes down at her hands, not saying another word, but I know I've struck a chord.

"Was there anything else you boys wanted to discuss?" my father asks, and Sawyer shakes his head before picking up his

cutlery again.

“No, that was everything. We’re more than happy to play the political part if that’s what you guys want to do, but only so much as turning up for the things that you need us to turn up for. The rest of our lives are going to happen as you guys swore they would be before we moved here.” My father nods and starts to eat again. I do the same and we end up talking about football while my mom sits there quietly, barely touching her plate.

I hate that she’s upset, or disappointed, but I also won’t give up my life for her. In this respect at least. I would die for her. I would die for any of my family, but that isn’t what she’s asking us right now. She’s asking me to live miserably for the rest of my life, to try and further our name. And that just isn’t something that I’m willing to do.

Maybe if I’d never met Briar and experienced the joy of what finding your person could be like, then maybe I would have been more open to it, but knowing what I know now, there is no way that I’ll go back to where I was before, and there’s no way that I will play into these silly games.

We finish eating and end up making plans for New Year’s, which obviously consists of a party at the Kensington house.

I think that’s how we’ve celebrated the new year for the last five years, so it makes sense that this is what they want to do again this year. And considering the concessions that my father made today and the fact that they’re not going to fight us anymore, we don’t argue with them about their plans.

When we leave the house I feel lighter than I have in days. I’m just excited to get back to the house, to speak to the others and tell them everything that happened. To be able to see my girl.

“That was easier than I thought it was gonna be,” Sawyer says, frowning as he climbs in the car.

I hop into the driver’s seat and start the engine. “You look worried,” I say to him before pulling out of the driveway. He nods, glancing back at the house.

“It was almost too easy, don’t you think?”

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After having this morning with our parents, we get back to find Briar and Cole cozied up on the couch, watching a movie.

Rather than interrupting their time together, we grab leashes and take the dogs out for a walk. By the time we’re done, Travis is back from seeing Katy, but I know better than to ask any questions when Briar is around because Travis doesn’t like anybody to know about his little sister.

Even if it is the girl that he’s obviously very much in love with.

Briar heads upstairs for a nap, leaving the four of us alone, and we end up sitting around the kitchen island sipping beers and shooting the shit. We fill them in on the conversation with our parents from this morning, and Travis lets us know that Katy is at least okay and doing well at boarding school.

Sawyer sits up, puts his beer down, and looks at the three of us before asking, “So how is this thing with Briar going to work? Because I’m more than happy to share, but you motherfuckers need to work out what it is that you want.”

I can’t help but laugh at his outburst. I had no idea that he was even thinking along those lines again. I know that we haven’t discussed anything with Briar and she’s still hanging out with all of us, but since the engagement, everything has kind of taken a pause.

He doesn’t get any response from anyone so he continues to talk. “New Year’s is coming up and I’m not willing to go through another new year without one of us by her side. I’d rather it be all of us, but if none of you guys are willing to step up, I’m more than happy to fill that role. Because I’m not prepared to let her go. No matter what any of you say.”

I lift my bottle in the air and tilt it toward him. I second everything he just said. Cole lets out a breath as he scrubs a hand down his face. I know he enjoyed their day together



earlier. It's exactly why I made sure that Sawyer didn't interrupt them. Especially since it's the first time they've been together, just the two of them, since Thanksgiving. I know that things have been tense between them. Thankfully, it seems like they've worked through at least some of their stuff. He takes a sip of his beer and nods.

"I'm in, I'm also not willing to give her up. But we really do need to make sure that this shit gets sorted with my dad."

All three of us turn to look at Travis, who downs the rest of his beer then shrugs before slamming the bottle down. "I'm not in a position where I get to do anything. So if you guys want to share her, I won't stand in your way." He pushes his stool back, the scraping on the floor screeching around us before he heads upstairs, his footsteps clomping on the wooden steps as he goes. Hellion disappears with him.

"Well, that went about as well as expected," Sawyer says

"What do you expect with his dad still breathing down his neck about everything?" Cole pipes up. "His pops might have been your out, might have been around the last week or so to try and keep Chase at bay, but he saw Katy today, which will have been a stark reminder of why exactly it is that he does everything he does for Chase. We all know he does what he's told and stays in line to keep that little girl safe, and I'm sure Briar would understand everything a lot more if we told her about Katy."

"She absolutely would, especially considering Iris, but it also has to be Travis's decision to tell her, and we both know he is not going to let that secret out anytime soon. Not telling her is just one more thing she'll hold against us once she eventually finds out," I respond as I run a hand through my hair.

I hate how twisted all of this is. I'm not sure when life got so complicated, but I'm sure it was never meant to be like this. Things are supposed to be easy and simple.

Sawyer jumps up to his feet and finishes his drink. "Well, I'm not going to waste any more time talking with you guys. I'm heading upstairs to my girl. Let me know if you need

anything. Otherwise, peace out. I'll see you guys in the morning." He flips us the peace sign before running up the stairs. I hear when he knocks on Briar's door, then the murmur of their voices before the door shuts again, closing them off from us.

I let out a deep breath. "You really think this could work? The three of us sharing, having Travis being on the outside?"

Cole shakes his head. "Not at all. He's obviously as in love with her as the rest of us are, even if nobody will really admit it. It will tear him apart to see us with her, but I also don't want to give her up."

I nod in agreement because I feel the same. I don't want to hurt Travis. He's been my brother since the day we met, but I also don't want to let go of her. She is the one spot of sunshine that is constantly available in my life right now, and I'm not willing to give that up for anybody.

"What are you going to do about your dad?" I ask him, and he smiles wide.

"Briar had a good point today. She asked me why don't I just say no to him, and I didn't have a good answer as to why not, so that's exactly what I'm going to do," he responds, and I raise my eyebrows in surprise.

"You're going to just tell your dad no? But what about—"

He shakes his head, cutting off the rest of my question.

"The rest of it doesn't matter. If he wants to cut me off, he can. I have enough things lined up for myself that being cut off from him isn't exactly going to be a problem. And somehow, I don't see him doing that, considering how much he adores his public image. But if he does, that's a bridge to cross when we get there. Right now, I'm just going to tell him no, because I never have and I'm not sure he's expecting it."

"Well, shit," I say, shocked. He really has never said no to his dad, and the fireworks that are going to come are going to be insane, but I'm glad he's finally stepping up and standing up for himself. Even if it took Briar pointing it out for him to get there.

“It will work out in the end,” I say to him, smiling again.  
“It has to, right?”

---

I stand in the kitchen, making breakfast while the others are all getting ready, when Briar bounces down the stairs and announces that she’ll be out for the day. She grabs her keys and runs out of the front door before I have time to even say a word.

The car is pulling out of the drive and she’s gone in the blink of an eye.

I guess she’s not spending the day with us.

Cole enters the room, dropping down onto the stool at the island, and I push a cup of coffee toward him and smile as I plate up breakfast.

“She has a life outside of us, I guess,” I say with a shrug.

“What kind of life could she possibly have outside of us? We’re amazing,” Sawyer says as he drops down beside Cole. “I was planning on taking her out today, so that just ruined my plans.”

“And did you ask her about going out for the day?” I question, snickering because I already know the answer before he tells me.

“Well, of course not. I wanted to surprise her. That’s the fun of a surprise.”

“Well, then you don’t get to blame her for having plans already.”

Sawyer grumbles as he takes a bite out of the pancake that I put in front of him.

When Cole’s phone starts to ring, I glance at the screen since it’s sitting on the counter. My eyebrow rises in concern when I see the name on it. He picks it up and answers while I wait silently, because listening to one side of a conversation is never any fun.

He ends up taking the call into another room, which leaves me on edge, and I've drunk way too much coffee already this morning for this.

After twenty or so minutes pass, he ends up coming back and sitting back down in front of his now-cold food and coffee.

"Well?" I ask, pretending to eat my own food that I haven't tasted since he left the room.

"Well, what?" Travis asks as he comes down the stairs.

"That was what I was trying to find out," I call back to him.

Travis walks into the kitchen and grabs himself a cup of coffee before leaning against the counter.

"That was Wes giving me an update. There's still no news on Serena's murder in the way of leads or suspects. Obviously, it's been ruled as suspicious, but they're having to let it go cold because there was no evidence on the other bodies that were killed in a similar manner. So they've officially logged it as a cold case."

"Any whispers about Crawford?" Sawyer asks, and Cole shakes his head.

"No, nothing like that. He was just filling me in on something that my dad had him looking into. But that's got nothing to do with Briar, Crawford, or Serena, so she's in the clear for now."

Travis raises an eyebrow in response. "It definitely seems that way. We just need to keep it together and keep acting like nothing happened. Everyone's done a pretty good job so far. We've had enough other stuff to deal with. But when school starts back next week, I think it's going to be a lot harder for her to pretend. Because even though she won't have his class anymore, there are still going to be questions around campus about where he is. Do we have any more information on the email that she got?"

I shake my head in response, guilt slamming in my chest. "No, it came from an IP that's been bounced across the world,

and is basically untraceable. There's no way for me to find out exactly where it was sent from. Whoever it was is very good at what they do and wanted to remain hidden. It would take someone with better skills than I have to fully trace them. I have no doubt it can be done; I just can't do it."

I hate saying the words, because I hate feeling like I'm letting her down by not knowing who the threat against her is. But even my skills are limited, and this is something that I can't do any more than I already have.

"I'll look into it," Travis says. "Just drop me an email with the details so that I can get Bentley on it. I don't know why we didn't just ask him first."

"Because we didn't want to involve anybody else," Cole says. "Bentley is somebody else."

"He *is* somebody else, but he's somebody else that I trust with my life. I trust him far more than my dad, and I know that he won't turn against us. He'll help us make sure she's safe," Travis counters, and I can't help but feel a little uneasy.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying to decide whether I think this is a good idea or not. But the fact of the matter is, this is outside of my skill set and, as much as I want to help Briar, I can't, and we need to know who the threat against her is if someone knows what she did.

If Bentley is someone who can help and Travis trusts him, then I'm fully on board for that.

I look at Sawyer and I can see all over his face that he agrees with every thought that just ran through my mind. So I turn to Travis and nod. "If Bentley is the guy for the job and we can trust him, then let's do it."

"I don't like this call, T. The more people that know, the more in danger she's in. Hasn't she already suffered enough?" Cole questions, his arms folded across his chest.

Travis looks at him with a straight face and responds, "Of course she has, but this is how we keep her from going through anything else."

“Well, then we have to tell her what the plan is.” His tone leaves no room for argument.

He and Travis sit in a stare-off for what feels like at least a couple of minutes before Travis nods.

“Fine, we can tell her, but I’m not going to be the one to do it. She hates me enough as it is already. One of you guys can take the brunt of her anger for a change.” He finishes his cup of coffee and heads back upstairs, the slam of his door echoing out through the house.

“Not it!” Sawyer calls out, touching the tip of his nose and jumping to his feet. I roll my eyes and shake my head at him before he lets out a whoop of joy. “I’m gonna go walk the dogs, then we can go for a run later.”

He grabs leashes off of the hooks and the dogs all clamber toward him as I watch, laughing far too much at him trying to get everybody hooked up.

“I can do it,” Cole says before I get a chance to. “I can explain it to her in a calmer way, and there’s no point in her hating you as well. I know I’ve started to make headway with her, but if she’s going to be angry at anybody, it might as well be me.”

“You don’t have to,” I offer, more than happy to give her the bad news. It’s not like it won’t be the first bad news I’ve given her since she arrived here.

“No, it’s fine. I’ve got it,” he says, the metal feet of the stool scraping back on the floor as he stands making me wince. “I need to go and see my dad today anyway. So I’ll speak to her when I get back.”

“Are you going to speak to him about Briar?” I ask, and he nods.

“There’s no time like the present. I might as well start fighting the battle now so that we can at least try to win the war later.”

# CHAPTER TEN

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I look down at the text message on my phone and want to crawl into a deep dark pit of despair again. These last few days have been almost perfect, and in one quick hit, my mom manages to rip away any joy I've been feeling.

Mom:

We need to talk. Please come by the house, or I can take you out to lunch, but we *\*need\** to talk. I need your help.

God only knows what sort of mess she's gotten herself into now, and I hate how much duty I feel to fix whatever it is that she's broken, but I can't change who I am.

I've always been the one to save us. Save her. It's like a part of my DNA, so even though it makes me hate myself, I find myself responding to her.

Me:

I can come by the house, what time? What's wrong?

Mom:

Thank you, sweetheart, you have no idea what this means. Pop by for lunch, Chase will be gone by then.

Yeah, that doesn't seem ominous at all.

I fling myself backward to lie down on my bed and pull the duvet up over my head, silently screaming beneath it. I already know that this is going to be bad. Every single sense in my body is on high alert and I feel like I'm going to be sick already.



It's going to be fun trying to hide this from everyone in the house this morning until I leave, because I already know that even if I try to hide out in here, Sawyer will try to join me. As much as I enjoy living with them—which definitely still shocks me on a daily basis—I definitely miss having some alone time. Normally, I'd go hide out in the library, but after everything at Thanksgiving, I haven't dared go back in case it jogs someone's memory of something they might have seen.

A shudder runs down my spine even thinking about it.

Nope. Not today. I've got enough emotional turmoil to fill the Grand Canyon from dealing with my mom, I am not adding the Professor Crawford thing to it. So I stuff that back down in its tightly locked-away box, and walk the hell away. I might not be able to stuff my mom in a box, but this I can.

Is it going to bite me in the ass eventually? Oh, I am a thousand percent sure it will, but that is future me's problem.

Right-now me has enough other shit to deal with.

My phone buzzes beside me on the bed again, but this time I ignore it. I've got enough stuff to be dealing with today without seeing another message from my mom or requests from anybody else.

So I bury myself beneath my pillows and stay under the duvet for as long as I think I can get away with.

It's only when a knock sounds at my door and Sawyer's voice filters through as he calls out good morning to me that I know I don't have much more time left to hide in my pit of despair.

"I'm just going to jump in the shower," I call out to him, hoping that gives me at least another half hour before he decides to bounce into my room.

Ever since everything that happened over Thanksgiving, they've all been watching me like a hawk. Not that I blame them, but I'm not exactly a flight risk at this point. Like, where exactly is it that they think I'm going to go?

I don't have anyone to turn to or anywhere else to go. I let out a deep sigh and climb out of my bed, heading into the

shower. I try to wash away that icky feeling that has been crawling over my skin since I agreed to see my mom, but it doesn't matter how hard I scrub or how hot I make the water, it doesn't go anywhere.

I should know better by now than to think I can get rid of it so easily.

I shut the water off and get ready for the day, wearing the most comfortable clothing I can find. I have a feeling that today I'm going to need all the comfort I can find, even if that is just from wearing leggings and a giant sweater with my beanie on my head.

I grab my phone from under the pillow and see my mom's name on the screen again, telling me that she's having lunch made for us, so come hungry.

*Awesome.*

I only have about half an hour until I'm supposed to meet her, so I rush downstairs calling out 'good morning' before grabbing the keys for the Batmobile from the hook. I call out to let them know that I'm heading out, and dash out of the door before anybody can ask any questions or try to come with me.

How I make it out of the driveway without one of them in my car is beyond me, but that doesn't mean I don't see Sawyer standing in the doorway as I pull away, his hands in the air calling out to me. Not that I can hear anything he's saying.

Guilt pools in my stomach at the thought of running away from them, but I'll answer their questions later.

Once I've dealt with my mom.

Right now, all of my energy is focused on whatever it is she has to tell me and keeping myself stable enough to deal with whatever chaos it is that she's about to bring into my life.

When I pull up to the McMansion, I head straight for the garage before making my way up to the informal sitting room where my mom told me she would be waiting for me.

She's in there with a tray of tea and a bunch of tiny sandwiches and cakes. As if she did afternoon tea before whatever it is that she wants to tell me.

Who exactly is it that she thinks we are?

"Hi, Mom," I call out as I move into the room, taking a seat opposite her, but she doesn't bother to stand or try to hug me because there's nobody else around and she knows better than that. "What's so important that you couldn't just tell me over the phone?" I ask, getting straight to the point because I don't want to be here any longer than I absolutely have to.

"I need you to agree to marry the Beckett boy," she responds, no emotion on her face, her eyes dull and lifeless, despite the shiny exterior that she's put together.

This is the woman I know, not the bright and shiny one that she's been pretending to be every time I've seen her since I arrived in Serenity Falls. This is the mother I grew up with, the lifeless, emotionless robot. The one who doesn't actually care about me.

"I already told you, I'm not going to do that. If that's why you called me here, then this was a waste of both of our time."

I stand to leave, hating how much time I've wasted on coming here when I could still be in bed, because this is the drivel that she wanted to go through.

"I'm not really pregnant, Briar," she says as I head to the door. "You need to marry the Beckett boy so that we are set for life. Because once Chase finds out the truth, he is going to divorce me, and that puts us right back into the position we were in before."

My heart stutters in my chest as I turn to face her, my eyes wide. "What do you mean you're not pregnant?"

She lets out a hollow laugh before taking a sip of tea from one of the cups on the table. "I'm not sure what it is that you're not understanding about what I'm saying, Briar. There isn't any other way to say I'm not pregnant. So unless I miraculously fall pregnant within the next week or so, you are the only thing that is going to be holding us together. Case in

point, you need to marry the Beckett boy. Otherwise, we're going straight back to the hovel I only just managed to pull us out of."

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*I watch as the tiny blonde joy of my life plays with the dolls I managed to find for her in the thrift store over the weekend and think to myself that life could be way worse. The joy on her face takes away from the pain in my stomach. It distracts me from how hungry I am, from the fact that Mom hasn't been home in three days.*

*I'm only sixteen, and I know other kids at school don't have to worry about the stuff I worry about, but they also don't have the joy of having an Iris in their life. Sure, we struggle, and sure, we don't have the fancy things we see on TV, but we have each other, and that feels like enough.*

*Even when I haven't eaten in two days.*

*I always make sure Iris eats, because she's already so much smaller than I am. She needs the food more than I do. She's only eight, she's still growing. Plus, the nice lady at the restaurant on my way home from school sometimes gives me food for us, so I only have to steal it sometimes.*

*But I only steal for Iris. Never for me.*

*I can live on water most of the time, and the job I got washing dishes at the bakery nearby means I don't have to steal too often, but sometimes Mom finds my hidden stash, and then... well, then I have to steal.*

*I'd still pick this over us having money when Mom has another one of her boyfriends around. Sure, then we have food and heat, but Mom's boyfriends always look at me funny. Some of them have tried to touch me. Others... well, I don't think about them.*

*I heat the box of mac and cheese for dinner, using milk instead of water today because it's her birthday, and grin to myself about the cupcake I have for her in the fridge. It was*

worth the extra expense, and maybe this mac and cheese will keep me going for a few more days.

When the mac is done, I scoop it into two bowls and sprinkle on some of the extra cheese I stole from the store on hers and smile at myself. Iris loves mac and cheese, it's why she wanted it for her birthday dinner. I'm just glad I could actually make it happen without having to steal too much.

"Dinner time, birthday girl," I call out.

She looks up at me from where she's playing on the floor with her dolls and grins wide. "Yay! Thank you, Briar."

"Anything for you, sweet girl," I respond when she reaches me and wraps her little arms around my waist, holding me tight. We look nothing alike, and most people wouldn't believe we're related, let alone sisters, but I would die for her.

She hops up onto the chair at the tiny table we have and I place her bowl in front of her before sitting opposite her. Her eyes light up and she claps her hands together when she sees her extra cheese. She grabs for her fork and lets out the most adorable noises when she takes her first bite.

"You made it with milk?" she asks, her bright blue eyes staring up at me, and I nod. "Thank youuuuuuuuuuuuuuu. Best birthday ever!"

It hurts my heart a little that this makes it her best birthday ever, but I'm just glad I could give her something to make her so happy.

When we finish eating, I put the bowls in the sink and head to the refrigerator. I grab the candle and lighter I stashed in the cutlery drawer before grabbing the cupcake. I stick the candle in the top and light it before turning and starting to sing happy birthday.

Iris lets out a squeal and bounces on the spot as I walk the few steps back across the kitchen space singing to her.

I place the cupcake and plate on the table as I finish singing, joy swelling my heart as she bounces and claps.

*“Don’t forget to make a wish,” I tell her as she sucks in a breath before blowing out her candle, clasping her hands in front of her chest and closing her eyes tight.*

*“I wished—” she starts, and I shake my head, shushing her at the same time.*

*“Don’t tell me, sweet girl, otherwise it won’t come true.”*

*She covers her mouth and giggles at me. “Oopsie. Okay, I won’t tell. But it was a good one.”*

*“Oh I bet it was.”*

The memory drifts away as I pull myself from my dream and feel the tears run down my face. If I’d known that two months after her birthday I’d lose her, I’d have picked her up and run away with her there and then.

Losing Iris might have brought my dad back into our lives for a short time before he up and left again, but I’d have given anything to have her in my life still.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes and try to push away the pain that rips through me. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive my mom for what she did, so if she thinks I’m going to save her again, she’s got another thing coming.

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Two days have passed since my mom’s confession, and I’m still reeling as I finish getting ready for the New Year’s Eve party that I’m being forced to go to.

I haven’t uttered a word to the guys about what Mom told me when I was there the other day, because I have no idea how to explain the actual fucking psychopathic move my mom has pulled. There is no other way to describe what she’s done.

I hear someone call my name, but it’s like I’m under water.

“Briar?”

I look in the mirror and find Asher staring at me from my doorway.

“We’re leaving in a minute, are you ready to go?”

I nod, unable to find any words.

He frowns in response, but closes the door as he leaves. I know that they all think something is wrong, not speaking to them for two days will do that, but every time I go to speak, I worry I’ll blurt out what my mom told me, and I just... I can’t.

The night passes in a blur, I barely even remember the drive to the McMansion, let alone the party. I have no idea who gave me the drink in my hand as I sip it—it’s like I’m numb.

If I could be angry, I’d want to kill my mom for putting me in this position, but once again, she’s just made me numb.

I blink, and when my lids lift, I find an angry Travis staring down at me.

“T—” I start, but he shakes his head and grips my bicep, pulling me away from the room we’re in. I can’t focus on where he’s taking me, but the music fades from my ears, the space filled with nothing but a blissful silence.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he hisses. “You’ve been weird for days. Is this something I need to be worried about? Is it Crawford? Something else?”

I shake my head, looking around and realizing we’re in the hall near our rooms.

Weird.

“It’s nothing,” I utter, my words so soft that if it weren’t for the silence, I don’t know that they’d be audible.

“Do not lie to me, Briar,” he hisses.

“I—” I start, but close my mouth. I realize I don’t want to lie to him, but I don’t know how to tell him the truth. He must read it in my eyes because his darken.

“Travis—” He stops my words by pushing me against the wall and pressing his body flush with mine.

“No more lies, Briar. Lies are like poison, and you’re the only poison I need in my life. My very own beautiful nightmare.” He pauses, but nothing falls from my lips. I can barely compute what it is he’s saying. “We both know exactly why we shouldn’t do this, but all I’ve done is watch you since the moment I knew I couldn’t call you mine, and it’s driven me insane. Seeing you with them so freely. Watching you hurt as you break. I can’t stand by anymore. I *won’t* stand by anymore.”

My breath hitches at his words as my brain finally starts to pick up speed for the first time in days.

A small part of me wants to ask what’s changed with him, but the rest of me is telling that bitch to shut her stupid damn mouth, so when he presses his lips against mine, I welcome the good kind of quiet that descends over my mind.

Kissing him again feels as good as it did the first time. He is right, I want him even though I know I shouldn’t, but how can this be wrong?

One hand fists my hair as his hardness presses against me. “This isn’t going to be soft and slow, Briar. Nothing about me is soft or slow. Nod if you understand.”

I nod slightly. The sting from where his hand grips my hair feels like a torturous kind of bliss.

“Good girl,” he murmurs against my lips before capturing them again, his tongue invading my mouth, the taste of him and mint overwhelming me as I wrap my hands in the material of his shirt. “Turn.”

The one word pulls me to reality and I blink at him, his blue eyes staring at me. The storm in them matches the one in my heart, and I follow his command without thought. Turning with his hand still in my hair, I await his next instruction.

“Hands on the wall.” As if on autopilot, my arms reach up and I press my palms flat on the cold, smooth surface. He uses the hand in my hair to tilt me forward, and his groan as he slips his other hand up my skirt and into my panties leaves me wanting, my breaths turning to pants.



“Fuck this,” he growls before pulling me upright and dragging me down the hall into his room. “Undress, now.”

I am so fucking turned on at this side of him that I tear out of my skirt, leather harness, and t-shirt faster than I ever thought possible, standing before him in just my underwear.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Keep going.”

So I do as he asks, watching as he unbuttons his white shirt and takes off his belt, cracking it once before throwing it to the floor. My eyes trail after the leather before making their way back to him, and I find him smirking at me. He doesn't need to say a word.

He pushes down his pants and boxers, standing before me, every glorious naked inch of him.

“Lie on the bed, Briar.”

I move back, my eyes never leaving his intense gaze as he prowls forward like a predator on the hunt. My entire body is humming for him as my breaths come in fast and my pussy aches to finally feel him again. No matter how much I shouldn't want this, I can't help that I do.

“Spread your legs nice and wide for me, baby.” I barely even register the command before my body reacts. Leaning back on my elbows, I open up for him and watch as his eyes trail down my body, landing hungrily at the apex of my thighs.

“Fuck, Briar. You're fucking stunning.” It all happens so fast. One minute he's licking his lips, and the next his mouth is at my pussy and I can barely contain myself. With big hands sliding beneath me to palm my ass cheeks, he pulls me even closer as he starts to fuck me with his tongue. He eats me like he's trying to consume me completely. His nails dig into my sensitive skin, and I have no doubt that he's leaving me with his mark.

