



FROM THE
DARKNESS



THE DARKWOOD ACADEMY SERIES
LYNN RHYS

Blurb

To whoever cares,

It hurts. The pain is blinding. And I'm not talking about the scars on my wrist. It's the wound bleeding from my heart.

The pain, lies, and heartache.

It's all just too much.

I'm more alone than ever. My past has been exposed for the entire school to see, and the one friend I thought I had abandoned me when I needed her most, along with the three guys I opened my heart to. And the moment I did, I was done for.

Daxon, Mason, and Colt brought on this darkness.

Their betrayal and lies led me to the end.

And that's what I wanted. I wanted it to be over.

I wanted the pain gone, I wanted the tears to dry up, and I wanted the world to go black.

Except, I don't get an end.

My stalker is still out there. I'm still bullied by everyone around me. My only living family member ignores me and pretends I don't exist. My life is slowly crumbling around me.

My sanity's hanging on by a thread.

My existence can't get any darker, can it?

Love,

Phoenix

From the Darkness

LYNN RHYS

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For those who are going through hard times or may be struggling. Please don't let your flame burn out.

Rise up and fight like hell.

I no longer feared the darkness once I knew the phoenix in me would rise from the ashes.

WILLIAM C. HANNAN

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Author's Note

THIS BOOK CONTAINS strong subject matter that may not be suitable for all readers, including scenes that may depict, mention, or discuss: abduction, abusive relationship, anxiety, assault, attempted murder, blood, bullying, death, depression, emotional abuse, fire, kidnapping, murder, physical abuse, rape, self-harm, sexual abuse, sexual assault, slut shaming, stalking, starvation, suicide, and violence.



Prologue

COLTON

TWO WEEKS BEFORE HOMECOMING

AFTER DAXON GOT the text this morning from his father, Mason and mine followed shortly after. If our dads are beckoning us at the same time, then nothing good is coming from it. Even last night, my father was very short with me. He gave me the job down at the docks, updating the software, and didn't say anything else.

That's not normally like him. Don't get me wrong, he's an observer like me. But he isn't quiet when it comes to a job.

That has all sorts of red flags popping off.

We all piled into Mason's Range Rover and took off to Daxon's dad's house. We all know that whatever is going down, it's that important that all of us are called to dinner.

The entire ride is silent. Which I honestly don't mind. I like the quiet. It gives me time to think. My mind immediately goes to Phoenix. Fuck, that girl is something else. I honestly just want to get this night over with so I can slide inside that tight pussy of hers.

We pull up to the house and walk up the front doors. We all look at each other and take a deep breath, not knowing what's waiting on the other side.

Stepping over the threshold, we head into the living area, and all three of us stop dead in our tracks. I hear a growl come from Daxon and a "fuck" whispered from Mason's mouth.

Standing there with our parents are Bianca, Tiffany, and Jacklyn, as well as each of their parents. Jake and Lily Bellecourt, Steven and Maria Ives, and Daniel and Jennifer Harris. This isn't good.

The Bellecourt's are real estate investors. They own buildings all around the world and live off that money.

However, they come from a shit ton of it. Their families are old money from the oil and gas industries.

The Ives are big time investors that have their own companies. Steven started his business as a broker-dealer and eventually worked up to being one of the biggest investment companies on the East Coast.

The Harris family owns a management consultant business. They buy up failing businesses for pennies on the dollar and then either liquidate the assets or find a possible turnaround solution and get the business up and running to sell.

“Ah, there they are,” Gregory Emerson announces. “Well, we can finally sit and eat. Let’s make our way into the dining room.”

Before we can even move, the girls come up and grab our arms. We try to wiggle out of their grips, but they have a firm hold on us. Looking up, I see my dad shake his head and thin his lips. So, I guess we have to play nice.

I look over at Dax and Mase, whose eyes are both wide, and I can see them clenching their jaws. I don’t think any of us expected this.

Dinner’s awkward. The men laugh and talk loudly, while the women sit there and fake compliment each other over whatever designer bullshit they have on or whatever charity they’re hosting.

Then there are the queens. The worthless and vile creatures that stare at us like we’re their next meal. It sickens me, and I am sure it sickens my brothers.

Every time Jacklyn touches me, I want to rip off my skin where she did. Burn my flesh, anything to get her off me. Probably a little extreme, but like I said, these bitches are vile and disgusting.

After dinner, the men all split off into Dax’s dad’s office, while the women go about and mingle somewhere else in the house. We make our way into the office and stand right inside by the door.

“Please, boys. Sit.” Mr. Emerson points to the couch along the wall. Three high-back leather chairs sit in front with a coffee table separating the chairs from the couch.

We take our seats, and the girls’ fathers sit across from us. Our dads take their places around us and the couch.

“What are we doing here, Dad?” Dax narrows his eyes at his father.

He shrugs, disinterested. “Well, you are here to fulfill your obligations.”

“What obligations are those?” Dax grits out.

“The merging of our families.”

“Wait, what?” Mason shakes his head.

Mr. Emerson frowns. “Since the day you were born, all three of you, you were already promised to those ladies in there. To marry, produce heirs, and make our businesses stronger than before. You know this is how families grow. So, it should be no surprise to you all.”

“We never agreed to this. It’s not happening. Sorry. No offense to your families. We are not marrying them,” Dax objects.

“That’s cute that you think you can just say no.” Mr. Bellecourt picks up his scotch and takes a sip. He places the glass back down on the table in front of him and sighs. “Boys, these contracts are non-negotiable. If these unions do not take place, then your families will be left in ruins.”

“How’s this even possible?” Mason growls.

“If you don’t marry our daughters, your fathers forfeit over their companies to us. It’s all here in the contracts.” Mr. Ives picks up a folder next to him and throws it down in front of us. “The only way for you to maintain ownership of your companies is to marry our daughters.”

“And what would happen if they didn’t want to marry us?” I ask.

“Well, as you can see, that’s not the case. But I’ll play your game.” Mr. Harris laughs. “Then the same thing would be happening, but to our businesses. We would lose it all to your fathers.”

“Is this a game? Is this a fucking game to you all?” Daxon yells. “These are our lives. Not yours.”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong, Daxon.” Mr. Emerson steps up to his son and looks down at him on the couch. He places a hand on his shoulder and sighs. “We brought you into this world, and we can take you out. Your lives are absolutely ours. These companies that our families built depend on you making a sacrifice as we all have.”

I drop my head in my hands and rub my forehead. This can’t be happening. I thought they would bring us here and tell us that we aren’t making progress getting rid of Phoenix.

Shit, Phoenix.

My head shoots up, and it’s like we all have the same thought at the same time. We turn to each other, and I see Mason’s eyes widen and Dax clenching his jaw. What the fuck are we going to do about her?

“Look, I’ll tell you what.” My dad steps in. “We all know you haven’t had success with getting rid of the Hayes girl. And we all know you three have had a sudden infatuation with her. We get it, she’s cute.” All three of us growl at my father. My fists clench in my lap, ready to beat the living shit out of him. “So, how about this? We leave her be. We won’t worry about her anymore. She can stay at Darkwood and live out the rest of her life in whatever way she pleases.”

“But you have to marry those three girls out there. Look, we even got you rings. One less thing for you to do.” Mr. Turner looks at his son, and Mason looks like he’s ready to rip his father’s skin from his bones.

We look at the table where Mr. Turner has placed three black ring boxes on.

“We don’t mean today. Do something special for them.” Mr. Bellecourt laughs. “All the fancy shit a woman can be

wooded with.”

“But you will remain engaged through the rest of your senior year and college, and then marry after college.” My dad sips his scotch.

“Boys, in reality, this would have come out after your graduation. But unfortunately, your little rendezvous with the scholarship whore has made it to where we need to do this sooner. So, it’s tit-for-tat. We will leave Ms. Hayes alone, but you *will* become engaged to those three girls out there.” Mr. Turner smiles over the rim of his glass of whiskey.

“Come on, let’s give these three some time to think. Not that they have much to think about. It really comes down to life or death.” Mr. Emerson winks at us and then leaves us with a parting blow. “Oh, and if you don’t marry those three out there, then you three aren’t the only ones that will suffer. We’ll make sure Ms. Hayes suffers plenty before we kill her.”

We are so fucked.



Chapter One

DAXON

“SORRY, Spitfire. We got tired. You were too easy. We bet at least November before you put out for all three of us. Didn’t we Mason?” I try to steel my nerves as I stare at her, and I’m watching her fall apart in front of me. It’s fucking killing me.

Fuck, I’m so sorry, Phoenix. Please don’t believe what I’m saying. Read my fucking mind. This is not what we want, it’s just to keep you safe.

Mason nods. “Way too easy.” And I know as he says those words, it’s eating him up inside. I watch him clench his jaw after he says it; he looks like he’s going to puke.

The three of us have been dreading this day. We have spent the last several days combing through the contract trying to find a way out, a loophole, anything. But our fathers have made this agreement ironclad.

We need to marry the girls, or our fathers lose their entire fortune, their companies. They would be left desolate. Every action has a reaction. The only way they keep everything the way it is? Our sacrifice.

And if we don’t, they won’t hesitate to kill us.

Or Phoenix.

We watch her run out of the room, and I can feel my control start to break. Every part of me is trying to keep from smashing the closest thing near me. I want her to run *to* me, not *from* me.

“Let’s go up to the room.” I turn to the guys, and they drop their deadweight fiancées.

“Aw, Daxy, I wanted to dance with you.” Bianca pouts.

“Bianca.” I turn and grip her cheeks with my hand, squeezing hard enough for her to wince. “You got the ring, you’ll get the fucking name, but you’ll never have me.”

Bianca scoffs, “Well, we have to produce an heir at some point, Dax. You won’t have a choice but to accept that you’re mine now. Don’t forget you need to keep up the show. Or I will tell my father you are backing out. We wouldn’t want that now, would we? I mean, all you have to do is fuck me. That’s not so hard, is it?”

I lean in closer to her, squeezing her harder. “I won’t touch you with a fucking ten-foot pole. And if, and it’s a big if, I have to produce an heir, there are medical facilities. I’m not sticking my dick in your putrid, diseased pussy.” I push her back and nod to the guys. “Let’s go.”

Mase and Colt peel the vile skin-walkers from their arms, and we make our way out of the ballroom towards the lobby elevators. We got a room here so that we could get away from everything and everyone. We did our part.

Did we make a spectacle? Take them out to dinner? On a bridge or in a park? Fuck no. We threw the rings at them before we left for the dance.

The elevator dings open, and we step inside. No one says a single word. I know my brothers feel the same way I do, completely and utterly destroyed. We had to watch her turn away, tears in her eyes and her heart completely broken.

We did that.

And it was the last thing we ever wanted to do.

Our silence says it all. We broke her.

The elevator comes to a stop on the 25th floor, the doors slowly open, and we step off, heading towards our room. The lavish surroundings blur from my vision as my mind focuses on the face that will haunt me forever. The sadness and tears in her eyes. Her skin even paler from the words that I could tell sliced right through her.

As I reach for my wallet to pull out my room card, I hear a voice that makes me want to pummel him into the next century.

“Emerson. Heard you got yourself a ball and chain. Does that mean that sweet pussy of Phoenix’s is available now? God, I can’t wait to stick my dick into her mouth and shut her up for once.” Chad Oliver comes strolling up to us, a smug look on his face.

“Oliver, please die a quick death.” I smile cruelly. “Also know that Phoenix will never fuck you. Stop trying; it makes you look desperate.”

“Well, I think after tonight, it really won’t matter. She’ll be on a corner in no time, desperate for a few bucks. Not sure she would care where it came from.” He shrugs.

“What do you mean?” Mason steps closer, his fists curled at his sides.

“After what she just saw with you and the girls, and then when she finds out we know about her little secret ...” He trails off. My fist clench at my sides as my entire body heats up with the need to rip the skin off him. What the fuck is he talking about?

“What little secret?” Colt growls from beside me.

Oliver laughs, “Thanks to Mason here, I found her little box hideaway.”

Mason steps up to him and shoves him into the wall. He seethes, “What the fuck did you do?”

“Nothing. Just revealed the truth. I’m surprised you didn’t know. I mean, your fathers were in on it, Bianca and the girls. How did you not know?” He pulls his brows together. “Oh! That’s right! That’s because you were too busy fucking the whore.”

Mason raises his fist and rams it into his face, and Chad lets out a groan. He brings a hand up and rubs his cheek that is now very red and already starting to swell around his eye.

“What don’t we know?” I come up next to Mason, and Colt closes out on the other side of him, boxing Oliver in. “Tell us, Chad.”

He lets out a hysterical laugh while looking between us all. “Your little trash slut comes from a slut mother. Turns out her dad isn’t her dad.”

“What?” Mason grabs Chad by the throat and throws him back harder into the wall. A painting nearby falls off the wall from the impact. “Tell us what you mean!”

“Just what I said, Turner.” Chad’s voice strains as he tries to talk through Mason’s grip. “Her mom got preggers by another dick. The man she thought was her dad, wasn’t.”