Part of me wants to watch him as he eats me, but it feels too damn good for me to focus. The pleasure sweeps through my entire body, leaving my head too heavy to keep upright, so I let it fall back and just allow myself to enjoy the ravaging bliss he's giving me.

Every time I moan, he fucks me harder with his tongue and every time my pelvis pushes for more, he stills my movements, telling me without a single word that he's the one in control here.

"Travis..." I have no idea what I want to say or scream or do but his name slips from my lips anyway. It's like I'm begging for something I can't put into words and still, he gives me what I truly need.

Releasing one of my ass cheeks, he pushes two fingers inside me as his mouth latches on to my clit and sucks, hard. My gasp fills the space inside the room, the sounds of my wet pussy echoing around us, but what brings me to the edge of my first orgasm are the moans coming from Travis's throat as he flicks my clit with his tongue while pumping his fingers deep inside my pussy. He is relentless with his delicious assaults and it affects me more than I could have ever imagined. It's like he's a man on a mission and his prize is my screams.

My toes curl and my muscles tense as I feel my orgasm edging closer. It's right there, teasing me with every one of Travis's licks and sucks.

Just when I think I can't take much more, he stops everything. His mouth hovers millimeters from my skin, his fingers disappear from my pussy, and he just stares at me with a gaze that penetrates my very core. He controls his own breathing as mine becomes more erratic. My body is primed to come. My poor, swollen nub throbs with need, and Travis does nothing.

I try not to scream with infuriation, especially when he smirks at me, like he knows exactly what he's doing to me and loving every fucking second.

"Your orgasms belong to me. I tell you when you get to come. If you come without my permission, you will be punished, do you understand?"

I blink up at him, trying to make sense of his words. I get that Travis loves nothing more than control, and him demanding to control my body's response to his touch isn't all

that surprising. I'm also not willing to give this up, so I nod, submitting myself to him.

After what feels like an eternity, he pulls his gaze from mine, like he was testing to see my will. Travis removes the hand that's currently on my ass cheek and opens my pussy lips before tilting my pelvis up. He spits onto me once, then twice, before licking a slow, torturous path up my slit and biting on my clit hard enough to make me whimper and shiver all at once. I'm trying my damndest not to come, my hands clutching the duvet to the point I'm sure that I'm losing circulation in my fingers, but I know I can do this. I can control myself.

I refuse to lose this game.

With a satisfied smirk etched across his lips once more, he captures me with his intense gaze and whispers just loud enough to break through the loud beating of my heart.

"Now." My brain registers his meaning just as he slams his fingers back inside me, curling them at the perfect angle and making me contort in all new ways. The sounds that fall from my lips are something between a gasp and a cry for help as his teeth hold my clit prisoner and his mouth sucks on it harder than I thought possible.

Travis gives no reprieve and feasts on my pussy like it's his last meal, licking and slurping away my juices with every pulse of my body.

All too soon, the ecstasy slowly abates, my breathing slightly less crazy as my body relaxes back onto the soft mattress. Once I open my eyes, I seek out Travis, only to find a wicked grin gracing his talented lips.

"Now the fun really begins."

And here I am thinking we started a while back.

In my post-orgasmic haze, I don't see him move until his hand is in my hair, the strands tightly wrapped around his palm and my face angled directly at his thick, hard cock.

I lick my lips, the need and want to have him in my mouth taking over every thought in my head.

Like he can read my mind, he chuckles. “I don’t do gentle, Briar. You will suck my dick until I can feel the muscles of your throat choking on it. I want to hear you gag and watch the tears fall down your cheeks. Only when you swallow every fucking drop of my cum will I let you breathe again. Do you understand?” I should be afraid of his warning, maybe tap out with a soldier’s salute and walk right out of this bedroom with my ass being the last thing he sees of me, but we both know that’s not happening.

I want this. I want him. I want to feel and taste everything he has to give.

So I tear my gaze away from the perfection that is his cock and nod before I remember that he wants my words.

“I understand.”

I barely have time to get myself stable before Travis slams his cock into my mouth, the thick head pushing down the back of my throat.

“Breathe through your nose, baby.” Closing my eyes, I concentrate on every inhale and every slow, measured exhale through my nose until my muscles relax and his shaft slides just a little further inside. “That’s it. That’s my good girl. Now swallow my dick and suck like a good little slut.”

With my hands clutching his hips, I do as I’m told. His tight hold on my hair is almost painful, but stays just this side of pleasure and feels so fucking good. His thick cock pushes in and out of my mouth and is big enough to be deliciously uncomfortable. His thrusts are hard enough to slap his balls on my chin with every jerk of his hips. I’m his prisoner in this cell of passion, a toy he can play with. I’m the hole he can fuck any which way he prefers and he’s not going easy on me. Not in the slightest.

It doesn’t take long before he gets his wish and I’m gagging as he slams harder and harder down my throat, my tears now falling like rivulets down my cheeks, sneaking around where my lips surround the base of his cock.

“Choke on my cock, Briar. Take it all like a good little girl.” With my nails digging into his flesh and breaking the skin, I order my muscles to just let go completely, allowing Travis to push in deep enough to make him pet my head while fucking my mouth like a savage.

“That’s it, that’s fucking it right there.”

He stills, my mouth full of cock, my lips pressed against his groin as he grinds my entire face into him. I choke, desperate for air, but hold on for as long as I can because, fuck, this is so hot.

Like he knows I need him, he places both of his palms on the sides of my face and lets out a groan so feral I almost come from the mere sound of it as he orgasms right down my throat. I can’t taste him, I can only swallow, but he saves one last spurt for me as he pulls back from deep inside my mouth.

“Keep your mouth open, tongue out.” His words are clipped, his voice tight.

Wrapping his fingers around his shaft he pumps once, twice and gifts me with everything he has left, his seed coating my tongue.

“Taste what you do to me, Briar.” Closing my mouth, I savor every drop before I find myself pushed back onto the mattress, my legs spread once again.

My eyes dart to his cock. Surely he can’t be ready to go again. How long does it take for him to go again?

“Don’t worry, Briar, you’ll get my dick soon enough.” Kneeling between my thighs, Travis runs his hands up my calves, over my knees, and down my thighs before his thumbs caress my swollen lips.

“You came without my permission.” His intense gaze darts to mine before holding my guilty stare. Busted.

“I didn’t, I’m just really fucking wet.”

“Are you lying to me, Briar?” he asks, his brow quirked, and it lights a fire in me.

“No, I’m not fucking lying. And maybe I wouldn’t be so wet if you weren’t so fucking talented with your dick.” I’m giving him my sass to spur him on. He enjoys the chase, the fight. He wants me to push him and I love nothing more than to flex my tongue.

“Flattery won’t save you from the consequences of coming without permission.”

“I didn’t—”

The next thing I know, his palm is at my throat, his fingers pressing against my pulse point as the head of his cock is poised at the entrance of my pussy. Fuck. Note to self: never underestimate Travis Kensington.

“Open your mouth, little girl.” Pressing against my throat, his entire upper body above me, his face just inches from mine, his lips hover close to my open mouth.

“I don’t like repeating myself, Briar, but I will only because you swallowed my come like a good little girl.” His dick pushes in just a tiny bit before he stops again.

“You come when I say you can come. You can beg, you can scream, you can cry out my name all fucking night long, but until I give you permission, you do not fucking come. Is that clear?” I blink up at him, his blue eyes boring into my very soul with every word that spills from between his lips.

I nod my understanding because I can’t give him my words in this position. Not that I’m about to tell him again that I didn’t orgasm, because holy fucking hell, this is hot.

“Good.” Pressing his fingers tighter against my throat, I have a harder time breathing, the air that I should be taking into my lungs is becoming scarce, my vision a little blurry.

“You take everything I give you. Starting with me.” Just as he slams his dick into my pussy, he spits right into my mouth. He hasn’t given me permission to close it, so I don’t move as he begins to plow inside me while his spit sits on my tongue, just waiting for me to swallow.

“That’s right. So fucking perfect.” I take this time to watch him fuck me, his entire body tight, muscles flexing and

relaxing with every thrust and every move he makes. When he bottoms out, he tightens his hold on me, releasing just enough for me to breathe every time he pulls out. The rhythm is perfect, his push and pull giving my body everything it begs for. Watching him is a fucking aphrodisiac. Knowing every moan and groan that escapes him is because of me. I'm doing this to him. I'm making him shudder every time my pussy muscles squeeze him. I'm causing that wild look in his eyes. I'm the reason for the tightness in his jaw. Me. My body and my need.

Travis is relentless with his fucking. There's nothing gentle or loving about the way he slams his cock inside me, yet I feel seen and worshiped.

Reaching back to grab hold of something, anything, I clutch at the headboard to keep myself from losing control. To hold back my orgasm that wants to escape. My muscles are tense, my entire body primed to come yet again, but I won't. Not until he's given me his permission.

I'm a fast learner, and if there's anything I've learned today, it's that fucking Travis is something I want again and again.

"That's it, hold it." He slams into me, over and over again, hitting that sweet spot relentlessly. "Hold it."

I try really fucking hard not to come, but I'm fighting a losing battle as he plunges one last time, so deep I can feel him fucking everywhere. His fingers squeeze just a little harder and my vision blurs at the corners as my breath comes in shallow little gasps.

I'm either going to disobey or pass out.

"That's my good girl. Now come all over my fucking cock."

The moment his command reaches my fading consciousness, my entire body reacts on its own. My muscles give way and my orgasm explodes into a million lightning bolts across every nerve ending in my body.

I don't know what sound I make as I come like never before, but I know that Travis is right there with me.

When I'm done, he gathers me in his arms and kisses my forehead. "Such a good girl."

A shiver runs down my body as he squeezes me tight, and I let out a sigh as real life starts to filter back into my senses. "Does this mean we have to go back to reality now?"

He chuckles, and my head bounces on his chest. "Not just yet, we've got time."

I know he's lying, but I'm not about to contradict him, because right now, in this moment, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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After the insanity of Christmas break, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm actually looking forward to getting back to normal and starting classes again.

Obviously, last semester looks entirely different than this one and I've got a lot less classes this time around, but I'm looking forward to starting fresh and sinking my teeth into something new and trying to forget everything.

I look over my schedule, noting my classes for the day.

We're starting back on a Wednesday, so I'm already aware that my world's going to be completely off balance, but I'm starting with Intro to Drawing and Contemporary World Literature today. I can't explain how happy that makes my heart because I feel like I haven't drawn in too long. So being forced to do some form of drawing every week is going to make my little heart happy. And Contemporary World Literature on the same day? This semester is ticking all of my nerd boxes.

I spend extra time getting ready this morning than I normally do since the cold of winter is still in play. I pull on jeans, a pair of fur-lined boots, and a long-sleeve t-shirt with a thick knit cardigan, then straighten my hair and throw on my slouch beanie.

I'm not gonna lie—I look cute as fuck.

If only I felt as calm and collected on the inside as I look on the outside.

Everything that has happened since Thanksgiving still has me reeling. Adding Travis's confession and everything with my mom on top of it all... it just feels wild. At least I have the comfort that the engagement is officially off.

I grab my phone and text Penn to see if she wants to grab coffee before my morning class. It's not long before she messages back saying she doesn't have class this morning, but asks if I want to meet her at the cafeteria for lunch. I let her know I will before grabbing my stuff to head downstairs.

It's weird waking up without the puppies all over me, but Asher snuck in super early this morning to tell me that they were all going out to start their exercise routine again now that the semester has started.

And that, apparently, meant running with the dogs at ass o'clock in the morning.

I'm just glad they didn't try to make me get in on their exercise routine, because running that early in the day is not something that's ever going to happen to me. Running at all, regardless of the time of day, isn't going to work for me.

I get downstairs and start tinkering in the kitchen. It's the first chance I've had to really cook in here because I'm never alone in the house. There is at least always one of the guys here and they all seem to enjoy cooking.

I make myself some pancakes and bacon, reveling in the ability to just do it for myself without having to check with someone or being worried about if eating now means I don't get to eat later.

The problem with all this food is, my hips are really starting to round out even further. My ass has already gotten a bit bigger, which it definitely didn't need, but I'm not going to stress over that.

Considering everything else that I have going on in my life, my ass can be a little chunky.

All it means is that if someone's chasing me, I'm going to be even slower than normal to run away. I'm officially *that* girl in a horror movie.

After breakfast, I drive to campus, and it's nice to be an anonymous person amid the hustle bustle at the start of a new semester. To get lost in the crowd and be a nameless, faceless number in the chaos.

My Intro to Drawing class is nothing like I expected, but it's everything I didn't know I needed. Starting my day this way was definitely the best thing I could have asked for for my first day back. My professor looks a little like Trelawney from *Harry Potter*, but I love her kookiness and quirks.

Even her woo-woo-like voice made me smile as she tried to explain some of the more scientific aspects of drawing rather than just the creative ones.

When class finishes, I drop a text to Penn, who tells me that she's already waiting at the cafeteria for me, so I haul ass across campus and see her waiting at our normal table. I drop my bag with her before going and grabbing a sandwich and some fries, then make my way back, finding her still sitting alone.

"No Connor today?" I ask, and she shakes her head.

"No. I barely heard from him over the Christmas break. I'm not really sure what's going on with him right now."

I frown as I pop a fry into my mouth, wondering what could possibly be going on with him. They were both super tight before Christmas, so I don't understand what could have happened.

I say as much and she shrugs. "I have no idea what's going on. Everything seemed okay before break. But then I had Christmas with my family. I didn't get to speak to him for a couple of days, because... well, chaos—as I'm sure you can imagine having met my family—and when I tried to reach back out to him, he didn't respond until New Year's Eve. And that was just to say that he's been busy and he would see me at school when we started back in the dorm, but he hasn't shown up yet."

I frown harder, wondering what on earth could be going on because they're supposed to be sharing that dorm.

“You think something’s wrong?” I ask, trying to pry a little further. She doesn’t seem *that* concerned, but then, she’s known Connor longer than I have. Maybe this isn’t totally unusual for him.

“I don’t know,” she says, chewing on her lip. “He doesn’t usually go dark for this long. Sure, a day or two, which has always pissed me off, but he isn’t usually this Casper-like.”

“Casper-like?” My brow furrows as I try to work out what the hell she means.

She laughs a little. “Ghostie.”

“Oh,” I say with a gigglesnort. “You’re stealing my ‘90s references.”

“Eh, they’re fun.”

“Yes, they are.” I grin wide, because I knew I’d infect her with my awesome at some point. “But are you sure we shouldn’t be more worried about Connor?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. Everything was fine, which makes me want to say no.” She fiddles with her red locks nervously. “But this isn’t like him either.”

“Okay, I’ll try and get ahold of him too, just to check in or something.” I try to reassure her and make a note to myself to text Connor later.

I’m scheduled to have Brain and Behavior with him tomorrow morning, so maybe I’ll just use that as a way of seeing if we’re still taking the same classes this semester.

“Thank you,” she says, some of the tension in her shoulders leaving. I guess she just needed someone else to acknowledge it. “Anyway, enough about my sad little lonely existence. What happened with you over Christmas break? You went kind of dark on me too.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I respond, wincing at the thought of how much of a terrible friend I really am. “Things were kind of crazy between Thanksgiving and everyone trying to engage me off to Cole, to Christmas where Cole basically told his dad that he wouldn’t be marrying me—though, admittedly,

that took the pressure off of me quite a lot. Then spending so much time with the twins that there's no way I wouldn't tell them apart. And everything with Travis..."

"What do you mean, everything with Travis?" she asks, cutting me off. She wags her brows at me, and I can't help but laugh before I fill her in on everything else that happened over the break.

By the time I'm done, her jaw is slack and her eyes are wide. I can't help but laugh as she just sits gawping at me. "Holy shit! And I thought my holiday was insane. It's got nothing on your chaos."

"My chaos has its very own brand of special," I respond to her, laughing. I check my watch and realize I need to make my way to my next class. I say my goodbyes to her and start making my way back across campus when I see a flash of blonde that has me stopping in my tracks.

I blink and search for the flash again, because there's no way I could have seen what I thought I just saw, but when I search the crowd, the blonde has gone and I shake my head thinking it must have been a hallucination.

I know I've been stressed, but even considering that, seeing Iris here is a physical impossibility. Right?

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Adjusting back to everyday life has been strange, but after two full days of college and classes, I'm officially wiped.

Today's Brain and Behavior, and Reasoning and Rational Decision Making has me anything but reasonable or rational.

I still haven't heard from Connor and he wasn't in any of our classes today. I'm starting to worry about him a little, all things considered. He doesn't seem the type to miss class unless there's some very important reason.

I head to grab a coffee as I make my way across campus before heading home.

My thoughts fade to dull background noise as *Spell It Out* by You Me At Six plays on my AirPods, and I tap on my thighs to the beat while I wait in line for coffee. It's weird not seeing Connor at his normal post, but I place my order once I reach the front and wait patiently, trying not to come off as a weird, awkward potato with this girl like I did with Connor on my first day here.

Once my coffee is in my hands, I make a slow walk toward where I left the car this morning, pausing when I see that flash of blond again. It has to be a coincidence or my eyes playing tricks on me because Iris is dead, and the person I saw was definitely a dude.

It's not like she'd be here on campus even if she were alive, but something inside of me tells me to move, to chase that blond head down, so I pick up my pace and move in the direction that my hallucination leads me as the blond moves farther and farther away, despite me trying to walk faster.

It's times like this I think maybe I should start working out with the guys, but even this isn't enough to make me want to run at 5 a.m. every morning.

The blond turns and I frown, blinking to try and see in the distance.

There's no way that can be who I think it is, there's no reason for him to be here.

I blink again, trying to find the face in the crowd, but it's gone.

That doesn't stop the fear in my heart.

I try to suck in a breath, but it's like my lungs have stopped working. My hands are shaking, and I can't even really feel them, despite one being clutched around my very hot coffee.

My feet start to go numb and the world starts to turn fuzzy at the edges of my vision. I crouch down into a ball, not caring that there are a thousand people milling around me, and try to make my lungs start working again.

*This can't be happening.*

I escaped him once, there's no way he's going to come back and want me now, surely.

I'm already dealing with so much, I'm not sure that I can deal with this on top of it all.

The sounds around me are warped, like I'm being held under water, and it's not until I feel someone lifting me from the ground that things start to come back into focus.

Travis looks down at me as he holds me against his chest, but I'm powerless to move or do anything as the panic attack grips me in its vise-like hold.

It's hard to pay attention to anything but the sound of his heart and the bounds of his steps as I lie against him, and he walks me through the crowd of people trying to escape campus as quickly as possible.

I try to focus on my breathing, trying to bring my heart rate in line with his, attempting to use him as my anchor to pull myself back to reality.

But all I can see every time I close my eyes is that face, that flash of blond, and it takes me back to being twelve years old and absolutely terrified.

The man who fathered my little sister shouldn't elicit such fear in me, but he is the only man who stuck around for a reasonable amount of time in our lives other than my dad, and the things that he tried to do will haunt me forever.

If he's here, then I have to go. There is no way I can stay here. Even a thousand miles between us isn't even close to enough.

Before I know it, the sounds around us have disappeared and Travis has me sitting on the ground, leaning me against a tree as he crouches in front of me.

His finger underneath my chin lifts my gaze up to his. "Just breathe in and out with me."

He keeps his eyes focused on me and walks me through breathing, as if he actually knows how to deal with the insanity that are my anxiety attacks.



I try not to overthink it and focus on pulling myself away from the hole I'm very much teetering on the edge of. After a few minutes of following his breathing and his eyes never leaving mine, my vision finally starts to refocus and it feels like my lungs inflate fully again. Sounds come back to normal, almost a little too loud, but fear still strikes through me.

He can't be here.

That isn't possible.

"Are you feeling better?" Travis asks, still not letting me move my gaze from his.

It's as if his eyes are almost penetrating my soul to get the answers that I don't want to tell him.

"I think so," I say quietly. "Sorry that you had to deal with me like that."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Briar. Everybody needs help sometimes. Are you going to tell me what triggered you?"

I clench my fists, sticking my nails into the palms of my hands, trying not to let the fear take over again. "I just thought I saw somebody from the past, but it's not physically possible for it to be who I thought I saw. My mind was probably just playing tricks on me."

"Are you going to tell me who?" he asks, and I shake my head as much as I can with him holding my chin.

"It's nothing. It can't have been them anyway. There's no reason for them to have been on campus, let alone here in New York."

"Tell me who it was, Briar."

I swallow past the lump in my throat, hesitating before I tell him that I thought I saw Iris's dad on campus. His brow furrows at my response.

I can't help but wonder just how much it is that he knows about me without me ever having told him.

“If you think you see him again, you let me know. Are you ready to go home? Are you good to drive?” he asks, and I nod, despite the shake in my hands.

He rolls his eyes and stands, offering me a hand to help me up, watching me closely. “Yeah, there’s no way I’m letting you drive.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket and puts it to his ear. “Sawyer, meet me at the car. You need to drive Briar’s car back to the house. Don’t ask questions. I’ll fill you in later.”

He ends the call almost as quickly as it started before pocketing his phone and putting his arm around my shoulder. “Come on, let’s get out of here, get you back to the house, then we can work through all of this together with the others.”

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After an exhausting week, even though it’s only been two days, I’ve never been more happy that my new schedule means that I have Friday to Monday off of class.

I’ve spent most of the morning wallowing in bed, trying to shake off yesterday’s anxiety attack, pretending that it wasn’t Travis who pulled me out of it.

We might be on better terms now, but that doesn’t mean I want him to see me at my most vulnerable or at my worst. Especially considering that I was so excited to get back to normal and my classes were going so well.

I hate that something so little tripped me up so badly.

So when Penn texts me and asks if I want to get tacos with her, Connor, and Dante tonight, my answer is instantly a hell yeah. One, because I want to hang out, and two, I want to know where the hell Connor’s been. It’s still bugging me that Penn wasn’t more concerned that he was totally MIA. Maybe she’s not as inquisitive as I am, or maybe she knew where he was—though, she didn’t seem cagey enough for that.

Did she?

God, my entire life has me jaded and mistrusting. I'm sure Penn was acting normal and I'm being the weird one.

I shake off the crazy thoughts and spend the rest of the day tidying the house, trying to keep myself busy. Wondering if it's actually a good thing for me to have so much free time, considering everything haunting me at the moment. Obviously, when I chose my classes, I didn't expect for my life to have become such chaos.

When Penn texts me to let me know that they're on their way to get me, I dash back upstairs and change my leggings and tank top, putting on some clothes that make me look like less of a swamp hag, and make myself presentable.

I create a group chat with the guys and send a message letting them know that I'm heading out for a couple of hours with Penn and the others before pocketing my phone.

The sound of the horn outside has me rushing back down the steps, scratching the puppies between their ears and giving them some quick loves before I head outside.

I'm glad to see Connor with Penn and actually back at college. I try not to focus on the fact that, despite his smile, his eyes seem haunted. It's not my place to question what's going on with him, but he is my friend so I intend on asking anyway.

I jump into the backseat of the car next to Dante, saying hello to everyone as Penn pulls away from my house. This almost feels like something a normal college kid would be doing, so I try to relax into it, enjoying the laughter and banter that goes back and forth between Penn and her cousin. All while I'm trying to realign myself with the fact that this is who I should be right now and what I should be focusing on, rather than everything else that I have going on in my life.

"What's got you so distracted?" Dante asks quietly as Penn laughs with Connor in the front of the car.

"What do you mean?" I respond, trying to play coy.

"I might not know you as well as my cousin, Briar, but I like to think I know you pretty well. I've seen that look in your eyes before, but not since you came to Serenity Falls. Last

time I saw that look in your eyes was that night... the one before you disappeared on me over summer.”

I smile sadly at him and shrug. “Just a lot going on with my mom,” I tell him, hoping that’s enough to fend him off and make him stop asking questions.

He seems to sense my discomfort with his line of questioning and stops before launching into his stories from the holidays. Penn chimes in about how their grandma ended up chasing Dante around the kitchen with a pair of tongs after he tried to steal some of the pulled beef before it was ready.

I can’t help but laugh at the vision of that frail-looking old woman chasing this two-hundred-plus-pound football player with a pair of plastic tongs, and him absolutely hauling ass because we all know, really, he’s terrified of that little old lady.

We head into the Mexican restaurant and the smells alone have my mouth watering instantly. It’s so nice to feel like a normal student with normal friends doing normal things. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so normal and mundane in my life. I stuff down everything else and try to focus on right now and just live in this moment.

God only knows how few of them I’m going to get, so I want to enjoy the ones that I do.

Penn and Dante head to the counter to place our order, leaving me alone with Connor at the table. I take advantage of us being alone and finally ask, “Where were you at the beginning of the week?”

He glances over my shoulder before settling his gaze back on me and shrugs. “I just had some family stuff to sort out. The holidays got kind of chaotic for me. My uncle showed up out of the blue. To say that there were some family tensions is an understatement. I’ve been cleaning up that mess since he arrived on Christmas Eve, and he only left my parents’ house this morning, so I’ve been there trying to help keep the chaos to a minimum.”

I watch him closely looking for any signs of a lie, but I don’t see anything. He could just be a good liar, or it could be

that I don't know him well enough to detect it, so I take his words as truth.

"I have notes from yesterday's classes if you want them. I've also got the dictations if you like?"

"That'd be great," he responds, smiling directly at me as Penn and Dante slide back into our booth.

"They should only be about ten minutes," Penn announces, bumping her shoulder with Connor, drawing a bigger smile from him than the one that I managed to get before.

"So have you seen that Stone Royal is on tour?" Penn asks, wagging her brows at me, knowing about my small infatuation with him thanks to the fact that we lived together for those few months.

Stone Royal might be way older than we are, but he is a rock god and I might just be a little obsessed with him.

"Yeah, I'd seen that he's on tour, but they're not coming to New York for at least another month or so, I didn't think," I say as casually as I can.