“How do you know she doesn’t know?” I sneer.

“Because there was a letter from her mom. Explained it all.” He tries to pull off Mason’s hand, grimacing from the nails digging into his neck. “Really, thank you for finding that box. It did save us a lot of work. I mean, that shit had everything we needed to fuck with her.”

“How do you even know she doesn’t already know?” I narrow my eyes.

He tries to shrug. “We don’t. But when Bianca blasts it to everyone, I’m sure either her finding out or the embarrassment of having her life flashed for everyone to see will get her to leave.”

“Flash for everyone?” Colt shakes his head. “She’s not—”

“Oh yeah. She made a whole slideshow with pictures. I wanted to add music, but she thought the silence of the whore would sound better.” He laughs.

I look at Colton and Mason, and fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck! “We need to get down there.”

“And what? Save the day?” Chad taunts.

My fist flies into his stomach, knocking the air out of him. He wheezes as Mason lets him go, and he crumples to the floor. I pull my leg back and drive it back into him, causing him to curl into a ball, coughing and groaning.

“You’re dead. I promise you, I’ll fucking end your life. So have fun living the rest of your days wondering when I’m coming for you, when you will take your last breath. I’ll be the one to watch the fucking light die from your eyes.”

I spit on him and all three of us run to the elevator.

Cursing, I frantically push the button. “Fuck! Twenty-five fucking floors! Where’s the fucking stairs? Stay here and wait for the elevator.” I notice the fire exit sign and run frantically down the hall. I burst through the door and fly down the stairs, skipping two or three at a time.

Time seems to slow down. I know I’m moving as fast as I can, but the first floor just seems to stretch farther and farther away.

Phoenix, I’m so sorry.

Bianca crossed a line. My father crossed a line. He promised she wouldn’t be harmed.

He fucking lied. He will fucking pay for hurting her.

When I make it down to the lobby level, I grab hold of the handle and yank it open. I run back down the hall and as I come up on the elevators, Colt and Mase come out of one. All three of us run into the ballroom and frantically start searching for Phoenix.

“Where the fuck is she?” I spot her roommate and run towards her. “Hey! Hey! Where is she?”

“What? Who? Bianca? Over there.” She points to a table off the stage.

I shake my head. “No Phoenix. Where is Phoenix?”

She laughs. She actually laughs. “Well, she ran out of here in tears. Not sure how long ago.”

“Why are you laughing?” I move closer to her, causing her to take a step back.

“I-I j-just think it’s funny that you assholes are looking for her when you d-destroyed her,” she stammers.

“We had nothing to do with whatever just happened.” Mason pushes her away from us as we make our way up to our future blushing cunt brides.

“What did you do?” I roar at Bianca.

“Whatever are you talking about?” She bats her eyelashes and places a hand on her chest, feigning confusion.

“Listen here, you worthless cunt, if you harmed a single hair on her head, I’ll bury you right next to that other cunt, Oliver.” I take a step towards her, and fear flashes in her eyes before she steels her face.

“That’s cute. But really, I didn’t touch her. I didn’t have to. She crumbled like a fucking house of cards. Guess you can say she has daddy issues.” She laughs.

“Where did she go?”

Her face blazes red. “What does it matter? You’re my fiancé. You shouldn’t even be thinking of her!” she screams.

I grab hold of her perfectly styled hair and yank her head back. “Let me make something clear. You may have that ring on your finger now, but that will never make you my wife.” I shove her back, and she scoffs at me.

I pick up my phone and call her cell. It goes straight to voicemail. Fuck.

“Stay here, look this place up and down. See if she’s off hiding somewhere.”

Mason nods. “And where are you going?”

“Darkwood. See if she ran off that way. Try to stop her before she tries to leave. Maybe try to set everything straight.” I take off running out of the ballroom and through the lobby.

When I make it out of the hotel and to the valet, I stop and spin around. Hoping I see her.

“Sir? Can I get you your car?” A man comes over and asks.

“No, I’m looking for someone. Red hair—”

“Oh! Yeah. She came through here. She’s short, wearing a black dress,” he says quickly.

“Where did she go?” I beg.

The man hesitates briefly before stammering out, “I, um, I don’t know. She asked for a cab. I flagged one down. She looked distraught.”

Fuck. Shit. Fuck. “I need a cab,” I tell him, and he immediately flags one down. I jump in. “Darkwood. As fast as you can get me there.”

The driver takes off, peeling out of the hotel and heading back towards Darkwood.

I pick up my phone and text Phoenix.

Me: Sweetheart, please answer. Look, it’s not what you think. I can explain. We just didn’t know how to explain what’s happening. Please, I’m so sorry.

I grip that phone, willing it to show me a response from her, but it never comes. Squeezing the phone, I let out a frustrated sigh.

Me: She left the hotel. Valet said she took a cab. Headed to campus now. Head that way.

Mason: Got it.

When we finally pull up to campus, I throw a wad of money at him and take off running towards the dorms. I have no time to wait for the guys to get here. They will just have to come up when they do.

I run up the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator, and I am out of breath by the time I get to her floor. I skid into the hall, sprinting towards her door. I pound on it and yell for her to open.

“Phoenix! Please. Let me in. I’m so sorry.” I knock harder. Fuck. I look down at the keypad and question whether I should use the access code Colt programmed into this door at the beginning of the year so that we had access to her before we even knew her.

Yeah, we are assholes.

She still isn't coming to the door. I punch in '2-5-8-0' and the door unlocks. I push it open in a panic and run towards her room. That's when I hear the water running.

I turn towards the bathroom, slowly walking in, but stop at the sight before me. My stomach drops, and all the air in my lungs leave.

"No," I choke out. My heart stops. "No, please no."

I rush into the shower and lie her on her back. I reach up and turn off the water that's gone cold. I straddle her. Her face is pale, she's lifeless. Her wrists ...

"What did you do? Sweetheart, what did you do?" I choke through a whisper. "Please wake up." My voice shakes as I try to swallow the emotion down. I caress her wet hair away from her head. As I reach for my phone, I hear the door open.

"Dax?" Mason shouts.

"In the bathroom! Call 9-1-1! Now!" I cry out. I can feel the tears starting to threaten spilling over.

You can't leave me, Phoenix. Please.

Mason and Colton come running into the bathroom, and I hear them gasp.

"Holy shit. Red!"

I see Colton dialing on his phone and walking away, tears in his eyes.

"Don't leave us, Spitfire. Please don't leave me," I beg as Mason comes over with some towels to wrap around her wrists. We delicately tighten them, trying to stop anymore bleeding.

I caress her cheek. Her skin ice-cold, ghostly pale. Mason scoots back against the wall, tears cascading down his cheeks, and he doesn't hide that.

"We fucked up, Dax," Mason sobs. "We fucked this all up." He drops his head into his hands. "Why?"

Colt runs back in, his eyes red. “Help is on the way. I called campus security, too. They should be here sooner.”

I turn back to Phoenix. “Stay with us. Don’t you dare leave us. Do you hear me? You fight this like you fight everything in life. Head fucking on.” I drop my head to her heart, and it’s still beating, but it’s weak. I don’t move from that spot. As long as that keeps beating, she is still fighting.

As long as her heart keeps beating, she’s still with us.

As long as it keeps beating, we can fix what we broke.



Chapter Two

MASON

BEEP. *Beep. Beep.*

That beeping lets me know she's still with us. It's a thread of hope. It's a single light that she's not completely gone. She lost so much blood. Fuck. Seeing her like that, lifeless, pale, it broke something inside me.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

We destroyed her. What we set out to do, we not only did, but we did it to the point that she felt she had to give up breathing and existing. Life wasn't worth living anymore.

We did that.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

But she's still with us. The fighter in her is still there. The flame inside her still burns. And that's what we need. We need that fight. Let her hate us, let her be mad at us, let her kick our asses into next fucking year, as long as she's still breathing. Please just keep breathing.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

She's still so pale. I've been watching her chest rise and fall, so she's still breathing. But her skin is so fucking pale. She just lays there, lifeless. Just as she was in the shower. But the monitors, the breathing, those are the only things that let me know she's still alive.

She's still here.

I refuse to leave her. There is nothing that can tear me away from her. Honestly, I've never cried more in my life than

I have sitting here. Watching over her. Protecting her... Fuck. It's what we were supposed to be doing. Protecting her. But we broke her.

We pushed her to this.

This is our fault.

Forgive me, Red.

I wipe the tears from my eyes as I hear the door to her room opening. Colt slowly walks in, his eyes landing on Red, and I see them start to water again. Colt has never been one to show his emotions. He keeps that shit locked up tight in a box. But for her, for Phoenix, he doesn't have a second thought about letting his emotions out of the box.

All three of us have been a fucking mess. Between living with our actions and the reactions that came from them, we are barely hanging on. We almost lost the best thing in our lives. And she truly is the best thing in our lives. I don't think I've seen my brothers as happy before. And it's because of her. Phoenix is our light, leading us out of the darkness.

Not like we deserve her. We definitely don't deserve her.

We went from trying to push her out, to keeping her close to us, directly to pulling the engagement bullshit.

Fuck, I have whiplash just thinking about it. I run my hand down my face and let out a long sigh.

"How is she?" Colt whispers like he's going to wake her if he talks louder. He brings the palm of his hand up and wipes away the fallen tears.

I shake my head. "Same as she was. Doctor says she lost a good amount of blood; she cut deep. Really fucking deep. She almost nicked a vein. Like a millimeter deeper, we'd be dealing with a whole different situation. One I don't want to even think about."

He cocks an eyebrow up at me. "You finally got them to tell us something?"

"Well, my name comes in handy sometimes." I shrug.

“Where’s Dax?” Colt moves over to the bed. Taking small slow steps, again afraid he could wake her.

“No idea. Though, if I had to venture a guess, beating the shit out of something in a gym somewhere. He’s been pretty fucked up since finding her.” After the medics took her from her dorm room, Dax ran out and into the stairwell and puked everywhere. He lost his mind after. Screaming out ‘why’ and punching the wall. It took both Colt and me to get him to calm down. Finding her like that decimated him.

Colt grunts, “I don’t blame him for feeling that way.”

“I don’t either.” I stand up and walk over towards her. I rub my hand over my chest. My heart hurts. I lean over and kiss her forehead. “You need to come back to us, Red. Just wake up for us. I need to see those amber eyes, baby. I’m so sorry. You need to let me fix this. Please.”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

We both stand there and stare at her. I place my hand over hers and run my thumb over her skin.

I hate the smell of hospitals. Walking in here took every ounce of strength I had because I wanted to turn and bolt. It’s fucking sickening. The smell of antiseptic, the fake artificial scent of the soaps they use, it makes my stomach turn.

But I won’t leave her. I can’t leave her.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I just want her to open her eyes. See me. Let me explain everything.

But her eyes remain closed. Her chest rises and falls. The machines let us know her heart is still beating.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

That’s the sound that reminds us that she’s here because we fucked up.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

If her heart stops, so does mine.



Chapter Three

COLTON

WAKE UP, *Phoenix*.

Her beautiful amber eyes are hidden under her eyelids. I wish I took more time to look at them, stare into them.

Wake up, Phoenix.

She's so still. She looks so fragile. And in reality, isn't that what life is? Fragile. Something that can break, be taken away. And if we didn't get there in time, we might be dealing with a whole different outcome.

I shudder at the thought.

Just thinking about losing her, my stomach drops, and bile rises in my throat. I can't lose her. *We* can't lose her. The last several hours have been an emotional beat down. I bring my hand up and rub the space over my heart.

It hurts. My heart hurts.

Wake up, Phoenix.

My breaths are coming out shallow.

I want to give her all of my breaths. Take them all.

Just forgive me.

We fucked up.

The whole game our fathers have us playing, some fucking bullshit our great-great-who-the-fuck-cares-grandfathers set in motion, from what I gather. Each family has to pick another family of some fucking status that would raise each family up.

They marry, have babies, and it starts all over again. Always searching out new wealth, new power.

And I should've known that they wouldn't leave Phoenix be. I should've known better. Mind tricks, games, it was all right there, and I didn't see it for what it was. Sure, they told us we didn't have to get rid of her, and they would leave her alone, but they didn't say others couldn't try.

And fuck them all.

Wake up, Phoenix.

I close my eyes, and instantly I see her lifeless on that floor. Her dress soaking wet against her body, hair matted to her face. That ball of emotion that crept up, the tears that blurred my vision.

Fuck. Making that call, telling the 9-1-1 operator that she was unconscious in the shower ...

She's lying here because of us. We set this into motion. We should have talked to her, told her. Given her some clue as to our plan. But we blindsided her. Instead, we were fucking idiots about this. We somehow thought we were protecting her by keeping her in the dark.

We broke her.

Wake up, Phoenix.

Let me tell you what happened. Let me explain to you how sorry we are. I want you to yell at me, be mad at me. I want you to show me you're alive. Show me that flame, that passion.

Waiting for help was the longest few minutes of my life. Having to watch Mason and Daxon break down around her, knowing how much they care for her. Fuck. It took everything in me to keep a straight head.