She shakes her head and shows me her phone after tapping away on the screen. "They announced new tour dates this week. He's going to be here in two weeks at Madison Square Garden. We should try and go."

My eyes go wide as my heart skips giddily in my chest. I've always wanted to go to a concert, but I've never been able to. The thought of my first one being a Stone Royal show is kind of blowing my mind.

"That would be amazing, but if you want me to believe you're from New York, please call it The Garden," I tease her, and she sticks her tongue out at me.

"We're not all big city, ya know," she retorts with a laugh, and I giggle in response. We start to make plans for how we can make it happen. My phone buzzes in my pocket and I grab it to check the notification, finding a few messages in the group chat.

I can't help but laugh at the boys' back and forth about me going to dinner without them, so I drop a message in the chat telling them to buzz off before locking my phone and popping it back in my pocket, not wanting to be rude.

Moments later, our food arrives. I smile wide, trying not to drool over it.

Days like this are exactly what I need right now, with laughter and friends and zero stress, so I lean back in the booth as Dante hands me my burrito and try to just enjoy the moment, because God only knows how few of them I'm going to get now that I'm supposed to be a Kensington.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

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“Where are we going? Where are we going?” I ask for what is potentially the eleventh billionth time, and Asher laughs at me again from the driver’s seat, shaking his head.

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

After my time out with Penn and the others last night, I was all kinds of happy when I finally got home and Asher crawled into bed with me, soaking up some of my joy because it turned out he had not had the best day.

So when we woke up this morning and he was all smiles, suggesting a day trip, I couldn’t find it in myself to even think about taking those smiles away from him and I agreed without knowing what was going on.

Except now we’ve been driving for nearly an hour, and I have no idea where we’re going or what we’re doing.

“Are we there yet?” I ask, fighting the giggles that threatens to bubble out of me.

He also seems to be getting a kick out of not telling me what we’re doing, so while I do really want to know what the plan is, continuously asking him is more about seeing him laugh than it is about finding out what is going down today.

When we pull into the marina, I smile wide and glance over at him, his smile matching my own.

“I figured since I never got my day out on the boat with you, that we could take advantage of it today. I know it’s



freezing cold outside, but there's still nothing like being out on the water. Especially when we can get warm and cozy inside."

"That sounds like a perfect day," I say to him, my cheeks hurting already from the amount of smiling that I've done today.

We climb from the car and he takes my hand as he leads me through the docks toward where the boat is moored up.

Once we're on board, he talks to the captain and the other staff before leading me inside to the warm and cozy seating area where a fire burns in the fireplace.

It might be a fake one, but there's still enough heat in here for me to feel like it's real, especially with the sound effects that it gives us.

We start to get comfortable and he turns the TV on. I snuggle into his side while we wait for everyone to prep the boat.

Once I feel the tug as we pull away from the mooring, Asher turns off the TV and pulls me up to the window so we can watch as we glide through the water. Apparently, Sawyer told him how much the water is my happy place, because he drops his chin onto my shoulder before kissing my cheek and wrapping his arms around my waist as we stare out over the waves rather than distracting me further.

"Do you want to talk about what happened yesterday?" I ask him, wanting him to be comfortable enough to tell me what's going on with him. Just like they always want to know what's going on with me.

"It was nothing important. Just my mom losing her shit again. And since Brianna didn't come home for Christmas, she's putting all of her crazy on me and Sawyer. I'm trying to nip it in the bud, but my mom is like a dog with a bone. She doesn't tend to let go of an idea if she can figure out a way to make it work. My dad's working on it too though, so it's nothing to worry about. Don't stress about it."

I lay my head back against his chest and glance up at him. "I'm not stressing, I just want to know that you are okay. You

guys have done so much for me. I want to be able to do the same for you.”

He smiles at me before pressing his lips into my hair and breathing deeply. “You’re doing everything right now that I could ever ask of you. Just being here with me and having this day. Let’s forget about them and just enjoy it.”

A knock on the door steals his attention and he pulls away from me. When he opens the door, a woman is standing there with a push cart full of dishes. “Breakfast is served,” she says as she walks in and starts unloading the food onto the table.

My mouth waters as the pastries, fruits, and various other foods are set down, along with a pot of coffee, a teapot, and a jug of fruit juice.

“If you need anything else, please, just ask,” she says to Asher before disappearing with the cart.

Within moments, it’s as if she’d never interrupted our little bubble of happy.

“Breakfast?” Asher asks, holding his hand out to me.

I smile wide before I take it and let him lead me over to the table, pulling out a chair for me as I sit down.

“And they say chivalry is dead,” I tease.

He laughs before taking a seat beside me. “Chivalry isn’t dead. It’s just that most people don’t appreciate it these days.”

I scoff at him before reaching for one of the chocolate pastries on the plate. “It’s not that it’s not appreciated, it’s just that it’s dead for the most part, nobody knows how to react to it anymore,” I counter, and he laughs at me.

“Let’s just agree to disagree for now, shall we?” he teases with a smirk.

As much as I love a good debate, I get the feeling that he needs a normal day of relaxation. And if that’s what he needs from me, that’s exactly what he’s going to get.

So rather than sit in my chair to eat, I get up and shift over to him, dropping into his lap before tearing off some of my

pastry and feeding it to him.

He licks my fingers as he takes the sweet confection from me, his eyes never leaving mine. "I'm not sure which tastes better," he says with a wink, and I swear the rumble of his voice goes straight to my pussy. My thighs clench as he studies me and his eyes light up, like he noticed the movement.

He grips my hips and lifts me. I let out a small squeal as he moves me so that I'm straddling him on the chair.

"That's much better," he says, taking another bite from the pastry in my hand. "This is good, but I can think of something else that I'd like to eat more."

He grips my hips again and lifts me so I'm sitting on the edge of the table and places my feet on either side of his hips on the chair, his hands moving to the button of my jeans. "Lie back, Beautiful."

I glance behind me as he moves the food out of the way then I do as he asks, his fingers making quick work of my buttons. "Lift up," he says, tapping my hip. I do, and he pulls my jeans and panties down before dropping them on the floor.

His eyes darken as they devour me. "You are utter perfection."

I don't know what to say to that, so I say nothing at all as he places his big hands on my knees and spreads me out like a buffet just for him.

The anticipation of his tongue on my pussy is just as heady as the warmth of his touch, knowing what he's about to do only excites me more.

Reaching behind me, I grab hold of the edge of the table with one hand while the other latches onto the back of his head, fingers tightening in his hair.

The first thing I feel is the softness of his lips as he gently kisses the sensitive skin below my navel before moving to my clit. But what causes the full body shiver is when his tongue circles my clit then glides down my slit before sliding right back up so he can suck on my now-throbbing nub.

“Asher...” His name is no more than a breathy moan. There’s nothing else to say, just his name on my parted lips as I silently beg him to do something, anything.

With his hands at the back of my knees, he pushes my legs up toward my body as his mouth grazes my pussy. “They call it breakfast of champions and I am a competitive fucker.”

I begin to laugh at the cheesy line, but it dies in my throat as his tongue plunges into my pussy and his mouth devours every inch of me.

In this position, I’m open wide for the taking, completely at his mercy as he holds me in place and eats me like he could never get enough of me. I can hear him moaning as he takes his time licking and nipping at my skin. I’m literally laid out on the breakfast table for him and it’s hot as fuck. Something about hearing his pleasure just heightens mine.

“I was right. No pastry could ever taste as good as you on my tongue.”

I’m breathing hard as he pushes me closer and closer toward an orgasm. He looks up from between my legs and grins, the sight of him makes me even crazier with his mouth wet from my juices and his eyes focused only on me.

“I want to taste you, too,” I say before licking my lips as though he’s already pressed against my tongue.

“Who am I to deny my girl?” he says, voice gruff and sultry all at once.

Letting me go, I lower my legs just before Asher turns me around like a fucking turntable, my head now hanging off the table. I glance up at him, now upside down, and smirk. “It’s going to be hard to suck your cock if you keep it hidden.”

“Keep it up and you’ll learn what it’s like to go home without an orgasm.” He’s bluffing, I’m sure of it. After all, this is Asher, not Travis.

“Well, I mean, you’re the one missing out on my super power,” I say, sticking out my tongue and he laughs.

“Someone’s feeling brave. You think I won’t deny you your orgasm?” he questions, and I think twice. Maybe it’s not the best idea to push him. He’s not Travis, but I can see the sadistic glimmer in his eye at the thought, so I shut my mouth.

“Hmm, interesting,” he mutters as he pops the button and slides down the zipper of his jeans. “I was sure you’d fight me a little more on this.”

Instead of answering him, I adjust my position and move a little more toward him so my head is hanging a little lower off the table, my tongue sticking out, waiting for him.

“Fuck, look at you all spread out and inviting. You’re a fucking sight is what you are.” Palming his cock, he strokes it before leaning down and taking my mouth in a searing kiss that makes my toes actually curl around the edge of the table. It’s a Spiderman kiss, upside down and full of passion. His tongue chases mine, his teeth nipping at my lips as he deepens the kiss and moans into my mouth. Just when I feel he’s going to pull away, my hand flies to the back of his head and I press him down so I can prolong it a little longer.

“Let’s put that delicious little mouth to good use.”

With my shoulders at the edge of the table, he has access to my pussy and he doesn’t take long to grab the back of my legs and pull my pelvis to his mouth just as his cock slides to the back of my throat. It’s deep and not exactly comfortable at first, but that choking feeling as he pushes through my gag reflex makes me feel so fucking powerful that any discomfort fades away.

I suck his cock so deep I can feel the tears at the corners of my eyes, while the pleasure of him eating my pussy like he can’t survive another day without it increases my pleasure to a whole new high.

I can barely move as his tongue spears in and out of my pussy, his lips sucking on me before he takes my clit into his mouth and sucks so hard I almost pull back from his cock.

Except there’s nowhere for me to go. I’m trapped between his cock and his mouth and I’ve never felt more powerful yet

out of control in my entire life.

That thought heightens my pleasure, it gives me the will to take him even deeper as his balls slap against my face and my saliva acts as lube with every pull and thrust into my mouth.

I own him as he groans into my pussy, his tongue searching out my juices that I freely give to him with every lick and bite.

But it's when he takes his fingers and fucks my pussy, hard and deliberate, while his mouth sucks on that hardened, sensitive nub that I feel my control give way to the orgasm just below the surface of my skin.

My muscles go taut, my body going rigid as I feel the moment he's going to make me soar. But not before I suck him dry.

Reaching up, I palm his ass cheeks and dig my nails into his flesh, my throat clamping down on his hard cock one last time before I hear him curse.

He doesn't want to come before me, which is the only reason he's pushing his cock as far as he can go at the same moment he slides his fingers into my asshole and buries his tongue back into my pussy.

I see stars as I tumble into my orgasm and the world bends around me.

Asher moans inside my cunt and I around his insanely hard cock as he gives me quick pumps in and out with every spurt of his come down my throat.

It's heady and it's fucking delicious. Most of all, it's all mine.

He pulls back, releasing me, and I rub at my jaw. The beautiful ache makes me smile. He lifts me from the table and strides across the room to the couch where he sits with me on his lap, pulling a blanket over us. I let out a content smile as he kisses the top of my head, and I stare out at the water as we cut through it.

“So what else do you want to do today?” he asks with a chuckle, and I giggle in response.

“More of that?”

He smirks down at me as I snuggle into his chest. “Definitely more of that.”

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I’m not sure when my life became this chaotic, but I’m fairly certain that it was when I stepped off the plane from California. Everything that’s happened since then has just been one ‘oh shit’ moment after the next.

Which is why, when our taxi pulls up in front of the house that I first met the guys at, I burst out laughing until I almost cry. That party feels like a lifetime ago.

“Talk about coming full circle,” I manage to say between my giggle fits.

Sawyer laughs at me as they climb from the car. “Come on, Sunshine, let’s go. Maybe tonight will be as much fun as the first time we met here.”

So much has happened since I stepped foot in front of this house the first time. It’s crazy to think that we’re back here. After another week of college insanity, when the guys suggested a party at their friend’s house, I figured why not.

What they failed to mention was which friend it was and where their party was taking place. And now it all kind of makes sense.

Their instruments left the house this morning when someone came to pick them up. I’d like to say that I helped with it, but really, I just watched as several guys loaded the drum kit and guitars and everything into the van that waited outside. I have no doubt that the guys are playing tonight.

It will be fun to see them back on stage because it feels like so long ago that I discovered them here, singing the song that spoke to my soul.

It'll also be fun to see them let loose and actually be the light-hearted college kids that they're supposed to be, like the people I thought they were the first night we met. The difference is that Asher is here tonight too, so they'll be a full band this time.

We head inside where the party is already full steam ahead. Music blares through the speakers and as we walk through the rooms, I noticed the band is set up in the same place it was before.

“Are you going to be okay with being on your own while we play?” Asher asks again. He's been worried about leaving me alone tonight rather than thinking about enjoying himself. All of them have been worse since Travis told them about my panic attack earlier in the week.

I smile at him and lean in close. “I'll be absolutely fine. I've survived worse than a rich kid party on my own. A couple of hours isn't going to be a major problem. I'll just perch back here on this couch and watch you guys work.”

I wink at him and he laughs at me as the others wander off.

Truth be told, I'm really looking forward to seeing them play again. There was something so hot about it the first time, and I've barely seen them touch their instruments since that first night. I know life has been chaotic, but I get the feeling that some of the reason none of them have been playing as much is me, and I can't help but feel guilty about that.

I came into their lives like a wrecking ball and kind of blew everything to smithereens. So it will be fun to watch them get back to being who they were before I arrived.

After reassuring Asher another million times, he finally heads over to where the guys are and I get comfortable in my seat on the couch. Sawyer bounces back over with a sealed bottle of water for me.

“I figured this would be better than tequila this time,” he says with a wink before bouncing back off toward the guys as they finish set-up.



I take a sip of the cold water, ignoring the couple making out on the other side of the seat, and just watch the guys as they set up. There's something mesmerizing about it, about watching them transform before my eyes from the uptight 'dealing with everything they're dealing with' guys to the relaxed, just-want-to-have-fun college guys that they should be.

They start playing and I swear I lose track of time and my surroundings as I lose myself in Travis's voice. It's only when someone knocks into me that my focus is pulled from them.

"Fancy seeing you here." I turn at the sound of my old friend's voice as shock filters over my face.

"Emerson? I didn't expect you to be here."

"Oh, I'm sure you didn't. Poor girl meets rich guys and drops off the face of the earth. It's fine. I totally get it."

I frown at her and shake my head. "I tried reaching out to you a dozen times but you never got back to me."

"Sure you did," she says, rolling her eyes. "It's fine. We were never really that tight anyway. I get it." The confrontational manner that she comes at me with throws me off-kilter. I've seen Emerson bitch plenty of times before, but it's never been directed at me. Not really. Normally I would get the passive-aggressive version of her, not this full-on version.

"I really did try to reach out to you," I say again, and she rolls her eyes once more.

"Sure you did, Briar. It's okay. I get it. Life moves on. It has for me too. Don't stress."

"What are you doing here?" I ask her, and she barks out a laugh.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she asks, her hand waving down her body. "I'm working."

My eyebrows rise in question and she laughs again. "Just because you got out of the gutter doesn't mean that we all did. We all need to make ends meet. My body is all I've got, so I'm

here and I'm working. Don't get in my way." She turns on her heel and walks in the opposite direction, and I can't help but frown at her back as she walks away from me.

I glance back over at the guys and find Travis frowning, glaring at me from where he's standing, so I shake off the interaction with my old friend and smile at him, not wanting him to worry. Because I can already see the uptight version of him starting to crawl back into his demeanor.

I give him a thumbs up and a cheesy smile, and he quirks his brow at me before Sawyer distracts him with the strum of a guitar. I hadn't even noticed they'd stopped playing.

"Let's do this," I hear Sawyer's voice coming through the microphone in Travis's place.

They start playing again, and I'm lost in a world filled with nothing but the sounds that they play for me. It's like there's nobody else in the room and the music is just for me, speaking directly to my soul once again.

When Travis opens his mouth and starts to sing again, I'm transported once more back to the first night I met them, and all the reasons why I was so willing to let go of all of my inhibitions to be around them come flooding back.

His voice is like a balm to every wound on my soul. I lose myself in the emotions that they elicit from me as time flies by. It's not until someone spills their drink over me from the side of the couch that reality comes crashing back, and I find a very drunk Emerson laughing as her now-empty cup is upturned in her hand.

My jeans are soaked through with whatever it was in her cup. I'm just glad that my t-shirt is black, so whatever it is isn't going to stain.

"Was that really necessary?" I ask through clenched teeth as I stand.

She just continues to cackle. "Even rich girls need to get wet sometimes, you know."

I roll my eyes at her, remembering why we were never truly friends. Her petty streak was always running rampant and

being around her for too long was exhausting.

I don't have time for that in my life right now. Not with everything else I've got going on. So rather than fighting back, I make my way toward the guys where they're already putting down their instruments.

"Who's that?" Travis asks as I reach him, and I explain to them who Emerson is and how she brought me here on that first night. He touches my hips then pulls back. "You're soaking wet."

"I know," I tell him with a frown. "Emerson spilled her drink. Can we go? I'm really sorry."

He glares over my shoulder at my old friend. "Sure. We only came here to play and we've done that now. Let's head out." He puts an arm around my shoulders and starts maneuvering us across the room, the others following behind, when I hear my name shouted across the space.

"You're just a filthy whore like the rest of us. You might be able to play pretend in your rich little castle, but I know who you really are and I know the things you've done. You can't run away from the past, Briar. It always catches you in the end."

---

After the failure of a night at the party, I crawled into bed alone, guilt at ruining their night trying to drown me from the inside out.

I lie in bed staring at the ceiling, knowing that, while they won't hold it against me, I'm going to carry the guilt for letting Emerson ruin our night with me for at least a couple of days.

Because it means that *I* ruined our night.

I might not be able to control her, but she was only a bitch because of me.

My mind hasn't stopped whirring about what she meant by *the past will always catch you in the end* since I crawled into bed last night.

Letting out a deep sigh, I grab my laptop to start working on the paper that I need to write for Contemporary World Literature before my class on Wednesday afternoon. I know I've got another three days off of school to get it done, but I might as well get started now because I have other work to be focusing on too.

I go through the reading that the professor laid out and review my dictation from the class before I start typing out my essay. Time whizzes past in the blink of an eye.

Before I know it, my paper is done and several hours have passed. My stomach rumbles, bringing me back to reality.

I move to close my laptop when a ping announces a new email in my inbox. I click on the alert that pops up on the screen to open the message, and my stomach twists when I see that it's another email from an unknown sender.

My appetite disappears in an instant as I look at the words on the screen, wondering who the hell this could possibly be.

*At first, I thought you wanted to destroy me, so I was going to destroy you first. But then I realized that you weren't here to destroy me at all. So now I'm going to protect you like you have protected me. Don't worry about me knowing what I know.*

*I won't let anything or anyone hurt you, and if anyone tries, I'll deal with them first. I know that you never knew the truth, and I don't hold it against you, but now I'm doing what I should have done all along.*

I stare at the screen, trying to work out the riddle in front of me, and decide that rather than hiding it, I need to tell the others.

I grab the laptop and climb out of bed, heading downstairs and finding the guys sitting around the table in the living area, all studying like I was. Travis is the first to look up at me. I don't know what he sees on my face, but the first words that fall from his mouth are, "What's wrong?"

Instead of saying anything, I put my laptop on the table and spin it around so that they can all read the email. Sawyer curses under his breath and Cole slams a fist down on the table.

Asher spins my laptop toward him and does whatever it is that he does. "It looks like it's the same user as before. The IP has been bounced all over the world. We might need to send this to Bentley too."

"Bentley?" I ask, confused as Travis nods and pulls his phone from his pocket, tapping away on the screen before putting it down on the table.

"I've asked Bentley for some help. Stuff like this is literally what he's trained for. If he's anywhere nearby, he'll swing by, I'm sure."

I frown as his phone pings moments later.

"You didn't mention that Bentley knew about any of this."

"We needed help, Briar. And I trust him. I'm not stupid enough to not ask for help when I need it."

I open my mouth and close it again, because there isn't much I can say to that without sounding like a petulant brat.

"Bentley is going to come by in the morning."

"Okay," I say, knowing it's pointless arguing with him. I grab my laptop and head back up to my room, fear gripping my heart because of the emails and what they could mean, but also because of the danger I'm putting the guys in.

I'm beginning to think that me coming to Serenity wasn't just the worst thing for me, but maybe for them too.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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After being back at Saints U for two weeks, people are finally starting to ask questions about when Professor Crawford's coming back. Nobody's heard from him since the email Asher sent to the dean, obviously, and there were whispers all over campus today about his disappearance.

It feels like everywhere I go whispers are haunting me, and I feel like I'm choking on guilt.

It's as if everybody who looks at me knows what I did, and I've barely been able to focus all day because of it.

I even had my professor this afternoon on Reasoning and Rational Decision Making, talking with other staff inside the department about where he could have gone, and how he's fallen off the face of the earth.

Someone mentioned calling the police because nobody's heard from him, and ever since I heard that someone had been to his house and checked in, I've spiraled harder. Apparently someone had even called his parents and confirmed he wasn't there either.

So I am officially unable to focus on anything but getting back to the house, otherwise I know I'm going to fall aimlessly down the hole of despair and there will be no pulling me out of it.

I need to speak to the guys, because I have no idea what we're going to do when it comes out that he's not just missing.

What if people find out what I did?

What if people find out what *they* did?

And I've essentially ruined not just my life, but theirs too.

Maybe if we'd gone to the police when it first happened, I could have claimed self-defense. But once you dispose of the body, self-defense doesn't really fly anymore.

I burst through the door to the house and find the twins lounging on the couch with the dogs, Shadow rushing over to me the instant he sees me.

"Where's the fire, Beautiful?" Asher asks as I close the door, my breath catching in my chest. I lean down, fussing the puppy at my feet as I try to find a small piece of zen.

"We have a problem," I tell them. They sit up instantly and Sawyer pauses whatever it is that they were watching, giving me their full attention. "People have started to notice that Crawford hasn't been around. I heard my professors talking today about checking his home and checking in with his parents and nobody having seen him and there being no trace of him. I think we're going to get caught."

The words come from me in an almost incoherent stream of one breath as my heart pounds like wild horses in my chest.

Cole saunters down the stairs with a towel wrapped around his neck, in nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants. "What was that about Crawford?"

I blink up at him before telling them everything again, adding extra details that I remember as I try to calm the rising panic within me.

"I'll check in with my friend in the police department and see what's being said. But don't worry, nothing's going to happen to you or to us. I've got it covered."

I drop onto the couch and put my face in my hands. It's easy for him to say something like that. He has money and political capital, they all do. I'm just a poor girl from the City whose mom happened to marry the right man.

I'm still the one that killed him and has his blood on my hands.



It's not quite so easy as just not worrying about it.

“Go take a shower and try to relax and I'll give my buddy a call. Hopefully, by the time you're done, I'll have some answers for you.” Cole puts a hand on the back of my neck and squeezes like he's trying to reassure me. The move sends shivers down my spine, but doesn't take away any of my fear.

I move on autopilot up to my room, jumping in the shower, spending as much time under the hot spray as I can to try and wash away the gross feeling that has taken over my whole body, like my skin is covered in a slick of oil that just won't come off.

Once I give up, realizing the feeling isn't going anywhere, I change into my pajamas, grabbing my robe and wrapping it around me before putting on my slippers and padding back downstairs.

I figured that comfort is key to me not losing my ever-loving mind right now, so that's what I'm going with.

By the time I reach the living room again, Travis is home and it seems that everyone has filled him in on the situation.

I take a seat in the leather chair, curling myself up in a ball, pulling my knees up against my chest and resting my chin on my arms as they rest on my knees. I don't bother to ask any questions because I know that Cole will tell me once he has answers, but he's still on the phone in the kitchen.

Worry twists in my stomach and I close my eyes, moving to put my forehead on my arms, trying to block out the rest of the room. I know they're just talking and trying to help, but I don't know if I can deal with any of it right now.

The prospect of spending the rest of my life in jail is utterly terrifying. Especially when it was for something so simple as a mistake.

Something so simple as defending my life.

I didn't mean to kill him.

It just kind of happened.

When Cole finishes the call, he puts his phone into his pocket, runs a hand down his face, and moves back into the living room.

“Well?” Asher asks, and Cole shakes his head as he drops into the chair identical to mine opposite me.

“There’s been no update on Crawford. They haven’t had any missing persons sent in, but he’s going to give me a call if anything crops up.”

“So he knows what happened?” I ask, my heart thundering in my chest before he shakes his head.

“No, he just knows that I have a personal interest in Crawford. I basically said that he was a creepy-ass professor who I caught coming on to a student and I wanted to look into his history, and since then, I’ve been keeping tabs on him so it doesn’t seem like anything out of the ordinary,” he explains, and I nod, hoping that the police actually believe that when the time comes. Because at this point, I’m convinced it’s *when*, not *if*.

“I think I’m just gonna go to bed,” I tell them before heading back up the stairs. It might not even be dinner time yet, but all of this panic has me absolutely wiped.

So I curl up in bed and close my eyes, trying to force away the images of Crawford’s bashed-in skull.

I don’t know what the future holds; I just hope that we can get ourselves out of this mess before the past really does catch up with us.

---

After spending most of the week spiraling, the boys have booked me and Penn a spa day for today.

It’s amazingly quiet here because it’s a Friday morning and everybody else is either still at school or at work. I’m loving the fact that we can relax with almost zero other people here.

“I love how these boys think they can fix everything for you with a spa day,” Penn says with a laugh as she climbs into the plunge pool with me. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m never gonna complain about massages, facials, and experiencing all of this, but do they really think that this is the answer to everything?”

I laugh at her, shaking my head. “No, I just think that with everything that’s been going on, they thought I could use a chill-out day. It’s sweet of them, really.”