Mason was torn at the sight, and Daxon wanted to burn the place down. I had to watch my brothers completely lose it.

Wake up, Phoenix.

Her skin was so pale. Even in her moodiest version of her, she was full of life. But on that shower floor, she was gone. The Phoenix I knew was gone.

And I don't even know if she would want us here. But Mason won't leave her side. I'm busy trying to keep our fathers off our backs. Dax is doing all he can to keep from becoming a raging inferno, taking his aggression out on whatever he can put his fists through.

Wake up, Phoenix.

I rub the spot over my heart, feeling it beat beneath my chest.

She can have it. She can take my beating heart. I close my eyes and picture hers. Her amber eyes with flecks of gold.

I open my eyes and clear my throat. "I found a note." I look over at Mason as he holds her hand.

His head snaps up to mine. "She left a note?"

I nod. "Yeah." I reach into my back pocket and pull it out. Unfolding it, I take another look at it. "*You win*" is written in giant letters. I hand it to him.

"You win?" Mason says as he looks up at me. "Shit."

I shake my head. "We wanted to get rid of her, the school wanted to get rid of her. She finally broke. So, we win."

"Yeah, but we didn't want her gone. We only agreed to marry those fucking pussy piranhas to keep her safe!" Mason's voice starts to rise up.

I hold out my hands towards him. "You know that, I know that, and Dax does. But she didn't. We didn't do this right. We thought she would give us the finger and move on. We didn't calculate that the queen cunt would have enough brain cells to formulate a thought, let alone an attack."

"What do we do now?" Mason says softly as he caresses her cheek.

I shake my head and sigh. "No idea." And that's the truth. I have no idea what to do from here. Where to go with what we

know or even how to get out of this contract.

All I know is that I need her.

And that I will spend the rest of my life begging for forgiveness.

Wake up, Phoenix.

Let me see those amber eyes.



Chapter Four

DAXON

I'M SORRY. My fist slams into the heavy bag in front of me without any protection wrapped around my hand. I need to feel the pain. I *want* to feel the pain.

Every inch of me is hurting, and it's not from anything I've been doing. It's from her. The pain is my punishment. I deserve every cut, bruise, and broken bone. My penance.

I'm sorry. I can't believe she tried to take her own life. Leave me, leave us. It's all my fault. This is all my fault.

My mind can't get that image of her so still on that shower floor. How ghostly she looked, water beating down on her. Her red hair soaked and plastered against her face. Fuck, she looked so small. So weak.

And that's not my Spitfire. She's not weak. She doesn't cower, she doesn't shy away from anything that's thrown at her.

But she gave up. She shouldn't have given up.

I'm sorry. I throw my fist at the heavy bag and feel the resistance as my tired and sore muscles fight me to stop. But I can't. I need my body to completely fail me, like I failed her.

Did her mom feel this hopeless? Was this why she thought Phoenix would be better off? Did her dad feel like leaving her was the best option? Phoenix really had no one. She had no one in her corner. No one. Well, she had us, until she didn't.

We should've told her what was going on. But I wanted her to be surprised, I wanted her true reaction to the situation so that she was kept safe. The less she knew, the safer she was.

I was so scared that if she knew, it would get back to our fathers, and I don't fucking trust our sperm donors for shit.

But I didn't think she would try to end it.

I'm sorry. Why, Phoenix, why? Was it because she found out about her dad? Fuck. Not her dad, a guy she thought was her dad. I mean, she grew up thinking he was her biological father, only to find out in front of people who have hated her that he wasn't.

I shake my head. This whole school hated her because we told them too. They didn't have to hate her, they didn't have to bully her. They did that on our instruction too. And then they just didn't stop.

This is all my fault.

I grab my bag and don't even bother changing. I need to get back to that hospital and see her. I throw my bag into the back seat and take off towards the hospital. I don't pay attention to speed limits or care about coming to full stops. I just need to get back to her.

The entire ride, my mind's blank, and I force it to be that way. I can't keep seeing her like she was. But the image of her just keeps creeping back in no matter how much I fight it. All it does is hurt me more each time I see her lifeless body on that floor.

When I finally pull up to the hospital, I mindlessly walk to her room, finding Mason and Colton there. I nod to them. We all look like hell. My eyes move to her. The bags of blood being fed into her.

Fuck. I rub the back of my neck and sigh. The urge to punch things is starting to bubble to the surface again. I take a deep breath. Seeing her like that ... it's too much.

I'm sorry. This is all my fault.

"How's she doing?" I ask Mason, knowing he hasn't left her side.

"Don't know except that she lost a lot of blood, and she was close to a vein. Her cuts were deep." He runs a hand down

the side of her face. Colt says nothing as he grabs a seat and pulls out his phone.

I know he's busy trying to figure a way out of this marriage bullshit. He's had people he trusts that aren't connected to his father trying to find us a loophole. So far, it's not looking good. But we won't stop until we can get ourselves out of that shit. No matter the cost.

I look at Phoenix, and my heart breaks. I can feel it tearing apart inside of me, the pain shooting through my chest. She shouldn't look like that. Her skin, still pale, is starting to get some color back. Her lips, those soft lips I love to kiss, are dry and colorless.

She's practically lifeless. Like she was on that shower floor.

I'm sorry. I drop to the floor and bring my knees up to my head. For the first time in several hours, I let myself feel the weight of our reality. We almost lost her.

What if I hadn't gotten there in time? If Chad didn't tell us? Or what if I went after her? I could've stopped this.

It hits me. I had so many chances to stop this. To make this outcome different, and I didn't take it. This is all my fault.

I sob, letting the pain seep out of me.

I'm sorry. I broke you.



Chapter Five

PHOENIX

WHY ARE my eyelids so heavy? I try to force my eyes open, but I don't have the strength. I feel exhausted, and my body's like a dead weight. There's an excessive beeping sound that I need to put out of its misery as soon as I can open my eyes to see where it's coming from.

I hear crying. Who's crying?

Where the fuck am I?

I try to swallow and realize my throat is dry and scratchy. Fuck, my throat hurts. My mouth feels like I swallowed a bag of cotton balls. What is that fucking goddamn smell? Why will my eyes not cooperate with me? I just need to see what is going on.

Someone turn off that fucking beep! For fuck's sake!

I swear, that alarm's getting a fucking baseball bat to it. I'll *Office Space* the shit out of it. Just as soon as I can move. Why does my body feel so heavy?

I try to shift, and I let out a groan. My body hurts so much. It's stiff and feels swollen. Have I not moved at all? How long have I been asleep?

"Red?"

Mason? I try to turn my head towards the sound, but my neck is sore. There's a panic starting to settle in me. Why is Mason here? What's going on? I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. The beeping starts to get faster.

Where am I?

“Red, baby. I need you to relax. You are starting to work yourself up. Just relax.”

Why’s Mason here?

“Hey, CT, we need you to calm down. Just breathe.”

Colton?

What the fuck is going on?

I let out another groan as I feel how weak my body really is. Slowly, I peel open my eyes, finding my vision’s blurry, and my eyes are gritty like they have sand in them. I try and blink a couple times to remove the fuzz from them, and then everything comes into focus.

I’m in a hospital. In a hospital bed. Mason’s on my right, and Colton and Daxon are on my left. They’re all staring at me, and their eyes look sad.

Why am I here?

I look at Daxon and find his eyes are bloodshot red, tears still trickling down his cheeks. He was the crying I heard. His knuckles are bruised and cut up, like he’s been hitting something or someone.

Colton’s eyes meet mine, and his stare is intense. Like he’s waiting for me to say something. I groan as I turn towards Mason.

Mason grabs my hand and pulls it to his lips. My eyes widen when I see the bandage wrapped around my wrist. In an instant, everything slams back at me.

The shower. The glass. The lies.

They are engaged to the Barbie Bimbos. The Queens of Darkwood. They flaunted their new status in front of me. Homecoming.

I take in a deep breath and look down at both my wrists. My father isn’t my biological father. Who the fuck am I? Who were the people I loved and thought of as parents?

They humiliated me. They fooled me. They won.

“Red ...” Mason croaks out. I look at him and think I see a flash of realization in his eyes. He sees that I remember.

“Get out.” My voice comes out in a hoarse whisper. “Get away from me.”

“No, Phoenix, you need to listen to us.” Mason leans closer to me, and I shift back against the bed. I grasp the blanket covering me and start to shake.

The beeping on the machine starts to pick up, and I can feel my anxiety starting to rise. My heart starts to beat faster, and terror rips through me.

This is part of their game. Part of the lies.

I close my eyes as my breaths come out fast.

“You need to calm down, Phoenix.” Colt grips the side of the bed, panic in his eyes.

“Calm down? Get the fuck out! You won. You all won! Get the fuck away from me! Get out!” My voice breaks with each word from the emotion and dryness.

“Excuse me, I’m going to need to ask you three to leave. You are upsetting her.” A petite nurse, who I didn’t notice coming into the room, stands in the doorway.

“No, we are not leaving.” My head snaps back to Mason, who is now gripping the side of the bed. “Do you have any idea who you are talk—”

“Sir, I don’t care if your father is the President of the United States or a famous movie star. What I do care about is *her*. You are upsetting my patient. Get the hell out of this room before I have you physically removed and banned.” She stares down Mason and the other two.

I can see the fight that Colton wants to put up. Daxon looks at me with his brows drawn together. Reluctantly, all three give me one last look and then head towards the door. Mason gazes at me, pleading with his eyes. His hands are now fisted at his sides. But I don’t say a word to them.

They can all go fuck themselves.

When they leave, the nurse comes over to me, grabbing my chart. She glances over the machines and examines my wrapped wrists.

“You okay?” She looks up from her clipboard.

“Thirsty.” My voice is still raspy.

She nods. “All right. I will get you a cup of water to sip on. I’m going to see if the kitchen will bring something up like some broth. It’s still too early for lunch, but let me see what I can do.”

“Not hungry,” I whisper.

“Well, you still need to eat.” She stands there and looks me over before placing a hand on my leg. “I can ban them from the room.”

I nod. “Please.”

“Look, your doctor will be here soon. Dr ...” she trails off as she looks over the paper. “Wilson, Dr. Wilson. He will be by soon to talk to you.”

“I don’t want visitors.”

“Well, honey, he’s not really a visitor. Because of what you did, we have to evaluate you,” she says as she moves her hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

Yeah, I guess there’s that. Fuck.

I lost it. I completely came undone. I felt like I was floating outside my own body. All I could focus on was the pain and the hurt, and I just wanted it all to stop.

My parents lied to me. My mother lied to me. She had so much time to tell me what was going on. My heart has never felt so broken and so used. Their lies have caused nothing but pain.

And then there are the Kings of Darkwood.

Those three made a fool out of me. Made me feel things, feel almost normal. Then I had the rug ripped out from under me. They played me. All three of them come in here like they give a flying fuck. Another sick and twisted game.

I'm lost in my thoughts when a throat clears. I look up to see Dr. Parker standing there. The nurse is gone.

“What are you doing here?”

Dr. Parker doesn't say anything for a moment. His hands are in his pocket as he looks down at the floor. “I'm your emergency contact.”

“What? Why isn't my aunt my contact?”

He shakes his head. “No idea. But I was listed and came as soon as I could.”

I look away from him and bite the inside of my cheek. She doesn't even care enough to be contacted if something happens to me.

“Phoenix.” He grabs a chair from across the room and brings it closer to me. “How are you feeling?” He hands me a cup of water that was sitting on a counter next to me.

“Thanks,” I say as I bring the cold water up to my lips. The relief when it hits my mouth, the crisp feeling as it slides down my throat, I start to gulp it.

“Slow, Phoenix. I know you're thirsty, but let's take it slow.” Dr. Parker gently takes the cup from me and places it on a table next to the bed. “What happened?”

“Doesn't matter, Doc. Doesn't fucking matter.” Just as I go to say something else, a knock comes at the door.

A stocky man in a blue dress shirt and tan dress pants comes walking in.

“Ms. Hayes, I'm Dr. Wilson,” he says as he steps closer to the bed.

I turn towards Dr. Parker, but he just stands up and nods to me. “I will be back later to check in on you, Phoenix.”

Dr. Wilson sits down in the chair vacated by Dr. Parker. “So, how are you feeling, Ms. Hayes?”

I grimace. “Um, is this a real question?”

“Well, I asked it, so yes. Do you understand why you are here?”

“Yeah. I do. I tried to unalive myself. So, to answer your first question, I feel like I want to get out of here.”

“Why did you want to hurt yourself?” He tilts his head to the side and studies me.

I sit silently for a moment and then look at him, “Wow. Right to the tough questions. Well, you want full disclosure?”

“Full disclosure, Ms. Hayes. It will help me understand your train of thought and why you did what you did.”

“Why I did what I did. Yeah.” I mull over his words and let out a sigh. “Well, how about I was so dickmatized by three dicks that I didn’t see them playing me? Or the fucking humiliation that played out at homecoming? Or maybe that I found out my dad isn’t really my dad? I mean, a lot of shit happened, Wilson. You’re gonna have to let me know which part you want to address first.”

“Have you thought about suicide before?” he asks, ignoring my little speech.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Then why did you think that was the answer?”

I blow out a long breath. “My ... my mother killed herself.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“She was hurting. I know she was. I don’t think she smiled once since the death of her husband, the man I thought was my father. And ... and when the kings did what they did, I hurt. I gave up. Just as she did.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment and then asks me, “Do you still want to give up?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Well, once the physician clears you, we are going to move you up a couple floors for observation.”

“What? Why?” My eyes widen and I grip the blanket over me.

“You attempted suicide, Ms. Hayes. We have to hold you for at least seventy-two hours.”

“And then I can go?”

“That depends on whether we think you will be a harm to yourself or not,” he says as he stands up from the chair. “I will see you when you are moved upstairs. I look forward to talking with you more, Ms. Hayes.”

* * *

“So, tell me about how you are doing, Ms. Hayes.” Matthew, the social worker, looks at me from across the other side of the circle that we are sitting in. There are several of us here, in this group therapy. And I feel awkward as fuck talking about how I feel in front of people I don’t know.

Last night, I was moved into the psych ward of the hospital. It’s a couple floors up from where I was. But this area is on complete lockdown.

When I got in, I was immediately moved into my room and greeted by Dr. Wilson, the psychologist, Dr. Mills, a psychiatrist, and Matthew Gardner, the hospital social worker. I apparently will be meeting with all three daily. Yay me.

All three sat and talked with me for a little while and then Dr. Mills informed me she was putting me on an antidepressant. I’d be meeting with all three separately throughout the day as well as a group therapy where I am currently sitting with good ol’ Matty boy.

“Well, day one. So, just getting the feel of the land here, Matty. But so far so good. Thanks for asking.” I lean back in my chair.

And what a day one it has been. This morning was a shit ton of fun. I was ushered out to a common area where we all sat and had breakfast. Then once I finished, I was sent back to my room where nurses then came, took my vitals, and shoved

pills down my throat. Apparently the antidepressants that I was told about.

Then I was whisked away to talk to Matt for an hour, one on one. Which wasn't so bad. He had a bad ass record collection in his office. Him and I talked about some of the music we both enjoy. I almost screamed with joy when I saw his Billy Joel collection.

But I still don't want to be here.

"What are some of the things you are grateful for, Ms. Hayes?" Matt leans forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees in a completely relaxed position.

Things that I am grateful for? Ha. Nothing. But I can already tell that I will never get out of here if I don't play the game. And I want to get the fuck out of here.

"I'm grateful to still be alive." And honestly, that's the truth. "I know I made a mistake; I was just so confused. And I'm grateful they found me." I put my head down for a moment and try to hold back the tears that threaten to fall.

The rest of group therapy goes by smoothly, and I listen to others talk and go back and forth with Matt. By the time group is done, I start to head back to an area where patients seem to lounge.

Before I can get far, Matt calls out to me. I turn and watch him walk up to me.

"Ms. Hayes, I was just informed by the nurses you have a visitor waiting for you in the visitor area. I can take you there if you would like?"

"Um, yeah. Sure." I nod and start to follow him through some doors. We walk into a room that is beyond clinical. There is nothing exciting inside here, just room that has some tables and couches laid out to allow people to meet with their visitors privately. When I walk deeper into the area, I see immediately who is waiting for me.

"Hey, Doc." I say as I slide into the chair across from him.

“Phoenix.” He nods. Matt smiles as he turns and takes off back out of the doors we came from, letting me know to go back through those same doors once we are done. “How are you doing?”

I exhale loudly. “I don’t know. I mean, this is all really strange territory for me. And after everything, I haven’t had much time to think about things.”

“About what things?”

“I’m still hurt by everything they did, Doc.”

“The kings?” he asks, and I nod. “Can you explain?”

“They played me. They were supposed to be my dates. I was meeting them there.” I swallow back a lump in my throat. I can feel my heart squeeze in my chest. “They showed up to homecoming engaged to the Cunts of Darkwood.”

He tilts his head to the side. “They were engaged? And you had no idea.”

“Well, I had agreed to go to Homecoming with all three. So, nope. No clue.” I shake my head.

“How did that make you feel?”

I let out a laugh. “Such a stereotypical question, Doc.” I lift up my wrists. “How do you think I felt? Think I did this because I was fucking happy?”

“Why was that the answer?”

I turn and look out the window. Why *was* it the answer? Why did I need a way out?

“Because it was. No one is who they seem. My entire life is a lie. The man I thought was my father ... My mother hid the truth from me. Everyone has been out to hurt me, and they did just that. They knew more about me than I did. Why would I want to live that life? This life I’ve been given? It’s shit. Who do I have? Who is here that I can trust? Shit, if my mother were still alive, she’d be dead to me.”

“That’s a little harsh to think that, Phoenix.” He crosses his leg over the other and places his hands over his legs.

“She left me. She lied to me. I’ve loved someone that lies. And for what? For me to find out in front of my classmates? For me to be humiliated? She left me in this hellhole. I wanted a way out. I wanted to be done.” Tears start to seep from my eyes.

“And you have no idea who your father really is?”

“Does it look like I do? Would this be a typical response to knowing any of this? Wouldn’t I go to seek him out?” My voice rises.

“But is that really the answer to all this?” He points to my wrists. “Was it the answer to your parents? Did it solve anything or make things more difficult?”

“What else is? It’s not like I have anyone it would hurt. No one cares about me,” I throw back at him.

“Well, are you sure the Kings, as you call them, are over you?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Let me ask you this, Doc. Has my aunt been in to see me?”

He falls silent, and I know that she hasn’t.

“Why are you my emergency contact and not her?” I ask.

Again, he says nothing.

I shake my head and cry. “See? What else is there? I’m not wanted, not loved, not needed.”

He lets out a sigh. “I care about you, Phoenix. Your health and wellbeing. I really do. Taking your life isn’t the answer. It never is, Phoenix.”

“Really?” I scoff.

“Did you think your mother’s suicide was the answer? Or your dad’s death? I believe we had conversations where you just wished she would have talked to you. Told you how she felt. I feel that way now. I wish you would talk to me, tell me what I can do to help you.”

“That’s the thing. My mom had me to miss her when she was gone. I have no one.” I shake my head. I look down at my

wrists. “I mean, I failed my attempt to escape into nothing anyway.”

He shrugs. “That’s because they found you.”

My head snaps to him. “Who found me?”

“Daxon. The other two came a few minutes after. But Daxon found you in the shower.” He narrows his eyes and studies me, no doubt waiting for me to be thankful for what the Kings did.

“Why did they care?” I roll my eyes. “I would have been one less problem to them.”

“I think maybe you don’t have the full story. Let’s think about it, Phoenix. They found you, they ran to you. They came after you for whatever reason. But they came to you.” He points at me. “They ran across town to find you, and when they did, they did everything they could to help you. So, I think maybe you need to talk to them. I think you only have one half of the story. Your version of the events. Sometimes we have to sit and listen to the other side of the story. As humans, we make snap judgments or decisions based on only half the evidence. We need the full picture.”

“Wow. So astute, Doc. It’s like you do this for a living or something.” I run my fingers through my knotted and messy hair, my fingers catching in the matted mess. “It just hurt.”

“What did?” he asks.

“I was drowning out there. The realization that they were engaged to the Barbie Bimbos was one thing, but then when the cunts came after me and exposed things I didn’t even know about my own family, they were nowhere to be found. I didn’t have anyone in my corner. I never do.” I brush the tears away as the memories flood back.

Dr. Parker stands up, and his hands slide into his pockets. “Listen to them. Let them tell you what happened. I think you’ll find you would be missed if you were gone. I know you and I have not known each other long, Phoenix, but you are a very bright young woman with a big future ahead. I know I

would miss your witty sense of humor if anything happened to you.”

With that, he turns and exits the visiting area, leaving me to my thoughts as I make my way back towards everything that I have to deal with for the next couple days.

I feel numb to what I did, but the pain of what the Kings did still stings. I take a look at the bandaging on my wrists.

They don't even hurt. Not like my heart does. My heart aches, it weeps. And I didn't want to feel that anymore. I didn't want to be the freak or the outcast. I didn't want to hurt.

But now I hurt even more.

It wasn't that I was worried that no one would miss me if I was gone, it was that I didn't care if they did.

They broke me.



Chapter Six

PHOENIX

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS into my stay at Hotel de Hospital, and I'm already highly annoyed at this entire predicament that I put myself in.

And yeah, I realize this is completely my stupid fault. But I have to just keep doing what they tell me just to get out of here after tomorrow.

Dr. Mills is wanting me to talk about my feelings and about Darkwood. She asks all these probing questions, 'Have you had these thoughts before? Why did you cut your wrists? What thoughts went through your head?' That shit's getting old and dumb as fuck.

Matthew, my social worker, is more laid back, and I have found it easier to talk to him. He and I have talked about coping mechanisms and things I can do once I leave to deal with stress and if I feel myself ready to go down that dark path again. He mentioned I should look into yoga, and I laughed so hard I almost pissed myself.

My ass is not doing yoga.

But despite the suggestion of yoga, things are better than they were. The group therapy is a nice change, and I don't feel so alone. I just am ready to get back to everything outside these walls.

Dr. Parker came by for a little visit, and we are now sitting at a small table in the corner of the visitor's room. I'm still a little mad at him. I don't know why he's my emergency contact and not my aunt. Plus, this is the man who didn't have

the decency to tell me there was no session last week. So why is he here?

“Phoenix. I had asked you a question.” He seems to be getting a little frustrated with me. I just feel so suffocated in here. I don’t like feeling like I can’t be free. I know I did wrong. I need the fuck out of here. I need to breathe. I need fresh air.

“You know what, Doc, I got a question for you. Where the fuck were you last week?” I snap at him. “You didn’t care about me enough then to show up for my appointment. Why the fuck do you care so much now?”

He purses his lips and looks down at the ground. He’s silent for a few seconds. “I’m sorry. I had a death in my family. I should’ve contacted you; I just was very distracted. I really do apologize.”

Well, fuck. Now I feel like a complete asshole. I rub my hands together on my lap, embarrassed for trying to call him out. I can’t do anything right anymore. I’m always one minute away from screwing up.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s okay, Phoenix. I had asked if you were going to contact the Kings when you left here. I think it would be beneficial to hear them out. That might help you get some closure. I can be there if you want. I can mediate the conversation.” He shrugs.

“Um, no. If I’m going to talk to these douchebags, I’m going to do it with no one around. I don’t want to feel like I have to keep myself at bay.”

“I’d never make you feel like you had to not be yourself, but I can understand, and I respect that.” We sit there silently, and he then asks me yet another stupid ass question. “Are you thinking of hurting yourself again?”

I let a laugh bubble up. “Is this a trick question?”

“It’s a question I need to ask, Phoenix. I need to know if you are going to try and hurt yourself again. I need to know if

you are a risk to yourself.” He leans forward and places his elbow on his legs.

“No. I won’t hurt myself again.” I shake my head. “It was stupid. It doesn’t solve anything. It hurts more than it helps. And actually, Doc, my social worker and I were coming up with an action plan. If ... If I do get any of those feelings again, he said I should have someone I can call. Someone I know I can talk to.”

“Okay, that’s a great plan. Who was it that you were using for that support?”

“I have no idea. I don’t really have anyone.”

“You can always call me, Phoenix.”

My eyes widen. “I can?”

“Yeah. If you need to talk, you can call me. Absolutely.” He gives me a soft smile.

“Thanks, Doc.”

He nods. “Now I want to talk about something that I’ve been putting off talking to you about.”

“That’s it? I say I’m not going to hurt myself, and you are fine with that?”

“I trust that what you’re telling me is the truth. You are working on an action plan with your doctors here. I can trust that you will follow it. What we have is a trusting relationship, Phoenix. You trust me to tell me things, and I trust that what you say is the truth. That’s how this works.” He gestures between the two of us.

“Fine. In this new-found trusting relationship we have, Doc, what is it that you are dying to ask me?” He stares at me for a moment, and then I realize what I said. “Sorry, poor choice of words. What is it that you want to know?”

“How are you feeling about your dad not possibly being your father?”

It’s what I’ve been dreading. It’s been haunting my thoughts. The man I grew up to love, the man I thought was

my father, was a fake. Did he actually love me? Was it just because he loved my mother? Why didn't anyone tell me this? The worse thing is, I don't get my answers. The only person that would know is my mother.

And she took those secrets to the grave with her.

“Well, I'm pretty sure the documents show that he wasn't, so no 'possibly' in the cards. He wasn't my biological father.”

“Did you see those documents? How do you know they're true?” he suggests.

I frown. He's right. I don't know if they were telling the truth or fucking with me. Why is everything always a game?

Finally, I sigh, “You have a good point. I don't know how much was just them fucking with me, or if it was the truth. And now I'm sort of mad at myself.” I stare off at the wall next to us.

“So, you made a rash decision, based on information you couldn't be sure was the truth. You're human. We all make mistakes.”