Penn nods her agreement. “Oh, I’m not saying it’s not sweet at all. It just makes me laugh. They always seem to send you away for a spa day. Have you had a chance to think any more about the Stone Royal concert yet?”

“Yes, and we’re absolutely going, I just need to work out logistics. When do the tickets go on sale?” I ask, because I’ve had almost no time to think about any of it.

“They go up tomorrow morning at eight. You best believe that I’m gonna have my iPad, my phone, and my computer all up, ready to try and get us those tickets,” she exclaims, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

I can’t help but laugh at her because her enthusiasm for this gig is as intense as mine is.

“I still can’t believe that he’s doing a date in the City,” she exclaims, clapping her hands excitedly. “It is going to be so amazing. He rarely comes to the East Coast. So I’m glad that he’s playing here so we don’t have to travel all over the freaking country!”

We spend the next half hour or so talking all things Stone Royal and enjoying the jet spray from the plunge pool.

When the receptionist pads over to let us know that it’s time for our next treatment, I almost sigh at the thought of getting out of the water, but I’m also very much looking forward to the facial that we’re booked in for next.

The rest of the relaxation day passes in a blur of joy, at least until we get back to campus as I drop Penn off.

Once I say goodbye to her, I'm making my way back to the Batmobile when I hear someone shouting behind me.

I turn, but I don't recognize anyone, so figure they can't be talking to me and keep walking.

It's only when I turn to walk down the small passageway between two buildings and the voices keep coming, that my heart rate increases.

Then I spot two guys walking toward me, and I glance over my shoulder to notice two behind me too.

Fuck my life.

*This isn't happening, Briar, it's just a freakish, terrifying coincidence. Do not freak out.*

I reach for my phone, but a hand pushes me from behind and I stumble forward, right into one of the guys who was walking toward me, who proceeds to push me to my knees.

"Oh, look, it's Serenity's newest whore. You're already putting out for so many, sweetheart. We figured it's our turn," one of them sneers as he grips my ponytail and yanks me backward, causing my knees to scratch on the ground.

"She's already living with those four, so she must be good at multitasking," another says with a laugh. The sound of a zipper being pulled down has me gripping the wrist of the hand in my hair, and digging in my nails.

"You bitch!" The guy hisses as he pushes me forward, releasing my hair. I scramble to my feet and back up against a wall since the four of them are blocking both exits.

"Briar?" Dante's voice calls out, and I swear I nearly sob in relief.

"Fuck," one of them hisses before they run off in the opposite direction of Dante, who runs toward me.

"Briar, are you okay?" he asks when he reaches me, taking in my disheveled appearance.

"I am, thanks to you," I say, trying to calm my breathing and not just burst into tears. "Why are guys such entitled

pricks?”

He doesn't smile, if anything he just seems to get angrier. “Who were they?”

“I don't know,” I reply honestly. “I've never seen them before.”

“What did they want?” he asks, and I just stare at him, not saying a thing. His hands clench at his sides as his breathing gets heavier. “You sure you didn't know who they were?”

“I'm sure,” I tell him. “I should probably get home.”

“Let me walk you to your car,” he offers, and I accept. I brush down my knees from the small bits of asphalt still digging into my skin, but there's nothing I can do about the stains. I redo my ponytail and straighten myself back up before looping my arm through his.

We walk to my car in a weird silence, but I at least feel safer with him than I would have on my own after that.

I never thought I'd have to be worried about walking around campus alone in the middle of the freaking day, but apparently I was wrong. I wish I did know who those assholes were, because I know the guys and Dante would tear them to shreds, then they couldn't attempt what they did to me again, or try it with anyone else.

Though, the way they did it, so methodical, tells me I'm probably not their first victim.

“You going to be okay?” Dante asks when we reach the car.

“I'll be fine, just a few scrapes. I've had worse.”

His frown deepens, but he nods as I withdraw my arm from his and unlock the car.

“Thank you,” I say to him before lifting up onto the tips of my toes and kissing his cheek. “If you hadn't turned up when you did...”

I trail off, not wanting to think about what might have happened if he hadn't been there.

“Well, I did, and that’s what counts. But you really should look into some form of self-defense. I might not always be there to save you.” He watches me closely and I nod, knowing he’s right. I should’ve taken some form of self-defense years ago, but I never had the opportunity before, and stupidly, I thought being here I wouldn’t need it.

But the last few months have shown me otherwise.

“I’ll look into it as soon as I get home,” I tell him. “Thank you, again.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Briar,” he says softly before opening the car door. “Drive safe, okay? And let me know when you get home.”

“I will,” I say with a smile before he closes the door. A look of determination skitters across his face as he looks out over the student body still milling around campus, but I try to put it to the back of my mind.

First things first, let’s get home in one piece. Then, and only then, do I get to freak out about what just nearly happened.

---

By the time I get home, I’ve managed to calm myself down and brush off most of what happened. The only upside to the sheer amount of trauma I’ve experienced is the ability to epically compartmentalize all of the shit I’ve had to deal with, and this is no different.

It’s in a box, locked up tight, in a very dark corner in the back of my mind.

I enter the house as an alert goes off on my phone, but the news playing on the TV captures my attention before I get a chance to look. Closing the door, I step further into the lounge where the boys are already sitting, watching the news footage play out.

“Another body was found near the Saints U campus in the early hours of this morning. Details of the victim are yet to be

released, but sources have told us that the body was discovered in a similar manner to the student whose body was found just weeks ago. Police are currently investigating the murder of Serena Dawson, with no suspect names released as of yet.” The news reporter pauses, putting her hand to her ear, before her eyes light up.

“I’m just being told that the police have released information about the murder... Wait, make that murders.”

Cole’s phone starts ringing on the coffee table, and he snatches it up and answers. “Wes, what’s going on?”

Travis mutes the TV while Cole speaks on the phone, but I read the subtitles, my stomach twisting with each minute detail I read.

*The bodies are being linked to several that were found in the city earlier in the year. Serenity Falls Police Department is now working with the New York precinct that was handling the original murders. Stay tuned with us to get more information here, first.*

Well fuck.

What the hell is happening in this tiny little fucking town and how is it linked to shit in the city?

I’d thought, until this point, that this has to do with me, but if it’s been happening since the spring, that can’t be right... right?

Sawyer pats the seat beside him, so I curl up in the space, trying not to overthink every single tiny detail of what’s happened since I got to Saints U. My mind races, but nothing seems to make any freaking sense at all.

This can’t be about me, so why the weird notes? Why Serena?

Cole wraps up his call, and for the first time since I can remember, he looks almost afraid.

“What happened?” Travis asks as Cole sits back down.

“They found DNA on the body...” Cole starts, trailing off before scraping a hand down his face.

“Surely, that’s a good thing?” Sawyer asks as Asher leans forward, concern all over his face.

I glance up at the TV and my heart stops at the image on the screen. I already know what Cole is going to say before he does.

He motions at the TV before speaking. “It would be... except the DNA belongs to Crawford, and now they’re looking for him.”

Well, fuck.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Cole

“Have you found them?” Dante asks as I walk into the locker room and pause, having absolutely no idea what the fuck he’s talking about.

“Found who?” I ask, confused.

“The guys who cornered Briar yesterday and had her on her knees,” he barks at me, and everyone around us goes quiet.

“Get out of here, you gossiping assholes,” Jeremy, the defensive captain, calls out while I try to not lose my shit in the middle of the locker room.

Anger tears through me as Dante describes what Briar went through once we’re alone, and how he stopped it from happening, from being any worse than it was, and I can’t help but feel a little pissed at Briar for not having said anything.

That girl keeps way too much to herself, and I really wish she would trust us enough to let us in.

I can almost understand why she doesn’t, considering all the things that have happened to her, but how am I supposed to protect her if I don’t know what’s going on?

“You really didn’t know?” Dante asks, and I shake my head, slamming my hand against my locker.

“No, I had no fucking idea. Do you know who they were?”

He shakes his head, looking a little confused. “No, and she didn’t seem to know either. I’ve asked around, but nobody’s

talking. So I'm guessing whoever it was knows who she is and knows who you guys are; the sort of consequences they face for doing what they did. Fucking cowards."

I grumble as I rip my t-shirt off and start to change into my football gear. Practice this morning is not gonna go well if I don't get my rage under control, but having Dante come at me first thing this morning with something I had no idea about, on top of dealing with the Crawford thing yesterday, has my levels bouncing all over the place.

"Two minutes to get your asses outside," Coach calls through the locker room.

I take a deep breath before squeezing myself into these ridiculously tight shorts. It's the one thing about this game that I dislike, because who needs shorts this tight for anything in life?

"Sorry, man. I thought you knew," Dante apologizes, and I shake my head.

"It's fine. She tends to keep this shit to herself."

Dante frowns and shakes his head. "I'm not surprised, knowing what I do about her. Where she came from before she turned up here wasn't exactly the nicest of places."

It occurs to me that Dante knew Briar before we did. Just another thing that I didn't know already.

"You knew her before?" I ask to confirm.

He nods, scratching the back of his neck, unease scattering across his features. "Yeah, I thought you knew that too. I guess she really doesn't tell you guys much."

I let out a noise of agreement as I pull my jersey on. "Yeah, something like that. So you knew her in her old life?"

He nods as he closes the door to his locker once I reiterate my question. "Yeah, we only met a couple of times before summer, but I knew her and the circles she ran in back then, and it's a whole world away from the life she's living now."

It occurs to me that he could be a good source of information on the things we don't know about Briar, but I

also don't want to betray her trust by going behind her back and asking him about her.

So, despite the questions on the tip of my tongue, I keep my mouth shut as we head out to the field.

Coach has everyone running laps already and we join the back of the line for warm-up. I can't help but envision what Dante described happened to Briar. It filters through my mind, pushing my anger to new heights.

If I find whoever it was that did that to her, they're going to regret ever having uttered her name, let alone anything else they did.

Coach blows his whistle and pulls us all over toward him, shouting at the entire team before starting to put us through our paces in practice.

Our game this weekend is against the second-best school in the area and the pressure is on for the win. To say I've been distracted at previous games is an understatement with everything we've had going on, but I'm yet to let the win slip between my fingers.

I don't intend to start now.

Especially not with so much riding on this game, and more so with the possibility of my dad disinherit me after I told him I wouldn't marry Briar.

As I expected, it was one of his first threats, but it was also one of his only threats because there isn't much that he holds over me.

He knows as well as I do that I don't really need him beyond paying for the rest of college.

Scouts have been interested in me for years and, if I wanted to, I could enter the draft this season, but I've held off because that's not what my father wanted.

By the time practice wraps up, my muscles burn in the best kind of way and my chest heaves from the workout that we've been put through.

I shower quickly and get changed, resolving to head home and speak to Briar about what Dante told me, because I want to find out who the fuck it is that went after her. Who it was that thought they could put hands on our girl without repercussions. Because I'm going to make them regret ever having even the slightest thought about her.

When I'm done with them, they'll be lucky to be able to touch another girl ever again.

---

"Why would you go to him rather than me?" I ask her again, trying not to let my anger get the better of me. Yelling at her, especially with everything that's happened the last day and a half, isn't going to help one damn thing. But my temper is barely restrained, and I'm not sure if I want to scream at her or just fuck her into submission.

"I didn't go to him, he found me," she tells me again, her frustration apparent.

"Of course he fucking did." He's half in love with her, and just that thought is enough to push me over the edge. "You aren't his, Briar. Do you understand me?"

I look down at her, hands gripping her arms, and her big blue eyes stare up at me, still a little guarded, but there's so much fire in her, and I can see it.

"You are ours. Mine." I move my hands to her ass, lifting her flush with my body, and take the last few steps into my room, pushing her back against the door, pressing my hard dick against her warmth. My heart pounds as she sucks in a breath.

Oh yeah, she's mine.

I let go of her ass, my hands sliding over her hips and up either side of her ribcage with her t-shirt trapped between my fingers. In one smooth move, she's in her bra—a black silky contraption that pushes her tits together perfectly—and it makes my mouth water.

“Take your jeans off.” My voice is gruff, my emotions running wild with the thought of any other man touching what’s ours. What’s mine. Hell, even looking at her should be a fucking crime and she needs to understand the lengths we will go to to protect what we have.

I place my palms at the base of her breasts and squeeze them together, my mouth lingering on her smooth skin, my tongue toying with her silky flesh, before sinking my teeth deep enough to make her gasp out loud. That sound makes my dick insanely hard so I do it again on the other side. Instead of telling me to stop, she throws her head back, and when she smiles, I bite her again. Just because I can.

“I said, take your jeans off.” I keep on distracting her with my hungry mouth, but this time she pops the button and slides the zipper open while my fingers pull the cups of her bra down to expose her to me. She’s soft and delicious. Addictive, even.

Shimmying out of her jeans, I watch as she quickly undresses for me, exposing every inch of what I crave. Once her jeans reach her ankles, I have to hold back a chuckle as she frantically steps on one leg then the other before she kicks the denim to the side of the room.

All desire to laugh escapes me as my hands palm her ass cheeks again and I pull her closer to my aching cock.

“The sight of you like this, naked and willing, does things to me, Briar. Now...” I don’t tell her what I want, I just flip her around so her face is pressed to the door and her ass is pushed out, rubbing up against my sweats-covered groin.

My hand shoots out, pressing at the base of her neck to hold her tight against the wood. It’s clear it’s not a comfortable position for her, but the need to punish her, to make her understand that when she needs something, someone, anything, she should never feel the need to go to anyone else, is driving my every action.

Leaning in, I place my tongue at the base of her jaw and lick a slow, torturous path up her cheek, past her eyes and over her temple before whispering in her ear, “Tell me, Briar. Who owns you?”

I'm expecting a quick answer, a right answer. What I'm not expecting is her silence that tastes like defiance. Reaching back with my free hand, I snap my t-shirt up and over my head before curling my big body around her small frame. Her skin is warm and inviting, calling to me to touch it, which is exactly what I do as my mouth finds her earlobe, my tongue flicking back and forth.

"I suggest you answer, baby." I bite down on her flesh when she finally speaks.

"I don't belong to anyone. Now, you are you going to fuck me or do I need to do it myself?"

I grin at her smart mouth, happy she's chosen the fun way. Grabbing her curvy hips with one hand, I push my sweats down to free my cock then rip her panties off just in time to slide right on home.

We both go quiet, our breathing erratic as our bodies beg us to continue. I want to savor this, though. I want to feel her pussy squeeze my cock like she's forcing me to fuck her by the sheer determination of will.

"Dammit, Cole, do something."

"Oh, little Vixen, I *am* doing something," I tease. *I'm punishing you for making bad decisions.* "Are you frustrated right now, Briar?"

I grind my groin against her ass, pushing some of my weight against her, making her feel my presence all around her. "Do you need something I'm not giving you?"

I repeat my actions and her little growl tells me everything I need to know.

"Yes!" That one word comes out from between clenched teeth and it feels like victory.

I pull out slowly then slam back inside her and freeze. It takes every ounce of my willpower to refrain from fucking the sass right out of her, but there's a lesson to be learned here.

"This..."—I punctuate the word with a thrust of my hips—"This need you're feeling... this missing thing?" My hands

cup her luscious tits, fingers squeezing until she whimpers against the door. “I know how it feels, Briar. I know what it’s like to want something and be denied it.”

Before she can argue—and she absolutely will because she can’t fucking help it—I cut her off with my lips slamming onto hers. My tongue demands entrance and she gives it to me like she’s the lock and I’m the fucking key.

There’s nothing passive about this girl, nothing meek or weak. She gives as good as she gets, her teeth biting down on my lower lip, nearly breaking the skin.

With one hand buried in the thick curtain of her hair, I slide the other down between her tits, over her belly, and finally reach her swollen clit.

Fuck it, I’m done playing.

My middle finger rubs circles around her nub just as I pull back and slam right back in. Our bodies move in tandem with each deep thrust inside her. She gasps and then moans and I want to swallow every single one of her noises, bottle them up for a later time when I’m alone and thinking about her.

Briar reaches back, her fingers searching for purchase until she finally digs her nails into the flesh of my ass, as if she’s taunting me, pulling me harder and faster into her. I’m trying really fucking hard not to lose my control, but every time she nearly breaks the skin, I pound her harder and harder, her little gasps mixing in with my growls, until I’m not sure how much more we can both take.

The rougher I am, the wetter she gets. I can feel her coating my cock with every movement. It’s like a deliciously vicious circle. The more I fuck her, the more I want her.

“Fuck, Briar. Godfuckingdammit, you feel so good.” In the back of my mind, I’m aware that she’ll be sporting some bruises—either from me or from the door—but I can’t seem to stop and I’m pretty sure she’d scream at me if I tried.

“More, Cole. Please, give me more.” Her pleas are like fucking music to my ears. My chest swells with pride at making her legs shake as much as they are.

I pull out, her following growl is almost intimidating, but I need her on my bed right fucking now.

Without any kind of finesse, I carry her naked body to my bed. Placing her in the middle, I cover her body with mine. Any semblance of patience and restraint is gone as I slide right back inside of her, where I belong.

Again, we both groan at the intensity of it all. At the perfect fit. Like a puzzle that falls into place every time I'm inside of her.

“You feel that, baby? Can you feel how much I want you?” Her entire body arches up from the mattress, her fingers digging deep as her nails finally break my skin. I moan at the feel of it, the pleasure in the pain. I want more of it.

With my mouth back on her, we struggle to breathe as our fucking intensifies. My once-calculated thrusts lose their precision as we both chase the orgasms that are so fucking close.

As soon as I feel her tense, I grab her hips and slam into her over and over again until I feel her entire body tighten around me. Her legs shake as her pussy squeezes my cock so hard it almost pushes me over the edge. I grind my teeth, determined to see her through before I fall with her. I grind my groin against her clit, over and over again, until I hear her cry out into the room as she comes all over my dick.

I wait for her to breathe again before I chase after my own ecstasy, but I don't have to wait long. Briar takes this moment to lean up, wrap her long legs around my waist, and sink her teeth into the meaty part between my neck and shoulder.

The roar that explodes from me isn't from pain but from the sheer violence of my orgasm. The sensation runs down my spine like a burst of electricity before I shoot my load inside of my girl.

*Mine.*

I keep myself propped up on shaky arms, panting as she grins up at me. “Fucking Christ, Briar. Are you trying to kill me?”



“Nope,” she says breathily, but that sass of hers still underlines the word.

“Do I need to teach you another lesson?” I threaten, matching her grin as I drop onto my side and pull her onto my chest.

“I mean, you can try, but you seem a little spent. Maybe you need to work on your stamina,” she teases, and I lightly spank her ass.

“Oh, pretty little Vixen. You have no idea how high my stamina is, keep prodding and you might just find out.”

“That isn’t exactly the deterrent you think it is,” she says with a small laugh before gently biting my chest, eliciting another groan from me.

“You’re playing with fire, Vixen.”

She turns to face me, her dark hair splayed over my chest, her eyes bright as the smile on her face. “Maybe I like to get burned.”

---

I finally feel like I am getting somewhere with Briar and we seem to be coming on leaps and bounds since the other day when she finally opened up to me. I’ve been riding that high ever since.

So when my phone rings and Wes’s name appears on the screen, my heart sinks a little.

I answer the phone regardless, waiting for what is potentially the worst news of my week, considering our last conversation.

“Cole, I have news,” Wes says, and my stomach twists further.

“Okay, hit me with it.”

“So, I finished digging up that stuff for your dad. Someone will be dropping a file off to you this afternoon. If you need

anything else regarding that particular thing, just let me know. We also have a new person of interest alongside the professor that you were keeping tabs on.” He pauses for a beat before continuing. “With the murders, DNA was found on the latest body which has been confirmed now as an exact match to the professor you had me digging up information on. Almost everybody is assuming it’s a mistake on his part and that he finally slipped up, but there are some people who are suspicious of evidence just turning up like it did when we were starting to lose hope of ever finding a trace.”

“Get to the point, Wes,” I mutter, scrubbing a hand down my face.

He makes a weird noise, but I don’t care if I’ve pissed him off. I want to know the point of his fucking call and he’s dawdling.

“There are some people who think the evidence was planted, especially since nobody’s seen or heard from the professor since before Christmas.”

“Right,” I say, trying to sound as unaffected and calm as I can. “What about it?”

“Well if it was planted, that raises some more suspicion. One of the rookies was looking at other people who were in places in and around both locations both before and after the summer, and it seems that your friend’s name popped up in his search.”

“My friend?” I ask, curiously.

“Yeah,” he responds. “A Briar Moore’s name has been linked to the investigation. She was in the City before the summer when the first murders happened, not too far from where she was residing at the time. The murders stopped over summer and we believe that she was away during that time. They restarted in Serenity Falls after she was enrolled at Saints U. It raises some questions.”

His words are so matter-of-fact, and if it was anyone but Briar, I’d be suspicious as fuck too, but it is her, and all I have is panic.

My heart hammers in my chest at the thought of Briar being questioned about all of this. Because while I know she isn't the one committing those murders, she has something else to hide and I'm not sure how well she'll hold up under the pressure of being questioned by the police if it comes to that.

"So what about it? She's just a kid," I say to him as nonchalantly as I can.

"It still raises questions about how she happens to have been in the right place at the time of the murders, and why they stopped while she was away."

"You really think a teenage girl is capable of doing these things?" I ask. "Especially when you already have DNA evidence pointing to somebody else."

"Don't shoot the messenger, kid. I'm just telling you what I've heard, which is what you pay me to do," he responds. "Got to say, this is the weirdest thing you and your dad have had me look at though."

I swallow against a lump in my throat. "You're right, it's fine. Thank you for letting me know. Keep me updated if anything else happens."

I end the call, my hands shaking. I rush from my room, pounding on Travis's bedroom door when I reach it.

He rips it open, half asleep and half dressed.

"Where's the fucking fire?" he asks, rubbing his eyes before taking in my appearance properly. "What the fuck happened?"

I tell him about the conversation I just had. I can physically see his body tightening with every word that falls from my mouth.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" I ask.

He runs a hand through his hair, pulling at it as stress tightens his shoulders. "We're not going to do anything," he responds. "They just have suspicions and questions. They have no proof of anything right now. You and I both know she

didn't commit those murders. We know that, but we also know what she *did* do."

"How well do you think she'll hold up under pressure from the local PD?" I ask, and Travis lets out a growl of frustration as he starts to pace around his room again.

"We need to speak to her before they do, to warn her what's coming."

"She's already in class," I tell him. "I checked."

"Okay, so call her and get her back here straight away, because we need to get to her before they do."

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

Being hauled into the police station after being dragged from campus by the two officers that barged into my class isn't exactly the most fun I've had with my clothes on.

They put me in this interrogation room where I've been sitting for at least the last two hours, if the clock on the wall is correct. I've been left to sit and stew in the silence of the room.

I still have no idea why I'm here or what it is they want from me, beyond them telling me that they had questions for me, but to say that I'm sweating bullets is an understatement.

I've been trying to stay as calm as I can, especially since nobody has asked me any specific questions yet, but I know I need to try and remain as cool and collected as I possibly can. However, trying to do that and not just assuming the worst goes against my very nature.

All I can think about are all of the possible worst-case scenarios.

Time drags by slowly but surely, the waiting a form of torture all on its own.

I get that that's one of their plays but also, I'm not under arrest, so I have no idea why I'm being treated with such contempt.

Another ten minutes pass, according to the clock on the wall, before the door opens and two police officers filter into the room. The shorter, burly and balding man sits in the chair

directly opposite me, the younger one of the two with the nice smile sits beside him.

“Miss Moore, thank you for your patience,” the younger officer starts. “It’s a busy day here at the precinct, as I’m sure you can imagine with everything that’s been going on lately.”

I force a smile to my lips, trying to remain as calm as possible.

“Not a problem, officers,” I respond as politely as I can manage. I know that prodding them or being an asshole, which is also my default setting, isn’t going to get me anywhere right now. “Can I ask what this is all about?”

“Well, Miss Moore,” the older, balding officer says. “It has been brought to our attention that your whereabouts line up almost perfectly with the times and locations of the murders that have been plaguing our town.”

“Excuse me?” I stutter, my palms starting to sweat. I wipe them on my pants under the table, hoping they don’t notice.

“With the murders that took place before the summer in the City, as well as the ones that have happened at the campus of Saints U since you started studying out there...” He trails off and my heart races in my chest as I blink at the officers.

“So, a question for you, Miss Moore,” the younger of the officers picks up where the other left off. “Does it not seem suspicious to you that you are one of the very few people who was in the right place at the right time, as it were?”

“I mean, it could,” I respond, snark filtering into my voice. “Except I haven’t done anything wrong. Serena was my friend. I don’t know the rest of the victims, or even how many of them there are. I’m not capable of murder.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat, tasting the lie on my lips. I’m aware I’m absolutely capable of murder, just not the murders that I’m being accused of currently. “Do you have any proof tying me to the murders beyond the fact that I was in the City and then Serenity Falls during the timeframe that they happened?”

“Well, actually,” the older officer says, opening the file and sliding it across the table. “We do.”

I look down at the sheet of paper in the file, but it might as well be written in Japanese for as much sense as it makes to me. “What, exactly, am I looking at here?”

“That, Miss Moore, is the results of the DNA evidence we found on the latest body.”

“Right? And what does that have to do with me?” I ask, bewildered.

“The DNA we found was that of your professor, who nobody seems to have seen for at least a month, but if you look on the next page, you will see the results of the tests that we rushed after bringing you in here.”

I flip the page, looking at the gobbledy gook written on the forms, wondering what this has to do with me. I look up at them and my confusion must be apparent on my face because the officer smiles, though it’s not a warm and happy smile. It’s more condescending than anything.

“That page, Miss Moore, confirms that you share alleles with the professor.”

I stare at him blankly, wondering what it is he’s actually trying to tell me. “I’m sorry. I’ve said that I don’t speak DNA. You’re going to have to talk to me like I’m a toddler.”

The older officer snorts a laugh, and the younger one that’s been talking to me about all of this sciencey bullshit glares at him.

“What that means, Miss Moore, is that you are related to the professor. A 50% match.”

My heart stops in my chest as I try to process his words.

“That can’t be right. My dad, I know who my dad is, and it definitely isn’t the professor.”

My mom would have told me if he was my dad. Surely. I know she’s a pro at keeping secrets, but this one seems like a hell of a coincidence, and I tell them as much.



“Professor Crawford is not my father, so your test must be wrong.”

“We ran the test three times to confirm, Miss Moore,” the younger officer says back to me, smiling sadly, as if realizing that I actually had no idea of the news that they were about to deliver to me.

“My father lives on the West Coast,” I tell them. “You must have it wrong. You need to check it again.”

“We don’t need to check it again. Evidence like this doesn’t lie. DNA doesn’t lie. The Professor is your father,” the older officer snarks. “It was his DNA we found on the bodies and you were the one in the places of the murders right from the very first one. That alone is enough to make anyone suspicious. Don’t you think?”

---

They’ve asked me the same questions a dozen times over, in different ways, and I want to cry. I’m hungry, I’m thirsty, and I’m just done.

I’ve been here for hours and answered every question that they’ve thrown at me. I don’t know why they’re being so hostile, because I didn’t do this.

I mean, I get that it looks suspicious from their perspective, but if they have Crawford’s actual DNA on the body—which is still baffling as fuck to me, considering he’s dead—why are they looking at me so closely?

Even if I do have matching alleles with him, and even if he *is* my father—which I still don’t believe—why would that make me a suspect?

I open my mouth to say as much and beg, yet again, for some water, or to leave since I’m technically not under arrest, when the door swings open and Thomas St. Vincent barges into the room. “Gentlemen, I believe you’ve had my client here without cause for most of the day. I suggest you wrap this up and step outside. Briar, don’t say another word.”

The police officers look at each other. The older one seems to get his feathers ruffled by the senior St. Vincent's arrival, whereas the younger one just smiles and nods. "Of course, Mr. St. Vincent. If we'd have known she was your client, we would have called you earlier."

"Of course you would have," he responds sharply. "Is my client under arrest?"

"No, she's not, she's just been here answering our questions. She's been free to go at any time."

My jaw drops as I stare at the police officers. "No, I haven't. I've asked to leave several times. You haven't given me anything to drink or eat either."

The older police officer's face turns a beautiful shade of purple as Mr. St. Vincent barks out a laugh. "Oh, dear, gentlemen. It sounds like someone's in trouble."

Confused, my eyes bounce between Mr. St. Vincent and the police officers. The younger officer ushers the older one out of the room before apologizing to me for having kept me for so long.

Once the door closes, Thomas sits down beside me and pulls a bottle of water from his suitcase. "Here you go, sweetheart. Drink up."

I take the ice-cold bottle of water, moaning as the cool liquid sloshes down my throat.

"Do you have it in you to answer some more questions? Just for me, so I can make sure that everything is all lined up."

After downing three quarters of the bottle of water, he hands me a protein bar, which I basically inhale in one second flat.

"Can you just walk me through everything they asked you and told you today?" he asks at first. So I run him through everything they told me, from supposedly being a DNA match with Professor Crawford, all the way through to the questions that they asked me about my whereabouts and what I knew about the victims and the murders. "My brain is a little fried," I tell him. "But I think that's everything though."

He nods, tapping his fingers against his chin. “Is there anything else I should know, Briar? Anything that could bite you in the ass if they try to pursue this?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying to work out what to tell him what not to. In the end, I trust that the twins decided not to tell their dad yet for a reason, so I shake my head. “No, nothing at all. None of this makes any sense to me.”

“Okay, then I just have a few more questions.” He pulls a file from his suitcase and slides it across the table to me. “This much I know already,” he says. “But I’d like to know your point of view on all of it.”

I open the file and suck in a sharp breath when I see a picture of myself inside.

Every police report, every incident, every hospital account from my entire life is inside. Including the worst of them.

My hands shake as I flick through the many pages and a tear slips down my face as I read the things written about me on the paper.

“I’m not sure what else there is to tell you,” I say. “This pretty much sums up my entire shitty life.”

He puts his hand on top of mine and pats it softly before squeezing and withdrawing his hand again. “I just need to know, sweetheart, if there’s anything other than this. Anything you did, any sort of angry outbursts, hurting anybody, anything that could have repercussions with them dragging you in here today. Anything that might have given them cause to think that you are capable of this.”

Another tear slips down my face and I swipe it away angrily. “The only thing I’ve ever done is defend myself,” I tell him. “The only thing I’ve ever done is defend everybody important in my life. It’s not my fault that my mother happened to bring monsters into my life on a regular basis.”

“I’m not saying it’s your fault, but I need to know if there’s anything that isn’t in these files,” he says softly.

I shake my head, my hands trembling beneath the table, so I clasp them together to try and make it stop. “No, this is

everything, every dirty detail of everything that happened to me in my entire life. Do I even want to know where you got this?" I ask.

"Probably not," he says. "I work with people. You can get all kinds of information from all kinds of places, but I also happen to work with people who can punish those who have done the things to you that are detailed in there. If that's something you might want."

I hold my breath for a moment, thinking about the reality of what he's offering, but shake my head again. "Revenge won't get me anywhere. I already carry the scars of what's happened to me. Even if the monsters are finally gone from the world, that won't get them out of my head."

He nods solemnly at my response. "I understand. Now, let's get you out of here, shall we? I've had two boys blowing up my phone most of the afternoon begging me to get you out of here. I'm sorry it took me so long. I've been in meetings all day."

"It's fine," I tell him. "And honestly, I didn't expect anybody to come to my rescue. It's not like anybody ever has before."

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

I sit in the passenger seat of Thomas' car and stare out the window as he drives me home.

Everything that's happened today hasn't quite sunk in properly yet.

I keep tripping over the fact that they seem to think that Crawford is my father, which can't be right.

Right?

Because if he's my dad, then my entire life has been a lie.

If he's my dad, I wonder if the man who I thought was my father knew that he wasn't my dad all along.

And if Crawford is my dad, that means I killed my father.

I'm not sure I can handle that.

I handled the fact that my professor could attack me for seemingly no reason, and that I defended myself, by putting it in a tiny box and shoving it away in the back of my mind, but that was when he was a nobody to me.

If he *was* my dad and he knew that he was, then I'll never know why he hated me so much. I'll never know why he tried to attack me, because I killed him. And if he didn't know he was my father, then why attack me in the first place?

I can feel the box full of the trauma surrounding everything that happened with him spilling open rather than sitting safely on its little perch in the closet in the dark recesses of my mind, but I try to hold it together.

Especially since I'm in the car with Thomas, because I don't think he would really appreciate me having a full on meltdown in the passenger seat of his car right now.

Not only because he got me out of one of the worst days I've had since I got to Serenity Falls— admittedly not in the top five, but it's definitely at least in the top twenty of worst days I've had since I got off that plane from California—but because he barely knows me. He might know what's in that file of his, but that doesn't mean he knows me.

We pull up in front of the house and I move to open the door but realize that it's still locked.

“Briar, I know that today has been a lot, but I'm going to need for you to be honest with me from here on out. If we're going to keep the police at bay, and for some reason they seem to have a bee in their bonnet where you are concerned, then anything that *can* be held against you will be. I already asked you if there was anything that you were holding back, but I'm going to ask you once more before you get out of this car. Is there anything else I need to know?”

A lump forms in my throat as I try to speak, so I attempt to clear my throat, trying not to seem as guilty as I feel.

“No, there isn't anything else you need to know,” I tell him, hating how big my tongue feels in my mouth at the lie. “Can I have that file that you have on me, please?”

His eyebrows rise in shock, but he nods and moves to grab his suitcase from the back floorboard. He opens it, handing me the file of doom as I've decided to call it. “You know this isn't the only copy I have, right?”

“I figured as much, but maybe going through this will help me see something or jog something in my mind as to why the police might think I'm capable of what they seem to think I'm capable of.” Because outside of their supposed DNA, I'll be fucked if I know what it is they have on me... unless there really was another witness.

No, Briar, don't go down that path. We don't need another spiral yet. Hold your shit together just a little longer.

He nods and pushes the button on the dash, releasing the lock on the door. “If you think of anything, give me a call. The boys have my number and my card is also in that file. If you need anything at all, you just call me, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” I smile at him and he reaches over to squeeze my forearm gently. He might be the first adult that’s ever actually shown up for me, and I’m trying really hard not to get emotional about it. “Thank you again for today. I really wasn’t expecting anybody to come to my rescue.”

He smiles sadly at me and shakes his head. “We all need to be saved sometimes, Briar.”

I climb from the car and stand on the sidewalk, waving as he drives away. Once he’s out of sight, I take a deep breath and turn toward the house. I have no idea if the boys are even home yet.

Considering it’s dark out already, I would assume they are, but the house looks dark too.

My stomach rumbles, but the thought of food just makes me want to be sick a little, so I take another deep breath and head up the path, taking the steps slowly before grabbing the hide-a-key, then unlock and push the front door open.

I’m greeted with silence, and silence never felt so good, because before I face the guys I need to face some demons.

---

With the house empty, I take advantage and head upstairs for a shower to wash the day off me. When I’m feeling something close to human, at least physically because mentally I’ve had to close all of the doors to keep myself moving forward, I dress in my PJs, thick, fuzzy socks, and grab one of Cole’s hoodies, which comes down past my knees, before going and sitting down on the couch. I grab my phone and pull up the group text and send a message.



Me:

I'm home, no idea where you guys are. But thank you for sending Mr. St. Vincent. I might be asleep before you get back. I'm wiped. If I don't see you tonight, I'll fill you in tomorrow.

I hit send, lock my phone, and put it into the pocket of the hoodie before curling up in a ball and laying my head down on the couch. Sure, I could go to bed and pass out, but something about being in this room makes me feel less alone than being locked away in my bedroom. After today, being alone is the last thing I want right now.

It doesn't take long before my phone starts buzzing like crazy in my pocket. I unlock the screen and pull up the group chat, which already has a couple of messages from the guys.

Sawyer:

On the way back now, won't be long.

Asher:

Just walking the dogs, shouldn't be long either.

Cole:

Just wrapped up practice. I'll grab some food and bring it home for everybody.

Travis:

I was called into the Kensington head office. I'm leaving in ten. Don't start without me.

Of course he doesn't want us to start without him. Because God forbid Travis Kensington doesn't have all of the

information first. But his message does at least make me smile for what feels like the first time today.

I look at the file I dropped on the coffee table on my way in and it feels like it's screaming at me from where it sits.

I have every intention of hiding it.

It might be easier not to, to just give it to the guys so all my shit is out on the literal table, but the thought of that makes my stomach churn again. So instead of leaving it on the table, I grab it and run it upstairs, dropping it onto my bed.

Once we've dealt with this nightmare, then I can think about dropping the entirety of my past at their feet.

I head back downstairs and make myself a hot chocolate with all the trimmings, including extra syrup, because I have a feeling I'm going to need the sugar to get through this conversation.

As I'm putting the finishing touches on, the front door opens and the twins enter, along with all the dogs. Shadow dives at me, almost pulling Asher's arm off as he yanks on his leash.

I only just manage to catch the now-somewhat-giant bundle of excitement that launches himself at me. I laugh when I stumble backwards as his weight hits me and smush my face against his.

"You're getting way too big for this now, buddy," I say sadly, but obviously he doesn't understand and just looks at my face because this now-somewhat-big puppy still seems to think he's small enough to fit in my arms.

But for right now, I'm not going to stop him doing that. Even if my knees do want to give out under the weight of him.

I pop him back down and love on the rest of the puppies while the adults just watch me for a moment before walking to their beds in the lounge area.

The twins are talking, so I sort out the food bowls for all of the dogs before grabbing my hot chocolate and making my way back to the couch.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Sawyer calls out before striding toward me and lifting me off the couch. He holds me tight in his arms and I melt against him, my head against his chest.

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” I tell him. “I was just getting comfortable.”

“Well you can get comfy right here,” he says before moving to sit on the couch and pulling me down onto his lap. He wraps his arms around my waist from behind and I lean back against him, cradled between his legs.

Asher sits by my feet, lifting them into his lap before starting to rub them, and I swear I want to purr like a goddamn cat. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I smile softly but then shake my head. “Actually, no, not really, but I will be. Have you guys talked to your dad since he dropped me off?”

“No, we saw your message before he texted to let us know you were home. We wanted to hear what you had to say before we spoke to him.”

I tilt my head back against Sawyer’s shoulder. “Yeah, okay, that makes sense. Once the other two are here, I’ll start spilling the beans.”

“That’s fine by us,” Sawyer says as he grabs the remote, turning on the TV and drowning out the sound of the dogs munching away on their food in the kitchen.

Another five minutes pass before Cole bursts through the door and strides to where we’re sitting, lifting me out of Sawyer’s arms and wrapping me up in a hug of his own. He doesn’t say anything, instead he just holds me in a bear hug so tight that I almost can’t breathe. But there’s comfort in it, so I don’t say anything. I just hold him back until he releases me.

“I need to go shower, but I’ll be done before Travis gets here. Don’t start without me.”

I smile as he echoes Travis’ earlier words, before reaching up on my tiptoes and kissing his cheek.

“I promise.”

He cradles my face in his hands, kissing me with so much passion that it makes my toes curl.

“That’s more like it,” he says when he pulls back, and I just stand there kind of dumbfounded as he strides away from me.

I blink at his back as he walks away because, while my thing with the twins is out in the open and I know I have slept with all four of them at this point, we haven’t really talked about how all of this is going to work.

I’m aware that now isn’t the time to be having that conversation, either, because we have so much going on, but if Cole’s kissing me like that in front of them, I have to assume that they’ve had a conversation without me.

I push the thought to the back of my mind, no matter how much the distraction feels tempting, and move to sit back on the couch.

Sawyer pulls me back between his legs, so that I’m leaning back on his chest, and Asher grabs my feet again, putting them in his lap. We sit in silence, half watching the TV while waiting for Travis to get back and Cole to finish in the shower. I have no idea how all of this is going to go. I have a feeling that saying the words out loud about Crawford potentially being my dad are going to be more explosive than I ever could have imagined.

We don’t have to wait long before Travis gets home and Cole comes down from his shower. They take their seats in the chairs by the couch. Nobody says anything, but they all look at me expectantly. So I open my mouth and just let the words of the day spill out.

Walking them through the constant questioning that I went through, and all of the insanity, right up to Thomas coming in and saving the day. I leave out the part about Crawford and the DNA because I’m still not sure how to say the words out loud.

“None of this makes any sense,” Travis says. “If Crawford’s DNA is the one that’s on the bodies, why is your

name linked to it?”

I know that I’m out of time. I know that I have to tell them, but somehow, telling them makes it seem almost real. While I know, logically, that the police had no reason to lie to me, up to this point, I’ve been able to tell myself that it’s all just one big mistake.

Telling them makes it seem less of a mistake and more of a reality.

They stare at me, expecting me to continue, so I take a deep breath, clenching my fists so tight that my nails dig into the palms of my hands, trying to center myself as I say the words.

“Apparently, they ran a DNA test, and they seem to think that Crawford is my dad.”

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The explosions that came with the announcement of Crawford being my biological dad were about as fireworks-like as expected.

Travis has already found some way to do our own DNA test to confirm it, but I already know that I’m going to have to confront my mom about what the police have told me. Because, while she is an excellent liar, I know if I ask her to her face, without warning, that she won’t be able to hide her expression. If I do that, I’ll know in an instant, but until then, I get to live in denial.

Despite the fact that the police have absolutely no reason to lie about any of it, I refuse to believe it’s true until I have my own proof.

The boys have been downstairs making a plan, trying to work out how to get some of Crawford’s DNA from his house, since the police are all over it. They’ve also been talking about how that DNA could have ended up on the body, whether it was someone who came into contact with Crawford before he died, which seems highly unlikely, considering the amount of

time that's passed, or whether the DNA was planted. And if it was, what does that mean for me?

Is it this twisted person who keeps sending me these notes telling me they're going to protect me that's doing this since they know what happened with Crawford? Are they doing this to try and save me? Or is this something else entirely?

I hate not having the answers to all of the burning questions swirling in my mind, but I thank God for me being so good at compartmentalizing because if I didn't have that particular trauma response, I'm not sure I'd still be able to function right now.

A knock on the door sounds and I roll over in bed in time to see Travis opening the door. He steps inside without saying a word and closes it behind him before padding quietly over to the bed and lying down beside me.

He doesn't say a word. He just lies there with me, staring at me.

I don't try to speak either, because I'm not sure what else there is to say at this point. I know there's still a lot between us that's unresolved, even after New Year's, but I feel like that isn't where my focus should be right now.

It's almost like the four of them have become a safety blanket for me, which is entirely absurd, considering everything that's happened to this point. But it is what it is.

"What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?" he asks, propping his head up on his hand. I mirror his action before shrugging.

"I've got about a thousand thoughts running through my mind at a million miles an hour," I tell him softly. "At the moment, I think my brain is just looking for a distraction so I don't have a complete meltdown."

"I'm fairly certain that between the four of us we can come up with a distraction for you," he teases, wagging his brows, drawing a small laugh from me.

"I have no doubt that you could," I respond with a smirk. "And as much as that sounds like the best kind of distraction, I

feel like with everything else going on, whatever is happening between the five of us shouldn't be our focus right now."

He reaches forward and takes my hand, threading his fingers with mine. "This thing between the five of us is definitely something we should talk about right now. Even with everything else going on, maybe *because* of everything else going on. There are things about me that you don't know. I know that I've been blowing hot and cold with you, but once I tell you this, it will make a bit more sense."

I keep my mouth shut, waiting for him to continue speaking, wondering what the hell he's talking about.

He closes his eyes and lets out a deep breath before flopping onto his back and staring up at the ceiling. I do the same, keeping our fingers locked together, and wait for him to speak.

"I have a little sister," he says quietly. "Her name is Katy and she's only ten years old. My father has her away at boarding school. He's kept her away from me and uses her as leverage against me. I know exactly what he's capable of, so I know his threats aren't idle, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect her."

It feels like an elephant is sitting on my chest at his confession. I had no idea about his little sister. But knowing how much I would do for Iris if she was still here...

I can't find it in me to hold anything against him anymore.

I squeeze his hand and wait for him to continue.

"My father has a plan for me and it's been set out practically since I was born. Pops has helped me try to fight against most of it, but even with my father being afraid of my Pops, there's still only so much that he can do. He's not going to be around forever. And he also refuses to interject on Katy's behalf. My pops doesn't believe that my dad will do anything to her that will cause any major harm because it's the boys in the family that are given the pressure and the girls that are cherished and looked after." He lets out another deep sigh before continuing. "Except I know exactly what my dad's

capable of. And when he tells me that he'll kill her and dispose of her without anybody knowing, I absolutely believe him, especially since almost nobody knows that she even exists anymore. There's a lot of mystery surrounding my mom's death because my father didn't want people to know what she was going through."

He pauses again before telling me about the cancer that took his mother from him. About how he watched her disappear before his eyes a little at a time, day by day. About how Katy was sent away while his mom was sick so that she didn't have to watch, and so Chase didn't have to actually look after her.

He tells me about going to her dance recitals and seeing her every opportunity he can. "But the boarding school is on the other side of the country, so I only get to see her a couple of times a year. I check in with her professors regularly to make sure that everything's going okay and I try to video call with her at least weekly."

Finding this out about him makes a lot of things make more sense, but it does leave me with one question.

"So why even risk this thing with me if it puts her in danger?"

He turns back toward me and I twist so that I'm facing him again.

"Because I tried to fight this, I tried to fight you, but I've come to realize that some battles aren't ones that I can win, and staying away from you was one of those. It just means that, while you might be able to be open about your relationships with the others, anything with me has to stay in this house. Outside of these four walls, we need to be what the world expects us to be, at least until I can figure out a way to make sure that she's safe forever."

I nod, accepting his words as reality because I know that if I was in his position I would be putting Iris first too, so I can't fault him for doing the same with Katy.



It also takes some of the sting out of the things that he has said and done to me up to this point. Because again, if I were him, I would have iced me out too, if it meant protecting her.

“You do what you have to do to keep her safe. Whatever this is, can wait.”

He smiles at me sadly before tucking some hair behind my ear. “I don’t want to have to wait. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. But if I’ve been able to wait this long, I figure we should be able to hold out a little longer. Right?”

“Right,” I say with a nod, and he leans forward, kissing me gently. Once he pulls back, I rest my head on his chest and he wraps me into his arms, holding me tight against him as we lie in the bed.

I’m not sure how long we lie there in the dark in silence but when his phone starts to ring, I know that whatever sort of peace bubble we might have just found is shattered, at least for the rest of the day.

He glances at the screen and drags a hand down his face. “It’s my dad again, I need to take this.”

I shimmy away from him, giving him the space to leave. He leans forward and kisses me again before stroking a thumb down my cheek. “Just know that I’m in this, Briar, even if it doesn’t seem like it, even if it doesn’t look like it. I am in this. I just need to get this other shit wrapped up first.”

The call ends and moments later starts ringing again. He lets out a frustrated groan and kisses my forehead before turning and leaving the room, leaving me alone in the silence and darkness.

We might have a lot going on, but something inside me tells me that if the five of us stick together through everything, we’ll work it all out.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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It's been three days since I was pulled out of my class for Contemporary World Literature and dragged into the police station, yet I still haven't dared to get the truth from my mom.

Except today is the day that I have to do that, because I can't keep putting it off. I know the truth of it, deep down, but I refuse to accept it until I hear it from her and find out why she lied to me for so long.

I also want to know if my dad knows, and if that's why he left me with her. Because the self-worth issues and spiraling I did when he took off and left me behind were for nothing, if that's the truth of it. Not that it makes what he did any better, but at least if I'd have known, maybe I wouldn't have suffered so much.

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, which feels like almost a default setting for me at this point. The guys are all downstairs and they've checked in on me repeatedly throughout the morning, but I just can't find the willpower to crawl out of my hole. I feel myself teetering on the edge of the deep, dark spiral that I've never dared to allow myself to look at too closely for fear of falling. But if there was ever going to be a time, I feel like with everything that's happened since Thanksgiving, these events are going to be the things that finally push me over the edge.

But if I go down that rabbit hole, I have no idea how I'm gonna pull myself back out of it.

So instead of thinking about that, I lie and I stare and I try to distract myself from the realities around me.

What I hate the most is that I can't distract myself with a book right now because every book I pick up, I put down. It's as if the drama and angst in my own life has muted the effectiveness of escaping into the pages of someone else's drama and angst, and that pisses me off almost more than anything else. I also can't draw. There's zero joy in it for me right now. So I have no outlets, no escapes. All I can do is lie here and stare at the ceiling.

After playing the back and forth game, I grab my phone and text my mom to see if she's home today. Her response comes in quickly, letting me know that she is, and I have a small tantrum in the bed, banging my hands and feet on the mattress, letting out a groan, mostly because I really don't want to move and I'd rather stick my head in the sand than deal with all of this.

Instead, I roll out of bed and head toward my bathroom, because I know deep down that there isn't any escaping this, not really. This is going to have to be one of those things that I have to run at head first and deal with.

Just like I did with Iris.

Just like I did with everything that has tried to haunt me my entire life.

I've never been the type to climb up and over obstacles; I've been the run-straight-through-it kind of girl and this isn't going to be any different. Despite my willingness to just skirt around it for the last couple of days.

The guys have been great and haven't mentioned anything, but I did go downstairs yesterday and drop the file that the twins' dad had on me on the island in the kitchen while they were eating breakfast, before turning around and coming back upstairs to hide away in my bedroom.

I have no doubt they had access to that file since before they even knew me, but this feels like taking back a little piece of control. Because I gave them the file this time. I don't know

what they knew before, exactly, outside of what I've told them, but that file covers my entire life and it seems easier for them to read it than for me to have to relive it and tell them everything that I've been through.

I know they read it, because the twins came and sat with me last night in my pit of silence and despair. They said nothing, just laid with me in the quiet darkness, letting me know that I wasn't alone.

I finish getting ready, not having put in much effort because it's just my mom. Plus, I'm running on an empty tank today. Fumes are all I have, but that's going to have to be enough to get me through what I need to do.

I make my way downstairs, finding all of them sitting in the living room watching a football game. I had wondered what all of the shouting was about and now everything makes a little bit more sense.

I keep forgetting it's football season, despite the fact that Cole disappears every morning and afternoon, plus most Friday or Saturday nights. I'm pretty sure he has some away games coming up, so he's going to disappear for longer than that, but in all honesty, my head's been so far up my ass that I've been selfish enough to not pay attention to what's going on with their lives.

After today, I should probably try and prioritize some of that, especially if we're going to be doing this thing with the five of us for real, but then I should probably speak to them about that too. Speaking with Travis is one thing, but I feel like it's a conversation I need to have with all of them, or at least each of them.

I want to make sure that everybody's on the same page so that nobody's wires get crossed and nobody ends up getting hurt. Because I'm aware that, in this situation, I'm probably going to be the one who ends up broken at the end of it.

"I'm going to see my mom," I announce as I head into the kitchen and grab a croissant from the plate on the island before pouring myself a mocha. I add extra syrup because I'm not

sure I can handle my mom for too long without all the extra sugar in my system.

“Do you want us to come with you?” Sawyer asks. I swear his smile makes my heart skip a beat. He’s been so good, so caring and attentive throughout all of this. I’m not sure that I’d still be going if it wasn’t for his perpetual joy and enthusiasm about life. He really does radiate that golden retriever energy and it’s really helping me get through.

“No, that’s probably not the best idea,” I tell him. “She’s going to feel cornered enough as it is and if you guys come too, it’s going to feel like an attack. I think this is something I have to do alone.”