“Trying to kill myself was a big mistake, Doc. If I had succeeded ...” I trail off.

“We wouldn't be having this conversation right now.” He nods. “I'm glad you see that. Look, we are emotional creatures, us humans. We do things without thinking it through a lot of times. Our emotions always play a huge role in our lives. Think about it. We follow our heart to those we love, we see horror movies because we love the thrill and adrenaline. And we make rash decisions when we are upset. You made a decision when you were emotionally disturbed. You weren't thinking clearly.”

Rubbing my hands along my face, I let out a long sigh. “What if ...” I stop and try to put my thoughts into words. Dr. Parker doesn't say anything; he lets me think through it. “What if my mom reacted to something that she heard or saw?”

“It's a possibility. But it's also possible that she was severely depressed. You said yourself, she was a shell of

herself. Your situation, I think, is vastly different from hers. You felt trapped, and at that point, you felt that was your way out.”

Looking around the visitor’s room we are in, I frown. “And look where that way out got me.”

A little while later, I am back in my room and laying down. I’m exhausted from all this talking. It’s a lot of energy when trying to deal with all the emotions from my mistake.

As I lay there, I hear someone walk into the room. I turn my head and find Dr. Wilson standing there.

“Ms. Hayes. How are you doing?” he asks.

“Um, tired. My stomach has been a little upset. But other than that, I’m doing fine.”

He nods. “The antidepressant may be making you tired and nauseous. That will eventually fade a few weeks from now. So, I wanted to give you this.” He hands me a folder.

I open the folder and look at the paperwork inside. It’s the action plan that Matt and I were working on. I carefully look through and see it was things we talked about doing. He was even so nice as to put “yoga” as something for me to try.

Not going to happen.

My eyes slide over the rest, when it comes to a number. 1-800-273-8255. “The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline?”

“It’s available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. If you need anyone to talk to, and you feel like you don’t have anyone you can call, call that number. You can even text them at the 741741 number. They can support you that way, too.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.”

“I will have this with your discharge paperwork for when we release you.” He takes back the folder and turns and heads out the door.

Hopefully that release will come soon.

* * *

“I had to waste my time to come and get you,” my dear Aunt Julie says beside me in the car. “I had things to do.”

“I am so sorry I interrupted your botox appointment. Though, you may want to look at one of those face lifts or transplants. Go with the transplant. Maybe one with horns.” I turn my head back towards the window and stifle a laugh.

“You are the devil, you know that?” She turns up the radio, drowning out any chances for us to have a nice conversation. You know, now that I think about it, thank god for this shitty ass music.

By the time we pull up to the house, the tension in the car is thick. She is pissed and she is still going on about whatever she seems to be missing that is so much more important than my wellbeing. I, of course, can't hear because we are playing the radio at blast-your-eardrum-out decibels.

She reaches over and turns down the radio. “Get out. Here's a key.” She throws a key at me, but it bounces off me and falls to the floor mat.

“Wow. Thanks. I feel so welcomed. Should I make myself at home?” I say as I bend down and pick up the key.

“Just get out! I have to go!”

I roll my eyes and slam the door shut. I really hope she gets amnesia, forgets that she lives here, and drives out west never to be heard from again.

I look up at the house. Home sweet, Hell.

Once inside, I look around and listen to the emptiness. I really wish this wasn't what the doctors at the hospital consider home. Because it's far from it. The bitch wasn't even on my emergency contacts.

I head into the kitchen to make myself something to eat that isn't shitty hospital food and place my antidepressants on the counter.

I crack open the fridge and pull out a bottle of water. Just as I put the bottle to my lips, the doorbell rings. Whoever the fuck it is can fuck right the fuck off. I take a long pull of the water and feel the rush of cool water down my throat.

Two seconds later, the doorbell rings. Again. I slam my bottle of water down and head over to the front door. I yank it open to find three of the last people I ever expected.

“Hey there, Red,” Mason says with his lips turned up.

“What are you assholes doing here?” I narrow my eyes at the Kings standing before me.

“We came to talk to you.” His voice gets soft and serious. “We really need to talk to you, Phoenix.”

I shake my head. “No. Go away.” I push the door to shut it, but a foot gets thrown against it. Colt pushes the door, and I back up into the house.

“Red,” Mason says as he steps inside with Daxon and Colt behind him.

My heart’s ready to burst at the sight of them, and my tears want to break free.

“Get the fuck out!” I immediately tense up.

“Hey to you too, Spitfire.” Dax’s mouth curls upwards as he slips his hands into his pockets.

“Do I need to say it again?” I narrow my eyes at them.

Mason throws his hands out in front of him. “We just came here to talk and try to clear the air.” He pauses for a moment, and I see a sadness in his eyes. “And we miss you.”

I scoff and take off towards the living room and stand in front of the fireplace. If they try anything, I can take a fire poker to their pretty faces.

“You miss me? Wow. That’s a great line, Turner. It definitely didn’t feel like that on Friday night. In fact, I’m pretty sure you called me easy.” I wrap my arms around myself and try to close myself off. Those words hurt me, and they said it knowing it would.

Dax nods sadly. “Yeah, I know what we said. And we’re sorry. So fucking sorry, Phoenix. We didn’t have a choice in the matter. We did what we had to, what we thought would protect you.” He runs a hand through his black hair. “And we were fucking wrong about all of it.”

“Protect me from what? From finding out that the Cunts of Darkwood had personal items that belonged to me? That they put it on display for everyone to see? Or how they were secretly engaged to you, and I was clueless to it? Oh, and that was flaunted for everyone to see what kind of fool I was.” I choke on my tears. “You didn’t protect me from shit.”

I drop my head into my hands and break down. In under a year, my entire life has been turned upside down and thrown fucking sideways. The moment I thought things were finally on the mend, that things were finally looking up for me, reality slammed back into me. Nothing changed, just me foolishly letting the Kings tear down my walls.

“I just wanted to be left alone. And you three couldn’t do that. You three pursued me, tormented me, and did things to me that had me so twisted up and confused. And when I finally felt comfortable with you, the rug was pulled out from under me. Do you understand the emotional rollercoaster I’m on? One I didn’t sign up to ride?”

Mason and Colton slowly and cautiously make their way over to my side. I take a step back but realize there isn’t much room for me to move around as my heel hits the hearth. Daxon has a look of pain on his face, and rubs his hand over his chest as he looks down at the ground.

“We didn’t have a choice to get engaged to those three. We are trapped in some bullshit contract that our fathers locked us in,” Mason confesses. Our eyes meet, and I can see the pain in them. “The bitches’ fathers and ours had threatened our lives if we didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we thought we would be able to find a loophole and none of it would matter. When we didn’t, we thought a natural reaction from you finding out would play better. We

needed you to be mad at us so they wouldn't think you knew about it. We needed you to go on and be you. Then we would have more time to figure out an end game to all of this." Mason takes my hand in his, but I shrug him off. "The last thing we wanted to do was hurt you, but we were left with no choice. It was our only way to keep you from ..." Mason stops and closes his eyes.

"From what?" I ask, my body trembling.

"They threatened your life," Dax says from the place he has yet to move from. "They said they would kill you. Our fathers are the ones that wanted you removed from school. They agreed to leave you alone if we did this, but if we didn't, they would kill you."

My mouth falls open. "Why? Who the fuck am I? I am no one."

"You're important to us, Phoenix. That was all you needed to be in order to be in the way." Colt runs a hand down his face.

"So, let me get this crazy straight. You were forced into an engagement by your fathers. They threatened you with killing me if you didn't. So, you brainiacs said, 'Hey, let's not tell her what's going on, so we can get a real reaction.' Then I gave you said reaction, and then the three bimbo-teers found my personal stuff and displayed it to the school. Which, on the same night I find out about your engagement, I find out my whole life's been a lie. How do you explain that? Because I still don't have that part of the fucking fairy tale yet."

"We don't know how they got that. Chad was the one who alerted us to what was going on." Dax shakes his head. "We had no idea. As soon as we found out, we beat the shit out of him and ran to find you."

Mason sighs, "We have no clue how they even got into your room and found that."

"Chad ..." The conversation from the parking lot comes slamming back to my memory. "He approached me in the parking lot when I was on my way to Homecoming. He said

things. Things that got me doubting you all. Did he know you were engaged to the diseased ones?"

I hear Dax growl. "What did he say to you?"

"He knew I had slept with all three of you. He told me I was a pawn in your games." I stop and swallow back my tears. "He said that you all had your fun with me and that was all it was. And then of course you said what you said at the dance. What was I supposed to believe?"

"I'm going to kill him," Dax sneers.

My eyes shoot up, and I start to feel my hands shake. The conversation I had with Chad starts to replay in my head, and I remember what he called me.

"What is it, Phoenix? You just paled." Colt steps closer to me.

"Chad. It's w-what he c-called me." I look between all three as the words replay in my head. "Little Birdie," I croak out.

"Little bird—" Mason tilts his head, and then his eyes widen when he realizes why that has me scared. "The letters. The pictures."

"Do you think it's him then?" I ask.

"No idea, but that's a hell of a coincidence." Mason scowls.

"Shit, if he's messing with her, we don't know how far this shit goes. You can't tell me that our fathers didn't know about any of this." Dax starts to pace back and forth.

"How are you guys even here? If you aren't supposed to be near me, why are you here?"

"Our fathers know we got engaged, so for now, they're pacified." Colt shrugs. "We gave them what they want. Doesn't say in the contract we have to be happy about it."

"They also didn't say we had to stay away from you completely. We just had to get engaged. They told us they would leave you alone once we were," Dax adds.

“Well, that’s what you think. You can’t be sure. So, you can still be putting me at risk even being here. Let’s be honest, your fathers are assholes. Underhanded, backstabbing cunts.”

The guys watch me in silence, more than likely mulling over my truth. Their dads seem to always be up to something. There is no guarantee any of this is okay.

“We had to come apologize to you, Red. We were backed into a corner, and we did what we thought was best to protect you. All three of us thought we were making the better choice, but we were wrong.” He places his hand on my shoulder. “Red, seeing you lying there, it destroyed me. Fucking tore me apart. I thought we lost you.” A tear falls down his cheek.

The emotions I have been trying to hold back start to form a lump in my throat. “I’m sorry. I was lost, confused. I was angry.” I shake my head. “I just thought I would be better off gone.”

There’s a loud groan from behind Colt and Mason. Within seconds, Dax is standing beside me and gripping my face with his hands. He forces me to look at him; there’s a burning in his eyes, anger.

“Don’t you ever leave us. We would be destroyed, broken, without you. You’re ours.” In an instant, Dax’s lips crash into mine, and my entire body comes alive. He pulls back and places his forehead on mine. “Please don’t leave me,” he whispers, his face pained.

“You hurt me, Dax. You all did. You said things, things that hurt my heart. They caused me physical pain. I felt like I was being crushed by the truth. Everyone lies to me. Everyone thinks they know better. It was too much to bear.”

He softly kisses my lips. “And I promise to you, *we* promise, that we will fix all this. And I’m so sorry I hurt you. Inside, I was screaming for you to know that I didn’t mean a single word, and I’ll never forgive myself for what happened. But, sweetheart, without you ...”

I shake my head. “I-I just need some time. This all has been an emotional overload to me. The engagement, my dad,

and all of these lies. This is all just ... a lot." I want nothing more than to be swept up into his arms. But I'm still hurting. I'm still reeling from everything they told me. They say they did it to protect me, or whatever, but they still caused me pain.

I caused myself pain, a lot of my own self-inflicted pain. And really, I think I need to work through that, too. Before I can even deal with them, I need to deal with myself.

But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want the Kings.

And that really fucking scares me.



Chapter Seven

PHOENIX

THE SUN FILTERS through the blinds, and I let out a groan, knowing that the beast is going to come barreling in here to get me up and out of bed.

And by beast, I mean my Aunt Julie.

Of course because she is my guardian, the doctors thought it would be best if I recouped a bit at home after my hospital stay. Well, a structure with a roof and a relative. Because this place isn't fucking home. Never.

Dr. Parker also agreed that it would be best to stay at home. He wanted to work with me on some things over the next week, before I go back to school. And as much as he knows I dislike my aunt and she really hates me, he felt I may be more comfortable in better surroundings.

Sometimes, for such a smart guy, he's dumb as rocks.

I mean, he's a doctor. You think he would know I wouldn't find this place comfortable at all. That this is the last place I would want to come to. Yet here the fuck I am.

And it's only fucking Thursday.

And Aunt Julie has been such a gracious host. She lets me know every minute of the day that I am ruining her free time and her life. She makes sure that everything I use is something her husband paid for or worked hard to get.

I hope he bought her a six-foot hole she can crawl into and rot.

Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners? Oh, that's right, I don't have any for this bitch. She hates me for some unknown

reason that she hasn't shared with me. I'm her punching bag in life. I didn't ask to be part of her life and she treats me like I begged to move in with her and turn her life upside down.

Like my own life being turned upside down didn't happen.

"Get your lazy ass up, Phoenix!" My aunt pounds on the door.