“At least let us come with you to the house,” Travis says, lifting the remote and turning off the TV. “At least then we’re with you, even if we’re not there while you talk to your mom.”

I take a minute weighing up the pros and cons of it, but ultimately decide fuck it. “Yeah, sure. That sounds good. At least then I don’t have to drive the Batmobile. I’m not sure I should be driving anyway.”

Travis nods then runs upstairs, returning moments later with a hoodie in his hand and sneakers on his feet. The others were already dressed, so I cram my pastry into my mouth and transfer my coffee into a tumbler before we all pile outside to the car to drive to the Kensington McMansion.

My stomach twists and turns the entire journey and I barely say a word, letting the four of them talk around me and joining in only when I absolutely have to. While deep inside I already know the answers, I really need my mom to confirm what the police told me, but when she does, I’m not sure how I’m going to handle the fact that I killed my father.

Or that he tried to kill me.

---

I sit opposite my mom at the small round table, waiting for her to speak. “Do I need to ask you again?”

She just blinks at me like I've pushed the pause button, or the reset button in her brain and she's currently rebooting. If it wasn't so frustrating, it would be mildly amusing. I give her a few moments before I say it again. "Is Noah Crawford my father?"

I already know the answer, because I've never seen her shut down in quite this fashion, but I need to hear her say the words. After a few more moments, she nods.

"Why did you never tell me?" I ask. "Why did you let me believe that Dad was my dad?"

She looks like she's about to cry, which makes absolutely no sense to me because I'm the one who's just had my entire existence upended by all of this.

While I haven't really let myself feel anything about what happened on Thanksgiving night, I get the feeling that knowing this information and having it confirmed by her is going to send me on a shame and guilt spiral like no other I've ever known.

Other than when Iris died.

"I didn't tell you, I didn't tell *anyone*, because that would mean acknowledging what actually happened."

My stomach twists at the deadness in her eyes, at the hollowness of her voice as she speaks.

"What does that even mean?"

"Don't make me say it, Briar. I never wanted you to know. I know I'm a crappy mother, and I always have been, but this was at least something I could protect you from. Don't make me say it."

I think I'm going to be sick, because if she's implying what I think she is, a whole new layer of self-loathing is about to wash over me.

"Please don't leave me thinking the worst, Mom. Please, just tell me because otherwise..." I trail off, unable to finish the sentence as she stares off into the distance over my shoulder.

“Noah Crawford was someone I met once. Before him... I was happy before him. I was sober. Before him, my life was completely different. He stole so much from me, but he at least gave me you.”

For the first time in my life, I actually feel sorry for my mom. The woman I knew has always had issues. If what she's telling me is true, then he's the man that started everything. I'm the byproduct of that. “I tried to forget,” she says, her voice still fully emotionless. “But there is only so much that you can forget when every time you close your eyes to go to sleep at night, you relive every moment of the worst part of your life, the day your innocence was stripped away. The day you realized that monsters really do exist, and they look just like you and I. That was the day I grew up. That was the day I learned that everybody has a monster inside of them, no matter how well they hide it.”

“Mom,” I start, and she finally looks at me with those cold, dead eyes before barking out a dry laugh.

“He raped me, Briar. Is that what you really wanted to know? He raped me and I got pregnant with you. I kept you, because I knew it wasn't your fault, but every time I looked at you, all I could see was him. And all I ever wanted to do was escape that. I learned to not see him in you after a while, but by then it was too late and our lives were already falling apart. I tried to pretend that your dad was your dad instead of the man who had raped me. Is there anything else that you want?”

She pushes her chair back and stands, her hands shaking at her sides. I open my mouth to tell her no, but she doesn't wait for me to respond. She just turns and leaves without saying another word, slamming the door as she goes.

I sit in stunned silence, trying to piece it all together and make sense of everything, but I'm not sure there is any way to make sense of any of this.

I walk in a daze down to the basement where the guys are hanging out and waiting for me.

“Let's go,” I say when I reach them. Sawyer is the first to bound over to me and wraps me up in a hug.



“What’s wrong? What did she say?” he asks.

I shake my head, opening my mouth, trying to form the words and failing. He pulls me over to the couches, making me sit, the others all waiting expectantly. It takes me a minute, but I regurgitate everything that my mother told me about Noah Crawford.

They sit in a stunned silence of their own, not interrupting me while I speak, and let me get it all out in one go. Which I’m thankful for, because I’m not sure that I’d be able to say this again out loud.

When I’m finished, my gaze bounces between the four of them. “Can we please go home now?”

Travis is the first to stand and holds out a hand for me. “Let’s get you home and away from this house of horrors.”

The others stand, murmuring their agreement. I follow him mindlessly to the car as I slowly start to descend into a spiral of darkness.

Not only did I kill my father, I killed the man who raped my mom and changed the course of our very existence. And I have exactly no idea how to feel about any of that.

---

After letting me stew for two weeks, going through a whole host of emotions—from shame and guilt to anger and revulsion—this morning, Travis and Sawyer dragged me from my bed and insisted I spend the day with them.

Which is exactly how I ended up with them for the entire day, playing laser tag and annihilating kids at what is meant to be a fun, family friendly game.

I don’t remember the last time I laughed this much. Even Travis has spent most of the day smiling. Who would’ve thought that a morning of laser tag was the way to make him a version of his own sparkly sunshine self?

Smiling as I stare out the window, my feet in Travis's lap while Sawyer drives us back to the house, I can't help but wonder if this moment of happiness is all we get in the middle of the crazy, but even if it is, I'm going to cling to it like it's a life line.

Sawyer pulls off down a side road and I furrow my brow but don't ask where we're going. Neither of them will answer me anyway. Frustratingly, they rarely do, but I'm learning to just pick my battles.

The car bounces down the dirt road until we're in the thick of a forest and I close my eyes, leaning my head back, trying not to wonder what the hell they're playing at.

Neither of them says a word, but Travis continues to rub my feet, so I'm just going to sit here and enjoy that rather than worry about the rest of it.

The car rolls to a stop, and when I open my eyes, I take in the fact that we're literally in the middle of nowhere. "Where are we?"

Travis quirks a brow at me and presses a finger against my lips. "No questions, just doing. That was the deal today, remember?"

I nod, my heart starting to race. That was our deal, that's how they managed to get me to laser tag in the first place. The one and only rule of date day.

The door in the front opens and Sawyer exits the car. Travis does the same, leaving me sitting here, trying to work out what's happening.

Taking a deep breath, I decide fuck it, slide my feet back into my Cons, and climb out of the car too. The chill in the air makes bumps rise on my arms. It's not as cold as it usually is in January, but it's not exactly summertime either.

They're whispering by the hood, so I circle toward them as their backs are to me and the car, trying to work out what they're saying.

"Soooooo..." I drag out, giving them my widest, most ridiculous grin. "What's going on in this little mother's

meeting, hmmm?”

Sawyer bursts out laughing and even Travis smirks at me.

Yes, another win for me today.

“You know, I don’t think she wants it,” Sawyer says with a huge grin on his face before leaning back onto the car.

Travis folds his arms across his chest, and I gulp. The way he looks at me already has me pressing my thighs together.

It should be illegal to use that look.

“I guess she might not,” he says with a shrug.

“Want what?” I ask, and Travis tuts.

“What’s the rule of today?”

I bite my lip as butterflies erupt in my stomach. “No questions, just doing.”

“Do you trust us?” Travis asks, and my gaze bounces between them. I nod without hesitation, despite the question setting off all sorts of anxious tripwires. “Good. Now you have a three minute head start. Run.”

My eyes go wide and I grip the cuffs of my hoodie sleeves. “Run?”

Travis just quirks a brow at me and my heart rate increases another notch. He doesn’t need to open his mouth for me to know what he’s thinking, he just taps his ridiculously expensive watch twice, his eyes lighting up with excitement. So rather than ask another forbidden question, I take a deep breath, trying not to freak out, and focus on the direction I need to head in before taking off like my life depends on it.

The cracking of twigs and nearly-frozen leaves under feet, coupled with my suddenly-loud breathing, is all I can hear. My cheeks are cold, my nose burns with the effort of dragging in great lungfuls of air, but the stress of not knowing how far three minutes will get me increases my heart rate threefold.

The physical effort of running and jumping over fallen tree trunks at breakneck speed—for me at least—is no small feat. I

may not be the obvious choice for a survival reality TV show, but even I know not to run in a straight line.

Yet, somehow, all of this—the thought of getting caught—is making me ridiculously wet. I won't make it easy for them, but let's be real: there is no possible scenario that exists that has me getting the best of those two.

Making a left between two bushes as tall as I am, I squat down to make my way in another direction, trying not to poke my eye out with a rogue branch.

I pause when I hear the heavy stomp of a foot on the ground, then silence.

My ears are ringing with the loud pounding of my heart and my lungs are burning as I try not to make too much noise with my breathing. I have no idea why fear is running so rampant through my veins, like this game has a life-or-death outcome and my name is Katniss or some shit.

*I want them to catch me.*

*I just don't want to lose.*

Another crackle about fifty feet away tells me someone is definitely there. Or maybe it's a deer. Or a wolf.

*Don't be stupid, Briar. Focus.*

Closing my eyes, I try to work out who or what it could be. Sawyer would be talking shit if he knew I was hiding here, teasing me or talking dirty.

*Fuck, why am I so wet thinking about this?*

I squeeze my thighs together and give myself a little feminist pep talk about not being their toy or their prey, but who the fuck am I kidding?

I have zero doubt that if either one of them is there, it's Travis. He's the patient one, the calculated hunter who will wait for me to fall into his trap, waiting on his prey to make a fatal mistake.

Fuck it, I'm not staying here like a sitting—or more accurately, squatting—duck. If I'm going to play this game,

I'm running like a ninja.

Do ninjas run? No, they would face their aggressors head-on.

*Thank fuck I'm not a ninja.*

I summon my courage like a queen and quickly stand, bolting without even checking who's out there. I run, ducking and turning and probably getting lost in this maze they call the woods. There's nothing in front of me and a quick glance behind me reveals only the same... trees, leaves, and bushes. I'm confident I can win this little game when suddenly, I'm hit by a brutal force around my abdomen. It's like a vise that pulls me back against a tree trunk.

Wait.

That's no tree.

Breathing harder than I've ever had to do in the past, I kick and scream and grab at anything that's in the vicinity of my hands—to no avail.

“Shh, Sunshine, you're going to hurt yourself.” Sawyer's voice calms me down immediately, my hands and legs going limp and body relaxing into his chest.

“Looks like you lost, baby.” Travis is leaning against the tree right in front of me, and I can't believe I'm just now seeing him.

Turning around, I look at Sawyer and frown, then turn again to Travis and narrow my eyes. What the fuck?

“You're not out of breath?” Was I the only one running in this game?

Travis pushes off the trunk and prowls toward us as Sawyer pulls me tightly back against his chest. I'm sweating underneath my sweatshirt, my jeans feeling like one layer too many, even though I'm aware it's fucking freezing outside. The temperature has no meaning when you've practically run a marathon, only to be greeted by two hot guys looking at you like you're their next meal.

Travis is pressing against me now, their heat on either side of me as Sawyer's mouth peppers my neck with soft kisses. I'm panting again for a completely different reason.

"No questions." Then his mouth is on mine and I quickly forget why it was even important that I'm the only one who exerted any energy on this little side quest.

Sawyer leisurely bathes me in kisses as he pops the button to my jeans and pulls them down just enough for his hand to slide down and cover my eager pussy.

I moan into Travis's mouth, my breathing becoming faster as the feel of the two of them makes me even hornier than I was two seconds ago.

"Your little run got your blood pumping, didn't it, baby?" Travis teases.

"God, yes," I moan as two thick, warm fingers push inside me until Sawyer's entire palm is covering my pussy, rubbing and slapping with every thrust inside me. Through my sweatshirt, Travis teases my nipples, pinching hard enough to get my attention.

"You want to get fucked out here, Briar?" he asks, like he's talking down to me. I don't know why that's hot, but it really fucking is.

"Yes." The word is little more than a breathy moan, but it drags a smile across his lips.

"You get your wish once you've come all over Sawyer's hand. Not a second before."

*Oh, woe is me. Like that's a fucking punishment.*

I lean back into Sawyer's chest and close my eyes, writhing against the feel of them both. One kissing my mouth like a hungry predator and the other holding my hair to the side as he sucks on my skin, probably leaving marks. *Alphaholes, amiright?*

I can feel the tell-tale signs of bliss as the tips of my fingers begin to tingle and my pussy squeezes Sawyer's fingers to keep him from pulling out. My hands are clutching

at Travis's sweatshirt, pulling him toward me until his mouth slams against mine and his tongue sweeps a warm path across my lips.

And there it is.

The shaking and trembling right before the full body orgasm that I'm about to experience.

"That's it, Gorgeous. Give it to us. All over my fingers."

I gasp as my body goes tight, rigid from the overwhelming sensation given by my two gorgeous, attentive men. My hips convulse, my knees go weak and still, I'm not moving because both of them are there to take care of me.

Breathing out, I realize it's a lot fucking colder than I thought it was earlier, especially now that my body is back from the land of euphoria.

I shiver, but this time it has nothing to do with my orgasm and everything to do with New York in February.

"Come on, now you get your reward." Sawyer wiggles his eyebrows as he puts his cum-covered fingers in his mouth with a wide grin on his beautiful face.

"Finger-lickin' good, Gorgeous."

I roll my eyes and smirk, but I can feel the blush creeping up my neck and landing on my face as Travis scoops me up and carries me to the Range Rover.

"Seriously? All that running and we're just... here?" I was barely ten feet inside the tree line. No wonder they didn't even break a sweat. They just waited for me to come back around to catch me. It's official, I would not survive on a deserted island.

Manhattan? Now that's a whole different story.

"Turn over the engine so we can get nice and warm in here," Travis demands, and Sawyer quickly runs to the driver's side and turns on the heat. As soon as Travis places me in the backseat, I feel the welcoming warmth of the heated leather against my ass. My jeans are off in a heartbeat, my underwear gone as well by the time Travis slides in beside me, his mouth landing on my pussy like he's been starved for me.

I barely register the driver's seat being pushed forward as I reach for something, anything, to grab on to. Then it's the passenger seat moving, giving us more room, before I've got a big body at my back and hungry man at my pussy.

"You look so fucking hot getting your pussy licked and sucked, Gorgeous. Fuck, I'm so hard," Sawyer whispers in my ear, talking dirty and turning me on even more than I thought possible. "Fuck, I love watching you."

Travis turns me around just as Sawyer adjusts himself and slides his jeans off, his dick right in front of my face. I smile up at him before I lick a long, languorous trail from the root to the head then suck it down to my throat. Sawyer moans and behind me, Travis's tongue spears me as he laps up every remnant of my earlier orgasm.

With both of my ass cheeks in his big hands, Travis eats my pussy like he won't survive another day without it. The more he gives me, the more I give Sawyer. I gag on his length, letting my throat expand every time I push down, and moaning every time Travis buries his tongue as far as he can.

It's only when I hear the sound of his belt, then the popping of his button followed by the scratch of his zipper, that I know this is about to get even better.

Just as Sawyer's dick disappears completely into my mouth, Travis slowly sinks his cock into me. I moan alongside them as I adjust to the feeling of them both, reveling in how fucking good it feels.

Sawyer grabs the back of my head and pushes me down as far I can possibly go as Travis pulls out and slams right back inside.

Taking Sawyer's balls in my hand, I squeeze gently, causing him to groan and let go of my head.

"Switch before I come in her hot little mouth, right the fuck now."

Like I weigh nothing—just a toy that's easily played with—the guys manhandle me quickly until my position is reversed. Suddenly, I'm sucking Travis's thick cock, his



precum already mixing with the taste of myself. Holy shit, I never thought tasting myself would turn me on so fucking much. Behind me, Sawyer's monster dick impales me and again, we all moan together as we fuck in a space too small to hold three people.

"That's it, baby. Suck my cock. Suck it nice and deep. Chok—" Travis doesn't finish whatever he was about to say because I grab his balls and roll them in the palm of my hand just as he buries his cock right down my throat. I swallow for good measure. My gag reflex is practically nonexistent at this point. I should get an award for this type of natural talent.

*Yay, superpower.*

Sawyer has one hand on my shoulder and the other on my hip as he works my pussy like his life depends on it. Travis holds my head down with both of his hands while I willingly choke on his massive cock.

"Now!" Travis gives a one word order and everything fucking breaks loose in the Range Rover.

Moving one of his hands to my clit, Travis flicks it with timed precision just as Sawyer pushes his thumb into my ass and I lose all semblance of control.

Screaming only in my head, since my mouth is full of cock, I rock back and forth as Travis is the first to come down my throat while I release all of myself onto Sawyer's dick. The pulsing of his thick length is the only clue I have that he's about to blow.

Once we're spent, Sawyer grabs a towel from the trunk and cleans me up before finding my clothes and offering them back to me. It takes a few minutes for my brain to start functioning again so I can pull my clothes back on. In the meantime, the two of them are dressed, the car seats back to where they're supposed to be. Sawyer climbs in with me while Travis jumps in the driver's seat and we make our way back to the main road.

"That was..." I trail off, still unable to make my brain work properly.

“It was,” Sawyer says, unbuckling me and pulling me onto his lap. He redoes the belt around us both and buries his face in my neck.

This, right here, is the most beautiful of distractions...

I just wish it could last a little longer.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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After spending way too long holed up under the guise of being sick after my mom's revelations, getting back to class and having a little piece of normal has actually felt amazing today. Even if my classes were entirely psychology-based and made my brain feel so numb that I don't know which way is up and which is down.

Right now, that feels like a gift, because it stops me from playing back through the conversation with my mom yet again.

It's not like I haven't had that conversation on loop in my mind since I spoke with her, so it's nice to have a sort of white noise for thoughts instead.

"What's the plan for tonight?" Penn asks as we walk across campus, classes finally done for the day.

"I have no idea," I tell her with a shrug. "Probably curling up with a blanket and pretending that the world outside doesn't exist. Ice cream might be worth a shot too."

"I'll take your ice cream and raise you pizza with ice cream," she teases, wagging her eyebrows. I haven't told her what happened with my mom because it leads down a sticky path, but she mentioned at lunch how I don't seem myself, so she's obviously picking up on the fact that everything isn't quite okay. Even if I keep trying to pretend it is.

"Pizza and ice cream sounds amazing!" I exclaim. "Your place or mine?"

“Yours. Absolutely yours. I’ve never seen the inside of the guys’ house except for during a party, which just isn’t the same. And to say I’m intrigued might be the understatement of the year.”

I let out a cackle, shaking my head. “It’s just a house, but sure, we can do it there. I’ll kick the guys out of the living room and we can have a girls’ night.”

She loops her arms with mine as we head toward the exit of the quad, but I pause when we round the corner.

“What’s wrong?” she asks while I stare at the girl leaning against the wall.

“I know her,” I tell Penn, motioning to Emerson, who looks strung out as fuck.

Penn’s eyes go wide as she takes in my old frenemy. I know she said she was ‘working’ when I saw her at the party, but it seems she’s fallen even further down the hole if looking at her now is to be the judge.

We keep heading in the direction of where Emerson is standing, and as we get closer, she stands and watches me, like she was waiting for me.

“Wondered how long I’d have to wait here for you,” she snarls at me, like I have any idea why the fuck she’s here.

“What do you mean you wondered how long it would take me, Emerson? We haven’t talked since the party when you spilled a drink all over me and basically called me a whore,” I snap, and she barks out a laugh, scratching at her arms and the track marks that are impossible to miss.

She catches me looking and sucks on her teeth before pulling the sleeves of her top back down. “Of course I’m looking for you. Why else would I be in this shithole?”

I roll my eyes while I wait for her to continue.

“I have a job in the area tonight, but I need some help. I need some money and you’re the only person I know around here. So I need... I need you.” I let out a sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“How much do you need, Emerson?” I ask, and Penn makes a garbled noise beside me, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

I know I don’t owe Emerson anything, but I still can’t help feeling partially responsible for her being where she is right now. Maybe if I hadn’t come to Serenity Falls and I’d stayed in the city, she wouldn’t be doing what she’s doing right now. Maybe she wouldn’t be hooked on whatever she’s shooting up with and maybe, just maybe, she’d be living up the year that we planned and going to college herself.

“How much can you give me?” she asks, and my anger spikes a little, but I do what I can to temper it down.

“Just tell me how much you need, Emerson,” I say forcefully. “I’m not giving you an open-ended figure. Tell me what you need and what it’s for and I’ll see what I can do.”

She scoffs at me and Penn glares at her before turning to me. “You shouldn’t be giving her anything. What sort of friend disappears all year, then turns up asking for money?”

“Shut your mouth, bitch,” Emerson hisses, and I see red.

“Emerson, don’t talk to her like that. You don’t know her, and she’s not exactly fucking wrong. Now tell me what you want and then we can just leave.”

“Five hundred,” she responds.

I swear to God, this fucking woman. “What’s it for?” I ask, already knowing that I probably don’t want to know.

“Does it really matter?” she asks, and I fold my arms across my chest, getting real close to being done with her shit. If it wasn’t for all the times she helped me escape my life, I’d have already left by now.

“If you want five hundred dollars from me, then yes, it matters.”

“Five hundred dollars to you is a drop in the sea these days, isn’t it? You’re living the high life now. That of the rich and famous. Don’t pretend like I haven’t seen your mom all over TV and billboards with her fancy new man. I know where

you're living now. You come to this school with folks that make millions. Five hundred dollars is what these people wipe their asses with."

Penn barks out a laugh next to me. "She really doesn't have any idea at all, does she?"

I shake my head, hoping Penn will keep her mouth shut. The fiery redhead is usually incapable of that, but I'm hoping that since she doesn't know Emerson, she's gonna just let me handle it.

"I don't have five hundred on me, Emerson. I might live around the rich, but I am not rich. That kind of money is not something I just carry around," I say, exasperated that I even have to explain this to her. Just because my zip code changed, doesn't mean I have.

"No, but I bet your new stepbrother or one of your fancy boys from the party does. Just call them and get me the money here. I don't have time for this." She rolls her eyes like *I'm inconveniencing her* and I swear I get a little stabby. I've never wished ill on Emerson before, but if she keeps pushing me, I'm going to lose my shit.

"Well, if you'd have let me know beforehand, Emerson, I could have pre-arranged something, but you didn't. No, you just turn up here, act like a bitch, *again*, and then demand money from me like I'm some sort of ATM."

"Don't play the poor little rich girl routine with me, Briar. I know you remember." She glares at me and I clench my fists, taking a deep breath.

"You have got to be kidding me," Penn mutters beside me, keeping her attention on her phone.

Emerson starts to scratch her arm again, and I slide my phone from my pocket. I should probably text Travis, but he's not the calm and collected one. That's definitely Asher, so I drop a message to him and ask him to come and meet me.

I know that he's on campus because he asked me to wait for him to drive home today. So he should be around any minute anyway.

His response comes in quickly and he tells me that he's on his way, asking what's up, but I don't respond. I have a feeling that if I tell him what's wrong, he's not going to come.

Moments later, I see the emo geek god, Asher St. Vincent, striding toward us.

When he sees Emerson, he frowns and glances at me. I shake my head, silently begging him not to ask questions as he approaches. He keeps his mouth closed for a minute, but his questions are written all over his face.

“Briar, you okay?”

“I'm good,” I respond tightly. “Thank you for coming.”

“Always. What's going on?” he asks me, not even glancing at Emerson.

“This bitch owes me money,” Emerson announces, and Penn starts laughing dryly.

“I'm gonna go wait by the car, otherwise I'm gonna knock this bitch out,” Penn says before striding away to where we parked this morning.

“You owe her money?” Asher asks me, looking confused.

I shake my head, rolling my eyes at her. I turn back to him, trying not to let her get to me. “No, she wants to borrow money. But I don't have enough cash on me. I was hoping you'd be able to help.”

I wish I could just tell her to fuck off, but I can see how much she's struggling, and I know who she used to be. She was a bitch, but not like this. Still, a part of me feels gross as hell asking Asher for this money, and I'll pay him back just as soon as I can, because there is no way I'm having this hanging over my head. They all do enough for me already.

Asher frowns and I plead with him with my eyes not to ask any questions, but he knows this is far from normal for me. “How much does she need?”

“Five hundred dollars,” Emerson responds, starting to scratch at her arm again.



Asher glances at her quickly before turning his gaze back to me.

I shrug because I don't know what else to do, it's not like I want to do this either. I'm embarrassed as fuck as I watch his emotions play out over his face, and I know he's torn about handing over the money. Not because he doesn't have it, but because she was a bitch to me before and is being a bitch now. That, plus it's glaringly obvious why she wants it. I don't want to give it to her either, but I have zero doubt she'll cause a major scene if I don't.

I mouth the words *'I'm sorry,'* to him, because I seriously hate this. If I thought I could get Emerson to come back later and just get the cash myself I would, but there's no way I can, and I also know that she's desperate enough to cause a scene. It wouldn't be the first time she's done it.

His face softens for a minute and he nods at me before looking back at Emerson. He pulls his wallet from his pocket and takes out the cash.

"This is the first and only time this is gonna happen. Do you understand?" he barks, waiting for her agreement before handing over the cash.

She reaches forward, snatching it from his hand, and I want to slap the stupid smile from her face. "We'll see," she says before turning and walking away without so much as a goodbye.

"We need to have a talk about your friend," Asher says sternly, and I let out a sigh, moving to his side where he puts his arm around my shoulders.

"I know," I say, dejected, "but I'm not sure what there is to say that you guys don't already know. She's a bitch, always has been, but this was a new low even for her. I'll pay you back just as soon as I can." I shrug, because I don't know what else to do.

"It's not about the money, Briar. And you don't have to pay me back," he says softly. "I just don't want to see her taking advantage of you. So as long as this doesn't become a

common occurrence, let's just forget it happened," he says, letting out a deep sigh and hopefully letting it go.