I look over at my clock and see it's six in the morning. Good god, she is awful.

"Why? Want me to grace you with my presence? Didn't know you loved me so much, Aunt Julie." I run a hand through my hair and then lean over to pick up the phone. It's at that moment I realize, I don't have one anymore. I have no clue what happened to mine when I lost it back in the dorm room.

Fuck.

I get up and head into the closet to pull out a black hoodie and some jeans. Throwing them on as slow as I can, I head into the attached bathroom and freshen up.

Once I make my way down, I see my aunt sitting at the dining room table, already drinking her morning tea. Her eyes flit up when she hears me enter, but she immediately goes back to reading her newspaper.

Who reads the newspaper these days?

My aunt does. Ol' cranky dinosaur bones.

"Sit and eat. You have another session with Dr. Parker this afternoon. When you're done, you can go into the den and work on your studies. I've taken the liberty of having your homework brought here for you," she says with a smug look on her face.

I roll my eyes and look at the food in front of me. I reach out and grab a bagel and some cream cheese, spreading a heaping amount on it. My aunt lets out a sigh and takes a sip of her tea.

Pretentious bitch.

“Hey, Aunt Julie, can I ask you a question?” I take a huge bite of my bagel, knowing I’ll talk with my mouth full when I ask her.

“What is it?” she says, still staring at her paper.

“Why did you and Mom not talk? What happened? I mean, there has to be a reason I didn’t get to meet you before all this. I mean, you and your winning personality.” I continue chewing obnoxiously.

She lets out a long sigh. “Because sometimes you do something that isn’t forgivable. Your mom was a whore.”

I spit my bagel out, and my eyes go wide. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t hear what I said. She was a whore. I didn’t need to associate myself with the likes of her.”

I let out a laugh. “Oh, aren’t you a peach? I can see why my mom didn’t want to even talk to you. Hey, did you know, they actually have a surgery to remove that stick from your ass?”

“Young lady—”

“Or I can pull it out for you. I mean, I don’t know what your insurance situation is. You would have to deal with copays and deductibles, that’s just a lot of bullshit for a stick.” I take another bite of my bagel.

She shakes her head and goes back to ignoring me. Did she know my dad wasn’t my biological dad?

“Can I ask you another question?” I reach the orange juice and pour myself a glass.

“What now, Phoenix?” She looks at me with annoyance.

“What did you know about my dad, Trevor? Did you know the truth about him?” I take a sip of my juice and see her instantly freeze.

Her mouth drops open, and for the first time in forever since I’ve known her, she doesn’t have anything to say.

“Uh, um, I ... um ...” She looks everywhere but me. Her hand on her teacup starts shaking.

“Did you fucking know he wasn’t my biological father? Are you serious that you knew this?”

She steadies herself and then like a switch she goes into bitch mode. “I said your mother was a whore, didn’t I?”

“So, you knew, my mom knew, and no one thought to tell me that the guy posing as my dad wasn’t really my dad? Did my dad know? Is that why he’s dead?” I push the chair out from under me and stand up. “Why do I not know about any of this? Why is everyone keeping this from me? Do you know who my real dad is?”

“I told you, your mother was a whore. She slept with half the town. Who knows who your father was?!” She stands up and starts to walk out of the room. “Be lucky you had two people who cared for you as long as they did. Because if I had you, I would have left you on a stranger’s fucking doorstep.” She heads out of the room, and my mouth drops in disbelief.

This bitch is fucking nuts!

Apparently, I have to be okay with the fact that I lost both my parents, but oh, thank god I still had them for as long as I did. What bullshit is that? And let’s revisit how she feels about my mother. She thinks my mom was a whore? Well, I mean, Aunt Julie does live in this stuck-up world of rich pricks, but I’m sure Betty Sue across the street is doing her pool boy and her gardener. I’m learning really quickly things aren’t always what they seem.

Who the hell does she think she is to pass judgment on my mom? Her sister! And she knew. Everyone lies to me. They keep secrets from me. How deep do these lies go?

I’m so tired of being left out of things. I don’t even know who I am anymore.

I run upstairs and grab my wallet, shoving it in my hoodie pocket. I need to get out of this house. Away from Cruella.

I run down the stairs and fly out the front door, making sure to slam it on my way out. I pass the giant god-awful fountain, wishing I had a car to ram into it, running towards the street.

Behind me, I hear my aunt yelling my name, but I continue to allow my feet to take me anywhere else. Away from supposed family. Away from all the goddamn lies.

* * *

“Here’s some water.” Dr. Parker hands me a bottle of cold water and sits me down on his office couch. I ran to his office, knowing I had an appointment with him today anyway. When he saw me flustered, he pulled me immediately into his office and sat me down.

“Sorry, I’ll go sit outside, so you can spend time with your other patients.” I start to stand, but he holds up a hand.

“Sit. I had no one until you this afternoon. It’s my morning office day. Just sit here and tell me why you look like you ran a marathon.” He leans over in his chair, his arms resting on his legs.

“Is this a session? Is my aunt getting billed for this? Because if it’s not, please do.” I take another long pull of cold water and feel it cooling my scratchy throat.

“No, this is all off the record. What happened? It’s with your aunt, I take it?”

“She knew.” I place the water on the table and then fold my hands into each other.

“She knew what?”

“That my dad wasn’t my dad.”

He’s silent for a moment, his brows creasing in confusion. “So, it’s true. How did she know?”

I shrug. “No clue, Doc. But she went into how my mother was a whore. That I probably would never know who my father was because my mother slept around. Which, apparently, is why they stopped talking.”

“Because your mother—”

“Was a whore. Yeah.” I nod.

“I was going to say, ‘was promiscuous’, but okay.” He takes a deep breath. “Did she just come out and tell you?”

I shake my head. “No. I asked her why her and my mom stopped talking. Then I asked if she knew about my dad. Both answers, by the way, were because my mother was a whore.”

Dr. Parker pinches the bridge of his nose in frustration. “I shouldn’t have agreed that you heal there. I’m sorry, Phoenix. I had no idea.”

I let out a maniacal laugh. “Hate to break it to you, Doc, but you haven’t been listening to me, then. She’s been a cunt to me since the day I set foot on her driveway.”

“No, I promise you I’ve been listening, I just didn’t know the hatred ran that deep. I thought I was leaving you in good hands, or at least someone that had some best interest for you.”

“Um, hello? She doesn’t call me. You know, I have to ask this again. Are you sure you’re certified to deal with this shit? Because your listening skills need some work.”

Dr. Parker stands, and his head tips back as he stares at the ceiling. He slowly makes his way over to the couch and sits next to me.

“I owe you a huge apology. I’ve ... been dealing with a lot in my personal life. My mother was the one who passed away. She had cancer. So, we knew it was coming, but the past few months, watching her decline, has been hard on me and my family. I’ve been so distracted with that, I really wasn’t listening to you like I should’ve been.” He places a hand on my leg, and his mouth turns down. “I’m sorry, Phoenix. I swear I’ll do a better job listening, so I don’t put you in any more bad situations.”

Well, now I feel like shit. “I ... I’m sorry.”

He stares at me for a moment. “Thank you.” He pats my leg. “But I promise from here on out to do a better job of listening. I feel bad that you have no one, Phoenix. But just remember that you have me to talk to.”

I nod and frown. “And now you know why I ran here, Doc. Not like I have a phone, or anyone to call.”

He jumps up off the couch and walks to his desk. “That reminds me. I ran into the Kings. They gave me this to give to you.” He walks back towards me and holds out his hand. In it is a brand-new phone.

I balk at him. “What? No. I can’t take that.”

“Well, it’s not from me. I’m just the messenger.” He pushes it towards me. “They said that yours was in pieces, and they knew your aunt wasn’t going to get you a new one.”

“But they shouldn’t have done that.” I reach out and grab the phone. It’s a fucking new ass iPhone. Not a small one either; it’s the giant, almost tablet size iPhone. “Why did they do this?”

“It’s obvious they care about you.” He stands there with his hands in his pockets.

“Yeah, they do. But I have no idea why.” I shake my head. “I’m no one. I don’t come from money, I don’t have a status, I’m just trying to make it through my senior year, and I’m failing miserably at even that bare minimum. I’m obviously a problem or they wouldn’t have wanted me gone at first. This doesn’t make sense.”

“My guess is, they care about you because you are you. You know,”—he sits back down next to me—“from the moment I met you, Phoenix, you have been one hundred percent real and yourself. My guess is that they appreciate that. As a doctor, I appreciate it. I have a lot of patients who come in here, tell me what they think I want to hear. But you have always been honest about who you are, how you feel. It’s refreshing. You even write in your journal. Do you know how hard it is to get patients to write? You are unapologetically you.”

I sit there and mull over his words. It’s true, they know I already don’t come from money, and yet they seem to not care. They watched over me in that hospital and made sure I was okay. They came after me and found me, and from what they told me, that tore them apart.

“You ready to start your appointment?” Dr. Parker moves to his shrink chair and crosses his leg over his knee.

I look up at the clock and see that it’s only ten. “But my appointment is at one.”

“I know. But might as well get it over with, so you can enjoy the rest of your day.”

I lean back into the couch and nod. I guess we might as well get it over with.

As we talk about going back to school, I realize I’m actually relieved to be going back. Back to fucking Darkwood. I never thought I would be relieved to go back there, but it’s better than the alternative of staying with my aunt.

And I know I have a lot I’ll have to deal with, the repercussions of my actions. Getting my box back from the Wraiths of Darkwood and dealing with my room and roommate. But even that hell is better than the alternative.

As long as I’m away from my aunt, I’ll be happy. The bitch doesn’t want anything to do with me, and I’m fine with that.

Better the devil you know than the devil ... nope.

No matter which way I look at it, I’m still in Hell.



Chapter Eight

PHOENIX

THE TREES FLY by as the Uber driver heads towards Darkwood. Finally, I got my freedom from that monster that calls herself my aunt.

Well, I don't think she even wants that label. If it were up to her, I would disappear off the face of the earth and she could go back to whatever it is she does during her days.

Working in the pits of Hell.

Tomorrow, I get to go back to classes, and it's been a little over a week since the incident. The guys have been in contact with me since getting the phone. Honestly, I'm torn.

My heart wants them, it craves them. But my mind remembers the pain, it remembers the feeling of being betrayed. And yeah, the guys say it was for the greater good or whatever, but it still hurt. However, after a lot of talking with Dr. Parker, I made the choice to forgive.

But my walls are firmly in place.

I pull out the swanky ass iPhone and flip to the messages that the guys have sent me in a group chat.

MASON:

Can't wait to see you, Red.

MASON:

It has been a very boring week in classes without you.

DAXON:

Yeah, I agree. No one to stare at and imagine doing dirty things to.

COLTON:

D. All the above.

I laugh at the message thread and put my phone back into my pocket. They know I'm on my way, and they told me they would be waiting by the gates for me. I had questioned them if that would be a wise thing to do, seeing how they are engaged to the twat waffles. They told me they don't give a shit.

I guess that's progress. Though, the backlash has me a bit worried. I don't trust the queens. Their ability to ruin everything is a true talent.

As the driver drives up the driveway to the drop-off area by the gates, a sense of relief almost comes over me as I see the three Kings standing there as they said they would. I'd be lying if I didn't say my stomach was all knotted up and twisted inside. I have no idea how this is all going to go. And even though I wasn't sure they should be waiting for me, the sight of them does give me a sense of reassurance.

I step out of the car, and I'm immediately attacked with a hug by Mason.

"Finally," he says into my ear as he kisses my cheek. "How you feeling, Red?"

Before I can answer, Daxon comes up and grabs my duffle bag from me, kissing me on the forehead. "Hey, Spitfire."

Colton pushes off from the wall and leans down, kissing me on my other cheek. "Glad you're back, CT."

"Should we take this to your room?" Daxon nods to the bag.

I bite my lip. I'm not sure if I'm ready to go back into that room. "I don't know if I have a room. I mean, what I did ..." I say nervously.

“I know they repaired everything. I’m not sure what of yours is still there. Things that broke, they tossed.” Mason frowns. “If you’re not ready to go back there, you can come hang with us in ours.”

“Shit. I was so focused on getting back here, I didn’t even think about having to face what I did to my room. Or be back in there. Or Liz. Oh my god. I don’t know if I’m ready for this.” I shake my head and feel that tightening again in my stomach. I turn and look at the Uber driver that’s now pulling away from the driveway. If I run, I could catch him and have him take me back. Well, not back to that Hell, but anywhere else.

“Red, relax. Breathe. Come stay with us. Tomorrow, we can go together to the room. We will help you in any way you need us.” Mason cups my face and leans down, his lips pressing against mine. Slowly, he pulls away, his eyes locked on mine. “Please come back with us.”

Biting my lip, I nod, and the four of us start to walk down the paths leading to the dorms. The boys flank me as we walk. Daxon is on my left, Mason on my right, and Colton behind me. I’m in this protective bubble from the bullshit. Or at least that’s what I’m telling myself.