"Okay," I say, trying to shake off the gross feeling crawling over my skin from that whole thing as we start to walk back toward the car. We've got enough to deal with without Emerson piling on too.

"Now, let's get home. We have a surprise for you," he says, squeezing me tighter.

"A surprise? What is it?"

"Not much of a surprise if I tell you," he says, laughing. "Come on, Beautiful, let's go bring back some of your joy."

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"I cannot believe you guys did this for me," I exclaim, way too excited to be pissed that Penn worked with the guys behind my back to make this trip a reality.

We're currently in the car, with Penn and Connor behind us in convoy, heading to the City because tonight, I get to see Stone Royal play live at The Garden.

I am beyond excited because not only did they get us all tickets to see the show, they managed to somehow snag us backstage passes too.

I can't even with how excited I am.

We've spent the entire ride here so far with me pretty much just bouncing in the backseat while I sing along to the Stone Royal playlist that I have in my Spotify at the top of my lungs.

It's all of his best songs, including *Raindrops*, which he recorded with his daughter, Octavia. I'm hoping he sings it tonight because the emotion in that song is *everything* and it's one of my favorite songs of all time.

"Of course we did this for you, Briar. Penn told us how excited you were about it and, honestly, we were more pissed

that you didn't tell us it's something you wanted to do," Cole says from the front passenger seat.

"Of course I didn't tell you guys. Why would I?"

"Because it's something that you wanted to do," Sawyer says with a cheeky smile beside me. "You should know by now that if it's going to make you happy, we want to make it happen. That's just kind of how this works, Briar."

I shrug before shimmying in my seat as the beat drops on the song playing. Once I finish my impromptu little dance, and they're all laughing at me, I lean back in my seat and get comfy.

"I'm not used to people doing things for me, so it doesn't occur to me to tell you guys what I want to do. Everything I've ever done, I've done for myself, which is exactly what I intended to do with this gig. Except then everything happened and it kind of slipped my mind."

Asher puts his hand on mine and squeezes, smiling at me. "Well you don't have to just rely on yourself for everything anymore. If you want something, all you have to do is say so."

"Asher St. Vincent, I am not a princess. I'm more than capable of getting things for myself."

"We know you are, Briar," Travis says from the driver's seat, because of course that control freak is driving. "But maybe, just maybe, we want to be able to do these things for you."

I open my mouth to respond, but shut it, because I'm not really sure what to say to that.

We spend the rest of the trip singing along to my playlist. Obviously, I knew Travis could sing, but apparently they all can. Shocker.

But what really shocks me is how many of Stone's songs they know. I didn't expect them to be fanboys.

It's not long before Travis has us pulling up at the hotel. He hands the keys to the valet and the bellboys take our suitcases. I stare up at the ridiculously high building and let

out a whistle. “I can honestly say I’ve never stayed in a place like this before.”

Sawyer grins at me, putting his arm around my shoulders as he pulls me into his side. “You better get used to it, Sunshine. This is the only way we travel.”

I let out a cackle at the prospect. “Aww. Poor little rich boys just don’t know how to rough it.”

I sneak a glance at Asher, who looks at me before rolling his eyes. “One shouldn’t have to rough it when one travels,” he says jokingly, and I can’t help but laugh again.

Travis heads inside and gets us checked in, and we leave him to deal with all of the details.

Penn and Connor enter the hotel just behind us and she lets out a whistle so similar to mine.

I just laugh when she reaches us. “I know,” I say to her. “I did the exact same thing.”

“Girl, it’s like you’re reading my mind,” she says, laughing.

Travis rejoins us, handing Penn the key for their room and we make plans to meet for dinner before the concert before heading upstairs to our suite. Because of course we have a suite. Why wouldn’t we have a suite? Kensingtons don’t travel in less than suites, apparently.

When we get upstairs to our room, the first thing I notice isn’t the size. It’s not the opulence and luxury. It’s the full glass wall that looks directly out onto Central Park.

“Holy shit,” I gasp as I walk through the space, transfixed. “This is... I don’t even want to know what this room costs, do I?”

“Probably not,” Travis says with a shrug before dropping onto one of the couches.

I gulp at just how blasé he is about it, which reinforces the whole I don’t want to know thing.

“Okay, well fine. I’m going to go jump in the shower and start getting ready,” I announce excitedly, and Travis points to the far room.

“That’s your room,” he says, and the other three stare at him.

“Why isn’t she just sharing with us?” Sawyer asks.

Asher smirks at Travis and asks, “You’re giving her the master?”

Cole just watches me.

Rather than join their crazy, I grab my suitcase from by the door where it was brought up and hightail it into my room. Getting ready for tonight is going to take some work because Stone. Motherfucking. Royal.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

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I walk out of the bathroom, barely able to contain all of the joy fizzing up inside of me about tonight. I'm trying to keep my fangirl locked down, but it's going to be really hard.

I bound into the living area where Travis, Asher, and Cole are already waiting for me, only to come face to face with a surly-looking Travis. His arms are folded across his chest as his gaze runs up and down my body.

"No," is all he says. I quirk a brow at him and hold my arms in mirror to his stance.

"What do you mean, *no*?"

"I mean, no. You're not wearing that tonight, Briar."

Holy fucking God, the audacity on this man is out of this world.

"You really think you're going to be able to tell me what I can and can't wear? I don't think so, Travis."

We stand in a stare off, and I can feel the tension from the other two ratcheting up as if they're not sure whether to intervene or not, and which side to take if they do.

The tension is broken by Sawyer entering the room. He lets out a whistle when he sees me, ignoring the tension radiating from Travis. "Damn, Sunshine, you look hot as fuck!"

"Thank you," I say, moving to peck his cheek and he slaps my ass. I thought my skirt and ripped tee combo was on point, especially paired with the ripped fishnets and my Cons.

“Now, we should probably go because there isn’t time for her to get changed.”

“She does look hot as fuck and that is kind of the problem. Travis says she needs to change,” Asher says, and I roll my eyes at him before I run to grab my bag, making sure I’ve got everything I need for the night.

“You can’t make me change, Travis, and you’re not going to.” I stick my tongue out at him, trying to lift some more of the tension.

“Briar, you’re barely wearing anything. You really think that I’m going to take you out looking like that, where everybody’s just going to want you?”

“I don’t care about everybody else wanting me, Travis. Let them look. It’s not like I belong to them. I don’t belong to *anybody*.” I make my words pointed because I *don’t* belong to anybody, no matter what the expression on his face is telling me, his jaw clenching and his shoulders tight.

Letting out a huff, I stomp back into my room, grabbing a shirt and wrapping it around my waist. “There I’ve got something to cover up with now. Can we go so we don’t miss the show?”

“Fine,” he growls, grabbing his phone off of the coffee table and stalking out of the room. Cole chuckles when the door slams closed.

“You do look hot as fuck, baby girl. Don’t stress him, he’s just in caveman mode.” He kisses my cheek before heading out of the room, leaving me with just the twins.

“Are you sure you want to go to this concert?” Sawyer teases. “Because I can think of a lot more fun things to do back here.”

“I second that,” Asher says. I laugh at them both.

“As much fun as that sounds, hell nor high water could keep me from this show. Nor can Travis’ surliness. So let’s go, boys! I need this show in my life.”



We head downstairs and meet Penn and Connor in the lobby. I link my arm with Penn's and walk slightly ahead.

"Girl, you look like fire," she exclaims, and I laugh at her craziness.

"I'm glad you think so, because Travis tried to tell me to change."

She glares over her shoulder at him again. "The audacity of that man," she says, and I cackle out loud.

"I thought the exact same thing."

We climb into the waiting limo that's apparently taking us to the Garden, because of course Travis can't go to a concert in anything less than a limo.

I connect my phone to the sound system while Penn pulls a few drinks from the wet bar. Once everybody's in and we're on our way, bubbles flowing in the glasses and music playing, I sit and reflect that this might be one of the best nights of my life. I'm not sure what that says about me, but I'm not about to question it either.

When we pull up to Madison Square Garden after dinner, everyone piles out of the limo, leaving Travis and I as the last two in here. I wait a beat, thinking he's going to say something, but he doesn't, so I climb out and he follows me. He stands behind me and pulls my back flush to his chest.

"You're going to regret disobeying me, Briar," he growls in my ear.

"We'll see," I respond, enjoying the way his grip tightens on me.

"Brats get punished, Briar. Just remember that," he says before releasing me and striding over to the others.

That shouldn't be so fucking hot, so why am I practically panting on the spot.

*Pull it together, Briar.*

I follow the others to the backstage entrance, absolutely dying inside as I try to lock down the fangirl inside of me.

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I'm still on a high as we ride back to the hotel, and I must look almost drunk as we walk through the lobby to the elevator because I'm a giggling, smiling mess.

The four of them usher me into the elevator, each of them with a smile on their face. "Your joy is contagious, Sunshine," Sawyer says before hitting the button to close the doors so no one else can join us.

I just grin widely back at him and it takes me a minute to realize the four of them have made a wall between me and the doors to the elevator.

"Oh, no..." I start as Travis steps forward, cornering me.

"I told you not to push me earlier, Briar. So now that I have you alone, I'm collecting."

My breath hitches in my chest as my heart beats as fast as a hummingbird's wings. "I..."

I trail off, not even sure what I was going to say. I knew being a brat earlier would come back to bite me, but I didn't expect this.

"Do not make a sound, do you understand?" he says, his stormy blue eyes darkening as he steps into me so there is no space between us.

I'm mesmerized by the determination etched over his features. The dark, lustful gleam in his eyes makes my skin prickle with anticipation. I know that look. I've caused that look a few times at this point.

It says I'm about to either get fucked or get punished. Maybe even both.

Leaning in to erase the remaining fraction of space between us, he glides his sexy lips across my mouth without even really touching me, just a wisp of air that feels like a caress. One hand on the back of the elevator, the other at my

thigh, he curls his long fingers around my skirt and lifts until my pussy is met with the cool air of the metal cage.

“Travis...”

Instead of telling me to be quiet, he bites my lower lip, cutting off any protest I had ready to throw at him. My eyes wide, my breaths heavy and wanting, I do as I'm told.

Pushing my thong to the side, he thrusts two fingers inside my pussy and curls them just enough to make me gasp out loud, but I choke it down, trying as hard as I can to stay quiet.

Sawyer—who is standing right behind Travis—chuckles loud enough to get my attention, but it's short lived with my tormentor's next words.

“You're going to have to be a good girl and stay quiet, baby.”

I want to say something, but I keep my mouth firmly clamped shut, because I don't want this to stop.

Cole and Sawyer sidle up on either side of me while Travis continues fucking me with his fingers, and from the corner of my eye I see Asher leaning against the far wall with his hand in his jeans, slowly stroking himself while he watches the show.

One of Sawyer's hands glides up and under my tank top while Cole grabs for my hair and pulls it back enough to expose the length of my neck. He's immediately on me, creating a trail of kisses all the way up to my ear where he whispers, “I can smell how much you want us, Briar.”

He bites on my earlobe just as Travis grinds his palm against my clit. I try to be as quiet as humanly possible while rushing toward my orgasm, hoping that working this hard to stay quiet is worth it.

My breaths increase and, as if he knows I'm close, Travis stops his movements, drawing a whine from me.

“I told you not to push me earlier, baby. Now you get to pay for being bad.” Travis's eyes light up as he utters the

words, and I swear I want to throw a fully fledged tantrum as everyone but Travis removes their hands from me.

Just when I've started coming back down from the edge, he starts again, fucking me slowly this time, but every moment is an almost painful bliss because I know his game now. I try not to succumb to how good it feels, especially when there's every chance we could get caught, but it's impossible.

The elevator dings, announcing our arrival on our floor, and Travis relents his beautiful torture, pushing his fingers into my mouth. He raises an eyebrow when I groan once more at my lack of release. "Lick them clean, Briar."

My eyes widen, but I do as I'm told while Asher holds the doors open. How no one else got on as we ascended is beyond me, but I'm not questioning my luck—or lack of it, depending on how you look at it.

I straighten my top and skirt and head out of the elevator at Travis' insistence, following them down the hall to our room.

Once the door locks behind me, Travis ushers me further into the room and the four of them look at me like they're going to devour me.

I bite my lip as my gaze bounces from one of them to the next. "So, this is going to happen, huh?"

I clench my thighs together at the thought of having all four of them at once. Apprehension shoots through me, but when Asher moves toward me and cups my cheek in his hand, stroking a finger from his other down my throat, a shudder rushes down my body and all nerves disappear. "Do you want this to happen?"

I press my lips together and nod once, but that is all they need. Travis moves to stand at my back and wraps his hand in my ponytail, pulling on my hair so my head is tilted back to look at him, leaving my throat exposed. "I knew you'd be a good girl, eventually."

Goosebumps erupt over my skin at his words and Asher responds by pressing his lips against the sensitive skin of my exposed throat.

I barely look around at the huge room because all I can actually see are these four men whose eyes are focused only on me. As Asher continues raining kisses down my neck, Cole and Sawyer undress me like I'm their own personal little fuck doll. My skirt, then my tank go flying before my panties are ripped off my body and my bra disappears too.

"Hey!" I don't get another word out as Travis' mouth assaults me in the most delicious of ways. I'm putty in their hands, my knees barely able to keep me standing.

Slapping both hands on my ass, Travis picks me up like I weigh nothing and backs me up to the giant bed just before Asher steps out of the way.

Gently, he places me on the mattress and all four pairs of eyes are on me. Watching, assessing, calculating.

Rising up onto my elbows, I look each one in the eyes before I speak. "So, who's going to be the first one to make me come?"

"That's not the challenge, Sunshine. The real question is —" Sawyer gets cut off by Cole, who's already reaching back and pulling his t-shirt off.

"Who's going to be the *last* one to make you come?"

While Travis and Sawyer disappear into the next room, Cole is quick to get naked, walking around the bed with his huge dick on display for me.

"Hungry?"

His question makes me smirk. "Always."

Straddling my chest, he places his big hand on my throat and painstakingly slowly feeds me his hard cock. I crave every single inch of him as he adds just enough pressure at my neck and his cock slides down my throat. He hisses, his eyes fixed on mine. "Such a good girl."

My focus is pulled for a second when Asher plants his hands on my thighs and opens me up to suck on my clit. I moan around the thick length in my mouth.

Cole clenches his jaw, his hand tightening around my throat. "Do that again."

At first I think he's talking to me, but when Asher sucks me again, I realize he's not talking to me at all.

Water running in the next room registers at the back of my mind. The bath, I'm guessing, as Travis and Sawyer's murmured words echo against the tiles. Everything comes right back into focus as my lips bump against Cole's groin and he slowly grinds against me, one arm out and holding his weight while he increases the pressure against the side of my neck.

"That's it, Gorgeous, swallow my dick." I'm trying, but Asher's mouth is doing insane things to me as he licks up and down my slit, fucking me with his fingers before alternating sucking on my swollen nub.

I'm going to come, I can feel the signs adding up, and with that little encounter in the elevator I know I'm not going to last very long.

Just when I think I'm about to explode onto Asher's tongue, Sawyer and Travis walk back in and drop a whole bunch of things on the bed, piquing my curiosity and making my orgasm recede just a fraction.

Now they're both watching as Cole fucks my mouth. Clothing is flying, t-shirts and jeans disappearing faster than a virgin at a swinger's club.

"She's so close. Fuck me, she looks beautiful." Sawyer kneels beside me and leans down, taking my tit in his mouth. Travis tweaks the other and it's all I need to let go.

It all happens so quickly. My back arches as much as is possible with Cole's thighs straddling me, my muscles strain against the onslaught of sensations coursing through my veins, and with each of them touching me in some way, I let go entirely.

Despite being muffled by the huge cock in my mouth, I still manage to scream around him, which only provokes a string of curses from Cole. Asher laps me up, licking

everything I give him as I try to push my pussy closer and closer to the point of pleasure. He doesn't deny me, wrapping his arms around my thighs and feasting at my core without shame.

Cole pulls out from between my lips, releasing my throat and pinching my chin so I keep my mouth open.

Then he comes all over my tongue, my lips, my chin.

"Drink up, Gorgeous." The strain of his muscles as he releases his own orgasm is a beautiful sight. All male and virile. The musky scent of his groin and the salty tang of his cum cause a sort of aftershock tremor, like my orgasm was nothing short of an earthquake.

"Fuck yeah, that was awesome." Breathing heavily, I give Sawyer a sex-drunk smile as I try to lean up, but my hand brushes against plastic. I can guess what it is, but I look anyway and I'm met with a variety of lube and dildos and even a very scary-looking butt plug.

*Shit just got real.*

Asher grins at me as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. It's primal and fucking hot, not to mention the fire that's still burning in his eyes because he still hasn't come. He's still in his jeans and the bulge is making my mouth water.

"Soon, baby. Soon." He mouths the words and the muscles between my legs contract with anticipation.

"First, we have a surprise for you." Travis's words get my attention. This can't be good. Correction: I'm betting it's so bad that it's perfection.

Sawyer gives me a tender kiss before turning me around and propping my ass up like a good little sub. Someone smacks one cheek then the other but I try not to make any sounds. After all, last time I did, I lost an orgasm.

"This might be a little cold." Lube. Okay then. I totally got this.

Asher wasn't lying, the lube isn't as hot as my body temperature and as he applies it over my asshole, I tense just

the tiniest bit. The anticipation of having something in my ass while they do whatever they want to me is only making my body heat rise by the second.

Cole peppers kisses up and down my back as Sawyer slides in under me and sucks on my nipples. I can see him when I bend my head down, my hair creating a cocoon for just the two of us.

“This is going to be hot as fuck, Sunshine. Bet you can’t count the number of times you come tonight.” I grin at his words. I don’t want to count, I just want to live this moment like it’s my last.

“Challenge accepted.”

Just as I finish my reply, the buttplug is pushed slowly, meticulously, into my ass. When I saw it earlier, it seemed unassuming, but right now, as it’s entering my ass, it feels like the fucking Chrysler Building being shoved up there.

“Shh, you’re okay. Push out. Relax and push out for us.” Sawyer’s big brown eyes help to settle me, so I do as I’m told. Slowly, surely, I relax, then push out and accept the intrusion.

“That’s a good girl.” Travis’s words make my entire body melt, especially as someone—though I’m not sure whose hand—caresses my ass cheek then kisses the small of my back.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” Cole is the first to comment before Asher hums his approval.

“See? Good girls get rewards.” *Fucking Travis.*

The next thing I know, I’m being carried to the bathroom, tightly snuggled in Asher’s arms, where he carefully walks into the tub and sits down on the ledge with me on his lap. The water is the perfect temperature with rose petals floating on almost the entire surface of the water.

“Wow! This thing is huge!” Without missing a beat, all four of them snigger, and I realize there’s a “That’s what she said” joke hanging in the air.

“I meant the tub, jeez. But yes, also your cocks are huge and I want them inside me, everywhere.” Their snickering dies



as Sawyer's grin widens with delight and Travis's lust-filled eyes rake me up and down, probably calculating all the ways he's going to humiliate me before making me feel like a queen.

Asher turns me around so I'm straddling him, his hands on my ass cheeks while his middle fingers toy with the plug.

I take in a deep breath, the movement activating all of my nerves at once.

"Do you trust us?"

"Yes." My answer is quick. I don't need time to think about that. They have proven, time after time, that my well-being is a priority to them.

"Good. Just remember, if at any time you don't want to play anymore, you either tap out or you say stop." I take a deep breath and nod. I was confident all of three seconds ago, but now fear starts to settle in my belly and second thoughts invade my mind.

"Fuck, Asher. Way to kill the mood." Cole sits right beside us and, without asking for any kind of permission, grabs me by the back of the hair and brings my worried face so close to his that we share the same breath.

"We got you. Always. Now, just sit back and enjoy the ride, baby." I grin up at him right before he slams his mouth to mine and kisses the anxiety away.

Just like that, I'm fully on board again.

By now, all five of us are in the tub and there's still room for another half dozen. Cole groans as Asher pulls me away from him, his teeth scraping along my bottom lip and his hand reluctantly releasing my hair.

It's Asher's turn to kiss me. He's so different from Cole. He's more tender, seeking out my tongue and setting a pace that only serves to make me wetter.

He also has a hard time letting me go, but when Travis growls his impatience, Asher places me on my back along the

rose petals and guides me across the bathtub until Travis sinks his fingers into my hair and pulls me up to face him.

His voice is harsh, but his features are tender. He's the yin to his own yang, a double faceted, erotic god who gives pleasure with one hand and pain with the other.

It's hot as fuck and I love being on the receiving end of both.

"Wait." Sawyer scooches closer, framing my face with both of his hands as he whispers against my mouth. "I'll be the last to make you come."

I grin.

He grins wider.

Then I'm suddenly submerged into the bath water, fighting for my life.

I realize now that the rose petals are not just for romantic show, they block out the view of anything above.

Mere seconds later, I'm pulled back up and Travis attacks my mouth with a searing kiss that scorches my brain cells a little.

The sudden fear of being held down under water evaporates as my body melts into the possessive way Travis is owning my mouth.

That too is suddenly gone and I'm back under water, my hands and arms flailing and trying to grab whatever I can find.

The next time I'm above the surface, it's Asher's mouth that greets me, kissing and nibbling and reassuring me that no matter what, I'm safe.

Again, with my head held down, before it's Sawyer's turn to curl my toes with a warm, loving kiss. By time it's Cole's turn, the fear is gone and only anticipation burns inside me. Cole's mouth is demanding and aggressive, his sexual needs are in the very molecules of air and lust.

Panting, I wonder what's next, since I've done my rounds, so to speak.

I don't have to wait long when it comes to Travis; his timing is always impeccable. Turning me around, I'm faced with three of the four guys who are now all sitting around the tub, watching like I'm the star performer in Cirque du Soleil, sexual-humiliation style. I chuckle at my own ridiculous joke, which is why I choke on a little water as Travis dunks my head, face down, in the water and impales me from behind. With one hand on my hip and the other holding onto my head, he fucks me long and hard, deep and rough, without a second thought. I try not to cough up the water, but I'm slipping and sliding all over the fucking place until steady arms grab my shoulders and bring my mouth to a hard, thick cock.

I don't try to suck it—I've got barely enough air to stay still while Travis pummels my pussy like it's his favorite sport—but I rub my lips along the shaft, concentrating on that instead of the darkness of the water.

When Travis pulls me back out of the water, I imagine myself coming out like some kind of music video where water flies in a perfect arc. I don't know if that's how it actually goes, but what I do know is that I take in a deep, satisfying gasp of oxygen to boost my lungs once more.

And here I thought having a butt plug was uncomfortable. Running out of air is fucking terrifying.

Just like before, I'm greeted by Asher, who soothes my fears, licking and nibbling on my lips, his tongue demands entrance and I give it willingly.

"You're perfect, Briar. Fucking perfect for us." Tears prick at the back of my lids as my eyes close with those tender words.

"That's right, baby. You're our perfect little slut." Fucking Travis. God, yes. Always there to balance out the good with his particular brand of bad.

Pushing me onto my knees, his hand an anchor at the back of my head, he angles my gaze up to him and gives me one of his rare, genuine smiles right before he backs me up so my ass hits Sawyer's shins. A large, soothing hand lands at my nape,

and just when Travis shoves his big, fat cock into my mouth, Sawyer rubs soft circles on my skin.

The soft and the hard all at the same time.

Tentatively, I reach around to palm Travis' ass so I can find purchase. That's when Sawyer lifts my hips out of the water and taps on the butt plug. I moan and Travis curses. I love getting a reaction out of him—it's so fucking satisfying.

But all thoughts of Travis' emotions fly out the window when Sawyer's cock plunges inside my pussy. All three of my holes are filled and I've never felt more alive in my entire fucking life. Asher and Cole both reach out and tweak my nipples, pinching and rolling them between their thumbs and forefinger.

Travis is brutal with my mouth, pushing in and out, bottoming out down my throat with every snap of his hips. I love that he doesn't treat me like a fragile little doll, that he knows I can take whatever the fuck he throws my way.

Because I fucking can and I will.

“My turn.” Sawyer pulls out, kneeling at my side and running a finger around my tits and stomach while Asher takes his place. I grunt at the long, smooth glide of his dick from tip to hilt without pausing even once. I'm so fucking full between him and the plug that I struggle to keep up the sucking.

The pads of my fingers are digging into the tight muscle of Travis's ass and it's almost like digging into fucking concrete. Man, I wish I had buns of steel like that.

“Focus.” How the fuck does he know when my mind wanders? It's not like I'm not sucking his dick like a good little girl.

Pulling out, Travis never lets go of my hair, even when Sawyer takes his place, feeding me his hard length, his eyes boring into mine with love and concern.

My ass is just above the surface of the water, which is flying all over the fucking place—against our skin, over the lip of the tub, against the tiled walls—it's a damn water polo match in here and the prize at the end is an orgasmic coma.

“Christ, you’re so fucking tight.” Asher slides out and Cole immediately takes his place and gone is the soft fucking. Travis is directing the show, pulling and pushing my head until he hears me gagging on Sawyer’s cock.

“That’s it, choke on his dick. Show us how much you love to suck our cocks.” The more he talks, the wetter I get. There must be something wrong with me. Or maybe I’m just a kinky bitch who’s found the men to finally satisfy her.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come.” I’m staring up at Sawyer as he nods to Cole. Suddenly, a hand is on my clit and Cole’s groin is shamelessly grinding on the butt plug. That’s when I lose any semblance of control.

I come so hard that I literally choke on Sawyer’s pistoning erection. He pulls out just enough for me to breathe, but then he smirks and winks. “Drink up, Sunshine.” By the time I register his words, his cum is filling my mouth and I’m swallowing every fucking drop of it.

Cole doesn’t relent until Sawyer slides out and Asher takes his place, and just like a sexy little merry-go-round, Cole is playing with my tits, sucking and licking and pinching and tweaking while Travis takes out the butt plug and shoves his dick inside my ass, lube pouring down my crack like hot chocolate on a Banana Split Sundae.