It’s mid-morning, so some students are out and about on the campus. As we walk, people stop to stare at us and whisper. I can hear sounds of shock and laughter. Sure, my life is a complete joke. Glad I can entertain you fuckers. Of course, I’m sure this will get back to the three tit-ateers that I was with their fiancés.

“Stop worrying.” Daxon leans over. “We will take care of it.”

“How do you know I’m worrying? I’m just walking.”

“You get this little crease in the middle of your forehead when you start to think. Or when you’re mad. And you can’t possibly be mad at anything right now, so I know you’re worried about something.” Dax places an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into him. I relax for a moment before I remember that people are still staring.

“The student body. They know everything now. I have no idea what to expect.” I look out at the eyes staring at us. It’s a sea of judgment from their pretty little golden pedestals.

“We’ll handle it,” Mason says as we head into the lobby of the dorms. We ride up the elevator and walk into their dorm. Well, more like penthouse suite, but that’s where we are.

“Why don’t you head to Dax’s room and take a shower? Get yourself nice and relaxed. When you’re done, we can talk more, okay?” Mason runs his hand over my cheek.

I lean into the comfort, his touch. I missed this. I thought I lost this when they tore my heart out. But even now, I want to fully give in, I just know I can’t.

I head up to Dax’s room and into the bathroom to wash off the putrid smell of my aunt’s house. I turn the water on nice and hot, steam pours out of the top of the shower as I start to remove my clothes. I look at the bandages on my wrists, and tears well up in my eyes.

A small sob escapes me as I lose myself staring at the damage I did to my own body. I feel so guilty for wanting the torment to end, for wanting to be rid of the lies that became my life. The pain that will come with seeing the scars makes my heart sink.

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

I jump at the sound of Dax’s voice. I’m standing completely naked in the middle of his bathroom. Out of instinct, my hands cover my chest.

He chuckles. “I think I’ve seen you naked before, Spitfire.” He comes over and slowly lowers my hands.

“What are you doing in here?”

His hands come up and cup my face. “I was going to leave you some of my clothes to change into. I kind of like seeing you in my things.” He winks. “But I heard you crying, so I came in here to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh. I’m fine. I just had a moment.” I wave him off.

He looks over me, his eyes dropping to my lips. “I was so scared I wouldn’t get to do this anymore.”

“Do wha—” Before I finish, his lips come crashing down on mine. His tongue pushes past my lips, dominating mine. His hands slide back into my hair, pulling my head back slightly to give him better access to my mouth.

He feels so good. His mouth on mine, I missed it. This isn’t like the kiss at my aunt’s house, this one is full of passion and desire. I run my hands along his shirt, trying to grab it and lift it off of him. He breaks the kiss momentarily to rip the shirt off over his head. His mouth immediately finds mine again, and he lets out a throaty growl. His hands work at his pants. He grips the side of his jeans and pushes them down, taking his boxers with him.

His touch. Their touch. That’s what I would miss. This is what I would have given up. I thought I lost it, but I didn’t know I still had it. It’s silly that I crave them as much as I do, what with the pain and torment they put me through. I shouldn’t want them, but I can’t stay away from them.

His hard cock presses against my stomach as he walks me backwards into the shower. My back finds the shower wall, and he finally releases my mouth as his trails down my neck to my breasts.

My mind is in overdrive. I’m here with Dax’s mouth on me. Naked in his shower. A thought passes through me. I need this. I need them. My entire body feels more alive in this moment. The sparks of his mouth on my skin, igniting something inside me.

Dax’s tongue circles my right nipple as his fingers find the left one and softly twists it. The pleasure mixed with the slight pain causes me to let out a moan that echoes in the shower.

“Fuck, I love hearing that sound.” My eyes pop open to see Mason standing at the shower opening, running his hand over his obvious erection in his pants. “Don’t mind me, please continue.”

Dax obviously isn't surprised by our sudden guest in the bathroom. He works his lips down my stomach until he is on his knees in front of me. He looks up at me as he hooks my leg over his shoulder, giving him more access to me. His eyes burn into mine, and I whimper at the sight of him between my legs looking at me with such hunger.

I look up and see that Mason has taken out his cock and is slowly stroking it as he watches us. My entire body lights up at the thought of how incredibly turned on I am with Mason watching. Not to mention the very hungry mouth I'm about to have on my pussy.

Dax softly kisses my inner thigh, teasing me. My hands find his hair, and I try to pull him to where I need him, but he is stronger than me, and he doesn't cave to my neediness. Moaning, I lift my hips slightly, my clit throbbing for attention.

"Please, Dax," I moan.

"Please' what, sweetheart? What is it that you need from me?"

"Please, I need to feel you." I buck my hips towards his face, and he chuckles.

"Fuck, I love hearing you beg me, sweetheart." He runs a finger along my slit until it reaches my very sensitive bundle of nerves. My head tilts back as I let out a moan.

His fingers dance around my clit

"Taste her," Mason says, his eyes hooded.

Dax sticks out his tongue, and slowly circles my clit, teasing me. My breathing picks up when I feel him press a finger inside of me as his tongue presses against my clit. He pumps his finger in and out of me, and I notice that Mason is stroking himself at that same pace.

"How does she taste?"

Dax pulls back slightly, licking his lips. "Like honey."

My hands grip his hair tighter as his mouth works to bring me to my much-needed release. His tongue works my

sensitive bud, and I hear him groan against me. That vibration from his mouth sends me screaming over the edge. Before I have a chance to recover, Dax is on his feet and wrapping my legs around him. One hand goes to the wall behind us, with the other wrapping around me to support me. He pushes his cock into me, stalling only for a second to allow me to adjust.

“Fuck, sweetheart. You feel so good wrapped around me.” He leans forward and kisses me as he starts to thrust. I look over at Mason, who is now fully unclothed and stepping into the shower with us. “You like Mason watching? You like having him watch us?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You’re such a dirty girl, Phoenix. Our dirty girl.” Dax starts to nibble on my ear. Between his cock working to draw out another orgasm and the sensitive spot by my ear, I’m feeling myself being pushed towards another explosion.

“Oh, Dax, I’m gonna come again. So close.”

Dax locks eyes with me, his hand reaches between us and strokes my clit. I start to close my eyes because it’s too much. “Eyes on me, I want them open as you come.”

Dax starts to thrust harder into me and I can feel myself starting to fall. My mouth drops open, and my vision goes white as I feel wave after wave of my orgasm rip through me. Dax’s breaths shorten, and then he groans as he finds his release inside me. My body is still humming from my own.

“Fuck. Sweetheart,” Dax says, out of breath. He looks over his shoulder at Mason, who groans for a release. “I think he needs some help. Don’t you?” I nod, and he slowly lowers me back to the ground. I walk over to Mason and sink to my knees.

“Holy fuck, Red. You are a sight to behold like that.” Mason’s voice is strained, and there’s a fire in his eyes as he looks down at me.

I open my mouth, and he takes my offering, sliding the head of his cock slowly past my lips. A loud hiss escapes him

as he squeezes his eyes shut, I grab hold of his thighs, my nails softly digging into his skin.

“Jesus, Red. This is fucking heaven. Fuck.” He pushes his cock towards the back of my throat until I start to gag a bit, causing him to pull back slightly.

Daxon comes up from behind me and wraps my hair around his fist. “Remember what I told you. Flatten and stick out your tongue, breathe out through your mouth. Good girl. Now, take Mason’s cock all the way to the back of your throat.”

I hum around the head of Mason’s cock as Dax slowly pushes my head forward. I look up at Mason as I see him watching his friend push me further down his hardness. The simple act has me burning up. If I could just get a bit of friction, I’d come instantly.

I swirl my tongue around Mason, causing him to groan and tip his head back. “Fuck, I’m not gonna last long. Holy shit. Suck it, baby. Be a good girl and make me come down that throat of yours.”

I moan at the words and create more suction as I work him with my mouth. Dax reaches around and pinches my nipple, making me whimper. Mason’s cock starts to pulse and twitch, and I know I’m close to getting him to the edge. My hand reaches up, and I cup him, softly stroking him, and he lets out a gasp.

“Shit, that’s going to make me ... Fuck. Fuck. Phoenix,” he groans before I feel him tense and warm release fills my mouth. Making sure I get every last drop, I lick the head. “Phoenix ... that was ... holy shit. I think you broke me.” Mason is trying to catch his breath and drops to his knees in front of me. His lips immediately crash into mine, not caring that he just came in my mouth.

He pulls back and places his forehead on mine. “Phoenix ...”

“Mason.” I brush my nose against his. He lets out the most contented sigh I have ever heard.

“Don’t try to leave me. Please. Ever again.” His shiny eyes meet mine, and something in me bursts. A sob erupts, and I wrap my arms around his neck and cry into his shoulder. Dax comes up from behind me and runs a hand down my back.

“Shh. Spitfire, we got you.”

“I-I know,” I say into Mason’s shoulder. And I do know. But that doesn’t mean I’m not ashamed. Scared, even. I know I hurt them. And it hurts me to know that.

“Take her into your room. I’m going to go talk to Colt.” Dax kisses me on my shoulder and leaves us. Mason carries me effortlessly to his room.

There’s a softness to him as he lays me down on his bed and slides in next to me. His hand runs down my face as he leans in, pulls me into him, and kisses me. The warmth from his lips, from his touch, start to calm me down.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” I say against his lips.

He shakes his head. “No. I’m sorry, Red. I wish we did things different, told you what was going on. I’m so sorry we had you doubting us. And rightly so. It’s what we wanted to happen. But ... fuck. I thought you were gone. I’ve never felt that empty before. I was so scared. I felt so helpless.”

Tears pour from my eyes. The pain in his face is killing me. I did that to him. “I’m s-so s-sorry, Mase.”

“I realized something that night.” He wipes the tears from my cheeks. When I don’t answer him, he takes a deep breath and continues, “I should’ve made it clear to you how I felt.”

“What do you mean?” I place my hand on his bare chest and can feel his heart beating rapidly under it.

“I love you, Phoenix.” His voice is soft, his breathing erratic. “I should’ve told you, so you knew. Found some way to let you know that you have my heart. That I don’t care what that contract says, you’re my everything. Every day, I hate myself for not—”

I cut him off with a kiss. Our lips work against each other, our tongues fighting dominance. He flips me on my back, and

I can feel him instantly harden against me. Looking up at him through the tears in my eyes, I can see the fire in his gaze, the passion that is emanating from him as his body strains above me.

Wrapping my legs around him, I nudge his cock towards my entrance, encouraging him to push into me. He doesn't miss a beat and slowly enters me, letting out a groan as he settles inside. He drops his head to my neck as he wraps his arms around me, holding me against him.

"This. I don't want to lose this. My heartbeat against yours. My skin touching yours. The feeling I get when I look at you," he whispers into my ear.

"What feeling is that?" I quietly ask.

Mason pulls back and looks at me. "That you stoke something inside me. You make my heart beat faster, my world brighter, and you ignite this need to show you just how much I love you, every second of the day. I don't want to lose that, baby. I don't want to lose you."

"I'm sorry. So sorry," I cry. My heart pounds against my chest and his. "I love you."

He leans in and kisses me. "I love hearing those words roll off your beautiful lips."

Slowly, he pulls back and slides into me, still holding me tightly and keeping our eyes on each other. My body comes alive under him. I run my fingers up his arms and into his hair as he continues to slowly make love to me.

"I love you, Mason," I whisper. The dark hole where my heart disappeared from suddenly comes to life. My heart beats wildly inside me.

"Say it again," he says as he kisses the corners of my mouth.

"I love you, Mason Turner."

Mason groans as he thrusts into me. Our breaths pick up as he pushes into me at a quicker pace. He reaches down

between us and circles my clit, quickly making me approach my release. “Come with me, baby. Come all over my cock.”

My body responds, and I feel myself start to move faster towards my release. My vision blurs as I crash into a euphoric wave of pure ecstasy.

Mason drops his forehead to mine and grunts through his own release. “I love you, Phoenix Hayes.” He stills on top of me, our eyes unable to tear away from each other.

He finally slides out of me and rolls on his back. He pulls me with him, resting my head on his chest. We say nothing because there is nothing we need to say. I listen to his heartbeat, and he runs his fingers through my hair.

As my eyes get heavy, and my body more relaxed, I realize I have so much more to fight for now. It’s no longer just me fighting to survive, to just get by.

I’m in love with all three Kings. There’s no doubt in my mind. I have more to fight for, because of the three of them.

I’ll never make it out alive if I don’t.



Chapter Nine

PHOENIX

“WE ARE CONCERNED about your wellbeing, Phoenix.” Headmaster Lockhart leans back in his chair as he looks at me. “You’ve been seeking attention since you stepped foot here in Darkwood.”

My eyes widen, and I feel a rage burning under my skin. This mother fucker has some big fucking hairy wrinkly balls to suggest that I have been doing any of this for attention. I want to hammer nails into his shriveled dick.

“Frankly, that’s not the kind of attention we want here at this academy.” He shrugs.