He fucks me hard for a few minutes, Asher’s dick filling my mouth and throat a lot easier than Sawyer since I’m coated in his brother’s cum. They’re delicious, all of them. I imagine doing this for the rest of my life and the thought only gives me more incentive to please them. And myself, of course.

Travis pulls out and Cole sits down on the ledge where he takes me by the hips and pulls me back so I’m sitting on his lap. The movement has Asher popping out of my mouth and we both curse at the loss.

“Turn around, Beautiful.” I do, only to find Cole’s mouth on me, demanding entrance and lavishing me with passion. We kiss for minutes, or hours, or maybe an eternity before I realize the guys have stepped out of the tub. When I look back out, Asher is holding a gigantic fluffy towel for me to step into.

With Cole's help, I'm able to get out without falling on my face—my knees aren't exactly holding me up—allowing my men to coddle and spoil me.

Picking me up with one arm under my shoulder and another under my knees, I wrap my arms around his neck and nuzzle his throat.

Asher brings me to the floor to ceiling windows and gently places me on the floor where they've set up a cozy nook with all the pillows and comforters from the beds. Rose petals are everywhere and the scent is intoxicating.

Lying down, Sawyer flips me onto him—reverse cowgirl style—turns my head to the side, and kisses me wildly as the guys all settle around us. It's quick and it's heady, reminding me that I'm the center of this show.

Their dicks are all standing proud, looking like they need more than just a little attention. Reaching out, I wrap my fingers around Asher's cock, only to be slapped away by Travis.

His expression is hard with an undercurrent of dare to it. Like he wants me to try again.

So I do. This time with Cole.

He slaps it away again, then shoves his cock in my mouth, fucking it once, twice before he pulls out.

“Good girls are patient.” Pinching my chin, he forces my mouth open and spits inside, pushing my mouth close and daring me to disobey. “Swallow what I give you.” Defiantly, I stare at him as I do what I'm told then open my mouth again, my tongue out and begging.

“Such a pretty little whore, we have.”

Sawyer lifts my hips and impales me from beneath me, fucking me slowly, getting me all worked up all over again before he stops and pulls me off of him.

That's when Cole joins the party with the bottle of lube.

They coat me with it, careful to dole out a generous amount for my ass before turning me to face Sawyer, who

pushes back inside me with a deep, guttural groan.

We all moan in unison as Cole pushes his cock inside my ass, slowly at first, until I relax and let him in all the way. I've never felt so fucking full in my life and the fact that they're not moving yet just makes the whole experience more intense.

"Fucking Christ, she's tight, man. Goddamn, I won't last long." Cole speaks through clenched teeth, and for some reason, that makes me feel incredibly powerful.

Suddenly, Travis wraps my hair around his fist and turns me to face him, his dick just inches from my lips. On instinct, I lick them as I stare up at his beautiful face.

"Tell me, Briar. How badly do you want my cock? Do you want me to come down your throat or all over your face?" I don't dare answer, it doesn't matter where he comes, as long as he does. Plus, I'm convinced that no matter the answer, he'll do exactly the opposite.

With Sawyer beneath me, Cole behind me, and Asher and Travis at my sides, I'm surrounded by the epitome of masculinity. Hard and soft, caring and reckless, but always, always, careful with me, even at their most degrading.

Asher walks away, turning off all the lights and leaving only burning candles to illuminate parts of our bodies. The Manhattan skyline is our backdrop as Sawyer finally starts moving me, fucking me slowly from under me. In tandem, Cole slides in and out of my ass so that I'm never empty, always full of cock.

As soon as Asher returns, Travis turns my head to him and instructs me to suck his best friend's dick. I don't hesitate, my mouth open and willing to be fucked again. Asher thrusts in and out, slowly, until Travis wraps his hand around the front of my neck and tightens his hold, no doubt feeling Asher's cock pump into my throat.

Every one of my holes is filled again, alternating between Travis and Asher in my mouth or in my hand.

Being with four men takes planning, choreography, that I didn't realize when I decided I wanted my life with them. But

they—mostly Travis, I’m guessing—plan this out, making sure I’m comfortable and feeling special.

I am, and I do.

Slurping and sucking and slapping noises echo all around with the constant light of the City keeping us company. I’m panting, moaning with every thrust and every push inside me. I don’t know if I can take it much more. It’s like Sawyer knows it, gliding his hand from my hip to my clit and rubbing barely-there circles until my resolve completely dies.

“May I come?” I don’t know why I ask permission, but as soon as I can pull my head back, I do. I think Travis is surprised by my submissive attitude, which is probably the only reason he’s giving me what I want when I ask.

“Do it.”

And holy fuck, do I ever.

I’m pretty sure my reaction triggers all the others. Sawyer comes deep inside my pussy, his face contorted with ecstasy, his gaze fixed only on me.

Behind me, Cole freezes, his cock buried deep in my ass as he jerks once, twice, then relaxes.

Both Travis and Asher come together, on my face, my chin, and my chest. Taking both of their cocks in my hand, I suck on them one, then the other, cleaning up their messes until I’m sated with their cum.

Travis rubs their orgasms across my tits, around my nipples, then brings their remnants to my mouth and pushes his fingers inside until I suck them dry too.

Boneless and sated, we fall into a heap of naked bodies over the makeshift campsite, and I’m pretty sure I’m the first to fall asleep.



# CHAPTER TWENTY

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After an intense trip, and one of the best of my life, I'm snuggled in the back of Travis' car between the twins on the drive home.

"Don't forget we have the fundraiser for my dad next weekend," Cole chimes in, eliciting a groan from me.

"Do we really have to go?" I whine, and the twins chuckle beside me.

"Unless you want to deal with my dad, then yes," Travis says, glancing at me in the rearview almost apologetically.

"Fine," I mutter, curling back into Sawyer, trying to cling to the joy from this weekend rather than let the dread for next week settle in.

The drive passes in a comfortable quiet until Cole's phone starts to ring, breaking through the calm silence. He glances at Travis before answering and I tense up, already knowing something isn't right.

"What happened?" is the first thing he says as he answers the call, but before he can speak again, all of our phones start pinging.

I grab mine from my pocket, eyes going wide when I read the news alert.

*'Another body found linked to ongoing serial in New York.'*

I gulp as I start reading the article. A girl who was at the gig last night was found in the early hours of the morning, strangled and raped.

How is this still happening? How have the police not found who is behind all of this?

“Sure, okay,” Cole says, his voice pulling me back to the car. He hangs up and turns to face me. “You read the article?”

I nod, my mouth too dry to say anything further.

“They found Crawford’s DNA on this body too, so the search for him has been ramped up to a priority.”

“Shit!” Travis hisses from the driver’s seat, while my heart rate increases to dangerous levels.

We’re going to get caught.

“Did Bentley find anything in those emails?” Asher asks beside me.

“Not yet, he hasn’t said anything,” Travis responds, gripping the wheel so tight that his knuckles are turning white.

“This is all my fault,” I whisper as I curl up into a tight ball. “I should have just gone to the police.”

Cole scratches the back of his neck. “Not a good idea. Plus, there’s more. This body came with a note.”

“A note?” Travis asks, and Sawyer takes my hand, holding it tightly.

“Yeah. It mentioned Briar. Wes suggested we maybe get some protection for her. Since they have the DNA evidence, they think Crawford is coming for her. Only, we know different, so we need to either speak to the police about what really happened, or we need help to look into this properly.”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Travis shouts, hitting the top of the steering wheel.

“It’s going to be okay, Beautiful,” Asher says, trying to reassure me, but his words fall flat.

They keep talking throughout the drive home, but I retreat into my own little bubble of panic and terror, trying to make sense of it all, and work out how the fuck I keep them safe and clear of what I did.

They can't be punished for it.

Maybe I should just go to the police myself, turn myself in. Tell them I moved the body because I was scared.

If I end up going to prison... well, I deserve to. I killed someone. They don't deserve to be punished for my actions.

Before I know it, we're pulling up at the house, and I can hear the dogs barking before I'm even out of the car.

"Wait here," Travis says sharply before climbing from the car. He runs toward the house, and I realize why he said what he did.

There is a large white envelope hanging from a knife that has been pushed into the front door. Travis pulls down the sleeve of his hoodie and yanks the knife from the door before putting it on the bench on the porch.

He leans down and grabs the envelope, pulling the paper from it. His brow furrows as a deep frown appears on his face. His fist tightens, the paper crumpling a little before he yells.

He turns his back on us and pulls his phone from his pocket.

"I'm going to just..." Cole trails off and climbs from the car.

Travis hands him the envelope when he reaches him and strides off around the porch with his phone to his ear. Cole glances at the paper, then turns to look back up at me.

He motions for us, so the twins finally let me out of the car and an icy drop of dread runs down my spine as we approach the house. Cole hands me the envelope, which I take with shaking hands.

I gasp when I see what's inside.

Photos.

Some of me running from Crawford. Others of Travis carrying me to the car. More of the others carrying Crawford's body.

“Fuck!” Asher hisses beside me while Sawyer just pulls me in to his side and tucks me under his arm.

“It’s going to be okay,” he says, trying to reassure me, but his words fall flat.

I’m not sure how any of this is going to be okay.

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After a stressful week of Travis hauling Bentley in to put up all kinds of security at the house and get an update on the emails, letting him deal with the photos, I am so far from ready for this fucking fundraiser ball tonight.

And yet, here I find myself, in the back of yet another limo. Except this time, there is no joy or excitement around. Not one of us wants to be here.

Even the most beautiful gown I’ve ever seen—a midnight-blue full-length dress, so dark it’s almost black, that shimmers in such a way that it looks like I’m wrapped in the night’s sky—that currently adorns my body isn’t enough to elicit a smile from me.

I move to fuss with my hair yet again. I’m not used to it being pinned back from my face like this, and my nervous go-to is tucking it behind my ears, dammit.

“Stop messing with it,” Travis murmurs in my ear, squeezing my thigh. “Are you ready for tonight?”

They’ve spent most of the week trying to prep me for tonight. I’ve had pictures and flash cards of who’s who, tests to make sure I know who the fuck these people are, because if I embarrass Chase in front of the wrong people... well, there will be hell to pay.

“I think so,” I tell him, chewing on my bottom lip. Honestly, I have no idea if I’m ready, but we’re kind of out of time.

The limo pulls up in front of the fancy building, but my mind is too occupied to really take it all in. I let Travis lead me

in, Cole on my other side, and the twins behind us.

Someone hands me a glass of champagne once we're inside and I gulp it down, trying to calm my nerves.

"Father," Cole says, snapping me from my addled mind, and I find myself face to face with Senator Beckett.

"So glad you could all make it. Briar, you look exquisite. Perfect for my plans for you tonight."

"I'm sorry?" I say, confused, thinking I must have missed something in the conversation.

"Plans?" Cole asks, his shoulders tightening.

Senator Beckett just smiles at him before taking another sip of his drink. "Well, you wouldn't marry her. There's no point in having breeding stock if you don't breed it."

I suck in a breath at his callous words while Travis grips my arm so tight I think it might bruise.

"If you'll excuse us," is all he says before dragging me away from the Becketts while Cole continues to talk with his dad.

"I'm going to look for my dad, find out what the fuck is going on," Travis hisses. I glance at the twins, who both have a mask of cool calm in place, but I can tell by how tight their shoulders are that they're about as pleased as Travis.

I'm still too confused about what the fuck is going on to be too angry. My mind is so not in the right place right now to be handling this breeding bullshit.

Do these people ever freaking quit?

I spot Chase across the room, speaking to a man and woman, and I let out a small laugh when I recognize the woman.

"What?" Travis asks, pulling me to a stop.

"Your dad," I say quietly. "He's with the woman we saved a few weeks back. Down the alley."

I point in the direction of Chase, and Travis nods, dragging me in that direction.

“Dad, we need to talk,” Travis says as we reach him before glancing at the pair in apology. Chase seems to get his feathers ruffled because his face turns a mottled red and he clenches his jaw as he stares at Travis.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” Sawyer asks as he joins us, and I smirk, just as Cole finally finds us but turns his attention to the man with Chase, a deep frown on his face.

It takes me a second, but I realize who the man with Chase is.

*Marco Mancini.*

The kingpin of the underworld in the City and definitely not a guy to fuck with.

Why the hell is he here? And why the hell is he talking to Chase?

“Not now, Travis. Find me later.” Chase raises his voice, dismissing Travis before pulling himself back together, nodding his head politely at Marco before he turns to walk away.

“Hey, aren’t you the girl with the phone?” I ask the pretty brunette attached to one of the most terrifying men in the country. I might not know most of the who’s who here tonight among the elites, but this guy... everyone where I’m from knows who he is.

She relaxes at my question and smiles at me.

“I am. Thank you for all your help. My name’s River, by the way. Much better than ‘girl with the phone’ I think. You’re Briar, right?”

“I am. This is Travis,” I say, motioning to the tall dark storm cloud attached to me. “Sawyer St. Vincent and Cole Beckett. And who is this?”

I glance over at Marco. He’s super fucking hot, but honestly, the guys terrifies me. I’ve heard enough stories to have a large, healthy fear of him and any of his associates.

“The growly man with a tight grip on my waist is Marco.” I smirk at her, because I know the growly thing all too well, as Travis pulls me into his side.

“Marco Mancini. Her husband.” I nearly choke on the announcement, because well, shit. I didn’t know he was married, and I sure as shit didn’t know she was his wife when we saved her.

Travis raises an eyebrow and steps forward to shake his hand. “Travis Kensington.”

“These are the guys I told you about, they found my keys and phone.” River tells Marco, as if she’s trying to stop any sort of male ego showdown, and I don’t blame her. The testosterone here is *strong*.

“Chase’s son?” Marco’s eyes narrow in on Travis, questioning.

“Not that I like to admit it, but yeah.”

“Can’t say you got dealt the honorable dad card.”

Travis smiles. “You can say that again.”

Marco turns to Sawyer, a small smile on his face. “I know your mother too, I believe. St. Vincent you said?” Sawyer nods in agreement as Marco turns to Cole. “And I assume you’re the senator’s son?”

My giant golden god nods once, not even a hint of a smile on his chiseled face, and Marco visibly relaxes before turning to me. “Thank you for what you did for my wife. If you ever need a favor, here’s my card.”

I take the card, too stunned to say much, when Asher sidles up behind me, slides a hand around my stomach, and whispers in my ear, “We might have another problem.”

I keep the smile on my face, despite his words, keeping my focus on the couple in front of us. “Thank you, Mr. Mancini. We may take you up on that offer sooner rather than later.”

Travis grips my waist a little tighter and leans down to whisper, “He’s already married and he’s not someone to fuck around with.”



I roll my eyes so hard I'm sure I see my brain. "Sorry, River, we've got to go. Give me a call whenever though. Sometimes we girls just need a chat that doesn't involve all the peen."

We turn and leave the couple, filtering through the crowd to find a quiet place to talk.

We find a small alcove on the ground floor, which we all tuck into.

"What's wrong?" Sawyer asks his twin.

"Well, the police commissioner is here and was talking to my dad about Briar, so there's that," Asher says with an apologetic smile.

"Plus, my father has Briar being pimped out to every eligible billionaire in here tonight," Cole says with a clenched jaw. "Apparently, he and Chase decided this was the next plan of action when I wouldn't marry her."

"I'm going to find my father," Travis announces and disappears before we can say any more.

"Now what?" I ask, deflating a little.

Sawyer puts his arm around my waist and pulls me into his side. "Now, you stick to us like glue until we figure this out."

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After being wrenched away from the twins by Chase, I've been passed from one rich guy to the next, being walked around like cattle at market for them all to observe and make comments on while they decide how much they'd like to own me for.

I get a small reprieve by excusing myself and going to the bathroom. Spending more time than necessary locked in the little room, I wonder just how easy it would be to run away.

So I take a deep breath, tell myself running away is entirely an option, and wrench open the door to the tiny bathroom, coming face-to-face with Travis.

Without a word, he grips my arm and drags me around the edges of the room to the staircase, up to the mezzanine. I try to keep up with him in these shoes, but it's like running on fucking stilts.

"I cannot stand and watch one more entitled rich guy paw all over you with their sweaty ham hocks. I am *this* close to going savage and fucking you in front of the entire goddamn room to claim you, Briar." Travis' words are harsh and bitter as he pushes me into an alcove off the mezzanine.

"It's not like I'm enjoying it either," I hiss as he puts a hand around my throat, squeezing as he pushes me up against the wall.

I grip his wrist, digging in my nails, because I'm about as pissed off with tonight as he is. "What are you doing, Travis?"

"I am taking what is mine." His voice is so quiet and low, it's almost indecipherable, but the flash of fire in his eyes as he squeezes my throat tighter makes my thighs clench together. "Now, be a good girl and stay fucking quiet."

His lips press against mine, stealing the last of my breath as he bruises my lips with his kiss. He releases my throat and spins me, pushing me against the wall and unzipping my dress. Cold air hits my skin, making me suck in a breath as my dress floats to the ground, leaving me in nothing but panties and my heels.

"All fucking mine," he growls in my ear as a hand delves into my panties, and I have to swallow a groan as his fingers find me wet and wanting.

Behind me, I hear the sound of a zipper right before the smooth head of his cock trails up and down the back of my lace panties.

"I want to come over every inch of skin they touched." His breath in my ear would be romantic if his words weren't so fucking primal.

"I wish you could."

"Oh, I can. I'm just not going to. Not right now." Biting my earlobe, he pushes my panties aside and in one quick move

he spears me from behind, eliciting a gasp that quickly turns into a long-winded moan.

“That’s it, baby. My fucking cock in your fucking cunt. That’s how it should be.” He turns my head to the side, claiming my mouth once more, fucking it like he *should* be fucking my pussy. Buried deep inside me, he remains still, teasing me with what’s to come. “Beg.”

“Travis,” I hiss out the last letter of his name as his teeth sink into my bottom lip.

“Beg, Briar. I won’t ask again.”

His bite is deep enough to break the skin, my tongue flicking at the tiny wound and tasting the coppery proof of his savagery.

“Please, Travis. Please, fuck me.”

“Better.”

Sliding out slowly, he snakes a hand around my throat and pulls me into his chest right before he digs the pads of his fingers against my pressure points and plunges back inside me. It’s quick and it’s violent, my core suddenly full to the hilt.

“Fuck me, Briar, you’re so tight. So hot. Squeeze my cock, my little nightmare. Show me how much you want to be fucked by me, right now.”

I don’t hesitate, my walls squeezing his dick like my biggest fear is that he’ll take away this feeling of belonging. I reach back, my hand at his nape, my nails marking him so I can claim him as much as he is claiming me.

“Harder, Travis. Please, harder.” The words are little more than a whimper as he takes me.

“That’s a good girl. Begging like the pretty little slut you are.”

His hips piston into me, his pants resonating within this secluded space he’s found. There are people milling about in other hallways, farther away, but the chances of someone walking in on us are high. Somehow, that knowledge makes me wetter and wetter and of fucking course, he notices.

“What are you thinking about, Briar?” He doesn’t stop driving in and out of me, but he slows as if waiting for my answer.

“More, please, Travis. I need you to be rougher.”

“Fuck.” His fingers tighten around my throat to the point I may actually pass out. The air traveling in my lungs is thinner, my vision is coming in blurry, my eyes watering with every pump of his hips hitting that magical spot over and over again.

“My dirty little whore likes to be fucked, doesn’t she? You like the idea of any one of these bastards walking up and seeing your pussy getting rammed. By me. By fucking me, Briar.”

I can’t speak, there isn’t enough oxygen to allow it, but I groan and I love every fucking minute of his talented cock.

Closing my eyes, I let my mouth drop to tell him I can’t breathe, but his free hand slides over to my clit and rubs quick, urgent circles until my stomach contracts and my legs go a little weak.

He’s not relenting, but he *is* giving me memories I’ll probably use for my spank bank at a later date.

One of my hands slaps the wall in front of me and somewhere in my haze of pre-orgasm, I hear someone ask what that noise was. At this point, Travis is right. I don’t fucking care if we do get caught. Hell, maybe I want these other assholes to see that I already belong to someone. Maybe then they’ll keep their dirty hands off of me.

“Do you want to come?” His words are a question, but I know damn well he’s not asking me a single fucking thing. He’s toying with me, probably deciding to do the exact opposite. It’s a good thing I can’t physically answer anyway.

“Of course you do, you little slut.” Turning my head just enough that he releases some of the pressure, I take in a deep gulp of air and when it’s time for me to exhale, I’m assaulted by his delicious mouth, his tongue searching and taking. His groans mixing with my gasps. It’s so fucking hot that I’m having a hard time thinking straight.

“We better hurry, I don’t want any of those fuckers seeing what belongs to me.” With a flick of his finger and pinch between index and thumb, he hits the perfect spot with his cock and my entire body soars with the overload of sensations.

“That’s it, give it to me. Cover my cock with your cum, Briar. I want to smell like you while I walk around this fucking disgusting party.” And I do. We do. We come so hard and so much that I’m sure I’ll be wearing our juices down my thighs for the rest of the night, but I don’t give a fuck.

We both needed this.

We both needed to remember that none of this matters.

When he stills inside of me, his arms wrap around me as I lean against the wall, using him and it to keep me upright. “You don’t get to clean up, Briar. I want you to feel me on you all night.”

I nod because, at this point, I’d agree to almost anything.

He softly kisses my neck. “That’s my good girl.”

He pulls back from me and I hear the sound of his zipper before he crouches down and pulls up the pooled material of my dress, helping me zip it up while I catch my breath.

He turns me around and kisses me once more before leading me to the bathroom. “Just sort your hair and face, Briar. No clean up.”

“I won’t,” I tell him, my heart still pitter-pattering in my chest. I reach up on tiptoe and kiss his cheek chastely.

I turn to enter the bathroom when he grabs my arm and pulls me back into him. “You’re mine, Briar, and you need to remember it, even with their hands on you.”

I nod, not willing to interject that I’m not just his. This doesn’t feel like the time.

“Game face back on, we have a game of chess to finish,” he mutters.

I smile grimly. “Oh, we do, and I’m fully aware I’m the pawn.”

“Oh no, my beautiful little nightmare,” he says with a grin. “You’re the queen, and we’re all playing for keeps.”

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After spending the rest of the night terrified that I smell like sex, I’m glad when the guys round me up and announce it’s time to leave.

This entire night has been, for lack of a better word, fucking gross. I’ve had way too many hands feeling me up, and I just want to go home and shower.

Especially since the evidence of Travis and me is still sticky on my thighs.

“At last,” I sigh as Asher hands me my shawl and I give him my bag as I wrap it around my shoulders.

“Let’s go,” Travis says, stalking ahead with Cole while they bitch and moan about their dads, trying to work out how to stop me being sold to the highest bidder. We reach the exit and I suck in a deep breath of fresh air, trying to release some of the tension built up inside of me.

Apparently, Pops’ threats fell on deaf ears.

Maybe going to prison wouldn’t be so bad.

I let out a small giggle and Sawyer turns to me with a smile. “What are you giggling about?”

Grinning, I tell him and he snorts out a laugh. “That shouldn’t be funny.”

“Especially when orange isn’t my color,” I tease with my tongue poking out.

“Erm, guys,” Asher says, drawing my attention to him. That’s when I see the flashing lights and the officers striding toward us.

“Maybe you tempted fate,” Sawyer jokes beside me, but I stiffen regardless.

“Briar Moore?” the officer in front asks when they reach us. I look up to find Travis and Cole striding back toward us, and my hands shake at my sides.

“That’s me,” I tell the officer who nods to the two in uniform. They circle us and one of them grabs my arms.

“Briar Moore, you are under arrest for suspicion of the murder of Noah Crawford. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

My brain stutters at his words, “I’m sorry, what?”

He huffs at me, and I realize the guys are all being held back by other officers.

“Don’t say a word, Briar. Dad will come for you,” Asher shouts before I’m being dragged off and put into the back of a police car.

I glance out the window, watching the guys all struggling and fighting with other officers, and all hope evaporates.

The detective climbs into the front of the car and turns to face me with a sneer. My stomach twists at the look on his face and I think I’m going to vomit.

“You rich kids think you can get away with anything. But not this time. Not this time.”

To be continued

in

[A Taste of Forever, The Saints of Serenity Falls #3](#)

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Thank you so much for reading A Revenge so Sweet! I hope you loved the craziness that is Briar’s new world! The whole crew return in the FINAL book of the series, [A Taste of Forever](#). Available for pre-order now.

*“Lily Wildhart is about to take you on a ride into the world of dark romance that isn’t like anything I’ve read before. There is angst for days, some series fall loving vibes, and coffee for days. Hold onto your hats, cause this is about to be a wild ride.”*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Well... yep.

I'd say I'm sorry, but you all know better than that by now. Briar's beautifully broken self is on one hell of a journey and I'm so glad I've finally been able to bring her to life for you all. That's before I even get started on the emotional rollercoaster that are the boys. But strap in, theres ONE BOOK LEFT!!

I have a huge thank you Rose for keeping my mind on what was important throughout this book. To Jenna for keeping my ass in the chair, and to KC for being my cheerleader and sprint buddy as always. I love you guys and I'd be lost without you!

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David, you know you're my sparkly unicorn, you don't get to leave this boohoo emo unicorn ever. I will find you, ha!

Becca, you don't get to leave either. You're stuck now. #BarnacleLife

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Finally, thank you to you guys for taking a risk on a new series. It's only my second contemporary series, and I know

that not everyone will pick up a new author, so there aren't words to truly express how thankful I am. But all I have is this, so thank you.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily is a writer, dreamer, fur mom and serial killer, crime documentary addict.

She loves to write dark, reverse harem romance and characters who will shatter your heart. Characters who enjoy stomping on the pieces and then laugh before putting you back together again. And she definitely doesn't enjoy readers tears. Nope. Not even a little.

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