“Seriously? Are you for real? You are blaming the victim in all of this? Do you know the shit I’ve been through here? That your precious role model students are nothing but relentless bullies? Fuck you and the fucking high horse you rode in on!” I shoot to my feet and grab my bag to turn and leave.

“Excuse me, Ms. Hayes! That language will not be tolerated.”

“Maybe instead of worrying about my language, you should worry about what’s going on under your nose. This is a zero-tolerance school with bullying and yet no one has fucking been kicked off campus for the hell I’ve been through. So, you may be focused on and ‘worried’ about me, but in reality, that’s bullshit. If you were so worried about me, where were you at homecoming? Where were you when they broke into my room and stole my shit? Where were you when they humiliated me in front of everyone? So don’t spout that shit

that this bullshit won't be tolerated. It won't be tolerated by me because I don't funnel money into this place. All of them out there can get away with it. Fuck your standards." I raise my middle finger and smile. "Sit and spin, Headmaster Lockhart. Sit and mother fucking spin."

His face turns beet red, and I stride out the door. Fuck him. Fuck this school. If they want to kick me out, do it. Otherwise, I'm graduating, come hell or high water.

I storm out of the dungeon of hell and make my way to my class. I haven't yet made it back to my dorm room, but the guys said they will take me tonight. They got me a uniform for today, and I'm not going to ask how, but it's a bit on the small side. My money's on Mason picking out the uniform for me. Especially when I walked out with it on, and he wagged his brows at me.

It's a Mason move.

Colton had a laptop ready for me to use. I told him I didn't need it, that I could just use the library computers. I was then laughed at by all three stuck-up rich boys. They told me that no one uses those computers. I nodded and agreed but also pointed out that it's because every one of their families could buy computers for entire countries. That shut them up. Still, they made me take the laptop, and I rolled my eyes as they stuck it in my bag.

The Kings also prepared me for the fact that while they don't give a shit that they are seen with me, the triple-mint bitches might. They were going to do all that they could to protect me and try to keep them off me. Unfortunately, I know from first-hand experience that they can get to me if they want to.

My hope is that after class, Liz will be in the room, and her and I can talk. I need to apologize for what I'm sure scared the shit out of her. She hasn't called or texted, so I know she's extremely mad at me. And I feel awful for it.

What I did was so messed up. I still feel sick when I think about it. Dr. Parker says it will be a while before I don't have

that guilt eating away at me. Time will heal or some bullshit mantra he pushed at me.

But I still have this war raging inside of me. I have to tell myself to keep pushing, to keep going. Sometimes I feel that darkness start to creep back. The stress and the fear are constantly pushing to reach the top.

And I am fighting like crazy to keep it down. It's draining me.

It's Monday and I have to haul my ass over to Emerson for my US Government class. The only thing I'm looking forward to is seeing Mason. I smile as I remember last night, when he told me he loved me. From the shower to his bed, it was two different sides of Mason. And I loved both of them. I didn't know he had it in him to be that passionate, to make love. But it was so powerful last night. The intensity, the emotions, it was an overload of love for me.

I'm unaware of what's going on around me, until I hear the whispers and snickers that start to interrupt my thoughts. I look around and see some of my classmates are staring at me, and obviously talking about me. I know they're well aware of the bullshit with my parents. Well, my mom and the guy who pretended to be my dad.

I rub my forehead and sigh as I try to push my way through the ever-growing crowd. Seriously, isn't there anything better to gossip about? The Kings got 'engaged'. You think that would make the front page of Rich Weekly.

But nope, I seem to be front and center on the gossip rags.

"Hey, Phoenix! Sorry about your mom, sucks she was a whore. Wait, no, that's right, she was the one doing the sucking," some random ass dude calls out. And of course, people think it's funny.

It definitely isn't.

I roll my eyes and bite the inside of my cheek to keep from punching the asshole. I really don't need another meeting with the headmaster. I could do without seeing him again today.

Tomorrow, maybe I'll be up for another round. But I've had my fill for today.

I walk into class, and everyone in there stops talking to stare at me like I've grown a third head. Awesome sauce. So, I wonder how long this is going to go on for?

I slide into my desk and take out my notebook. My books are in my dorm, but the guys said I could share with them until we can get to my room. As I sit there, I feel the eyes burning into my skin. Oh my fucking god, move on. I let out a sigh and put my head down and pull up my Instagram and scroll through it.

I look to see that the account @the_woods_have_eyes has been deleted. I still have my belief that Chad is my 'stalker' and was trying to make my life a living hell. Since he accomplished that by embarrassing the shit out of me at homecoming, why would he need to continue?

I'm so lost in my mind that I don't hear Mason come up next to me. "Hey, Red. Whatcha doing?" he asks as he slides in his seat and scoots it closer to me.

"Perusing the socials. Nothing exciting. Well, unless you're all of Darkwood Academy and then all you can talk about is my life." I shrug.

Mason leans in and whispers, "I love you." He plants a kiss on my cheek, and I can feel the heat rise in my neck.

"Should you even be doing that here?" My eyes go wide; my eyebrows are practically in the ceiling.

"I don't give a fuck. They got the ring. Not for long, but enough to pacify them. I don't care about them, I love you, Phoenix. Everyone else be damned." He drapes an arm around my chair.

"Yeah, but people won't call you the whore. I'm their punching bag, Mase. While I couldn't give a shit normally, I also don't want three bitches hot on my tail."

He shakes his head dismissively. "Don't worry about them."

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not a threat to them.”

“I’m more a threat than you think, Red. Trust me, they don’t want me figuring out a way to break this. They lose out on their dynasty or whatever you want to call it.” He runs his hand along my cheek and smiles at me. The teacher comes in and sets his stuff down on the desk and class begins.

Before I realize it, class had ended, and I’m headed to Pre-Calc. But not alone. With his arm around me, in the middle of the hallway, Mason walks with me to class. And the stares I’m getting alone are enough to make anyone cower. But I won’t, I can’t. I won’t fall apart again.

We make it into the class and Mason leans down and kisses my forehead, and I’m lost in that moment. The noise around me fades away and I can only feel him.

But then the screeching of a howler monkey breaks the spell and I turn to face the Wicked Witch of Darkwood.

“What are you doing with her, Mase?” Bianca huffs, her hands on her hips. “She’s the trash we took out! Remember?”

“The only trash here is that receptacle you call a mouth, Bianca.” Mason squeezes my shoulder and moves to slide into his seat.

Bianca stomps over and gets in my face. “They are ours. Not yours.”

“Now that’s not even remotely the truth,” Colton says behind her, and she freezes. “She’s ours. You may have the rings, but I suggest that unless you want this to get messy, you leave her be.” He leans down and whispers something in her ear. Her eyes go wide, and her face flushes. She turns on her heel and plops down in her desk.

Colton smiles at me and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before sitting in his seat. For a moment, I stand there completely stunned. As I come back down to reality, I realize there are eyes on me, some with their phones out. Are they waiting for me to say something? Do something? It’s like I’m going to class with the fucking paparazzi.

Don’t react, Nix.

I quickly sit down and begin to fish out my book and notebooks. I'm already over this school day.

"Don't get too comfortable, Ms. Hayes," Mr. Fellows barks from his desk. "Headmaster Lockhart wants to see you in his office."

"No, I'm good. Had enough of his ramblings this morning." I cross my arms over my chest.

"Well, too bad for you, it's not an option. Also, I don't think you want a detention, now do you, Ms. Hayes? Leave now and go see the headmaster." He points to the door.

I roll my eyes and then look over at Mason, who's glancing between Fellows and me. "Whatever. Peace out." I head out the room and find my way out of the building, walking towards Forthright.

Minus the impending doom that I'll be walking into for a second time today, it's a beautiful day out. You would never guess I am going to school in Purgatory. I stop for a moment and let the wind blow against my face, the cold, crisp air kiss my skin. The sky is blue, and the sun shines brightly over campus. I listen to the leaves crinkling in the wind around me, I take a deep breath and feel that sense of calm. Even if only for a moment, I enjoy it.

I let out a long breath and stare at Forthright. Let's go get this over and done with.

"Ms. Hayes, please come in and sit." Headmaster Douchebag, I mean Lockhart, points to the chair in front of his desk. I walk into his office, and my skin itches. I think I'm allergic to this asshat. That or something about him makes my skin crawl.

I throw my bag on the floor and fall back into the ridiculously uncomfortable green leather high-back chair. Okay, I mean it is comfortable, but it's really the company that just makes me hate this chair more than anything. Well, not anything. The Queens hold the top spot, but I digress.

"What do I owe this unnecessary torture?" I smile at him. "For a second time today?"

He lets out a long sigh. “Can we drop the attitude please?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good. You called me in here, you get what you get. So fucking deal.”

“Langu—” He shakes his head, abruptly stopping himself. “Never mind. I don’t have the time to deal with your mouth. Look, your roommate has complained that she doesn’t feel safe anymore in your dorm. I can understand her concern. So, we are going to move you into a new dorm room.”

“Wait, what? Why me?” My fists clench at my sides as I sit forward in the chair.

“Yes, you. Her parents are quite concerned. They are afraid for their daughter’s safety. As much as we don’t like to shuffle students around mid-year, we don’t have a choice in this situation. Unfortunately, your little stunt is the catalyst in all this.” He shrugs.

I scoff, “My ‘little stunt’? You still won’t admit your students here are nothing but entitled assholes! God forbid your entire student body gets kicked out for bullying.”

Ignoring my obvious pissed off response, he continues. “Now, unfortunately, we don’t have any open dorm spots. So, we have made some special accommodations for you in an old staff building.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He carries on like I’ve said nothing, “We have had a bed set up in there and all accommodations you will need. We have already taken the liberty of moving your stuff in to that room this morning. Well, what was left.” He hands me a set of keys. “These are your keys to the building and to the room. It’s on the first floor. It’s, uh, not as updated as the dorms, but it’s livable.” He pauses for a moment and looks at me. “After what you did to that room, and your stunt, you should be happy we aren’t kicking you out of school.”

“Again, this must be a joke! Are you seriously kicking me out of my dorm?” My voice booms in his office. I’m sure if there are people outside, they can hear it.

“Your uncle was a respected member of this board. That’s the only thing keeping you at this school. Otherwise, I’d see to it that you would be kicked out of here.” He narrows his eyes at me. “So, enjoy the free ride, Phoenix. Keep your head down.”

Chills run down my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand. He called me Phoenix, not Ms. Hayes. Something’s off with this man. Fuck it. Without saying another word, I get the fuck out of the creep’s office. He repeated the same thing he told me when I first got here, only this time, it was more of a warning. I run out of the office and head over to the courtyard and find a tree to sit under.

My heart is beating so fast, I feel like it’s ready to burst from my chest. I’m outside, yet I feel like I can’t get enough air. I realize I’m panicking. I place my hand over my heart and try and count slowly. I let out slow breaths and attempt to imagine Mason’s face. He’s always able to get me to calm down. There’s a sweetness to him that’s different than the other two.

Why is everything so fucked? Why are the guys engaged to the street hookers of Darkwood? Why am I being tossed into a different building to live? Why is nobody paying the consequence of what they did to me at Homecoming?

Because I’m no one.

My left hand starts to shake, as I squeeze some of the pressure points in it. I need to write, I need to get out everything. Scream the words onto a page. I scrounge through my bag and find my new journal. I take it out and flip it to a new page.

And then I let it out.

Dear Phoenix,

Yeah. I’m writing to myself. Why wouldn’t I? My mother’s a liar, my dad isn’t really my dad, and my aunt is ... well, she’s a cunt.

All I have left is me.

And this me is fucking confused AF.

Mason professed his love. Dax fucked me up against the shower wall and Colton is the silent but deadly type. Which was evident by whatever he said to Bianca today.

Ugh, today.

Today's a shit day. I mean, you can add it to the pile of shit days that keeps growing. There's a shit ton of them. And finding out that you're being exiled to some unknown part of the campus to now live is ridiculous.

And I still haven't dealt with this whole dad thing. Probably should. I'll put it on my to-do list. That list is ever growing.

But how could my aunt not tell me? And the hatred she has for my mom is vile. Something big happened between them, something destroyed whatever relationship that they had before it all went to shit.

What the fuck happened?

I need to get that box back. Somehow. It has to have some answers. I need answers.

For now, I'm stuck in this perpetual darkness. All these questions that just breed more questions, but never answers.

Why do I feel like I'm always being pulled in two different directions? I'm always fighting to keep my head above water. Drown or fight for air.

Thing is, I still feel like I'm slowly drowning. And I still don't know if I want to be saved.

Will I always feel this way?

Love,

Me, Myself, and I

Closing the notebook, I shove it back into my bag. I rest my head in my hands, taking a long breath. I am feeling less panicky, but now just tired. Just need to get through all of this.

This semester is almost over. One more semester to go. That's it. I have no idea what it will mean for the Kings and I, but I know I need out.

I let out a sigh and gather up my back and stand. When I turn around, I jump back and let out a gasp.

“Hey, Red.”



Chapter Ten

PHOENIX

“JESUS FUCK!” My hand flies to my heart as I try to calm it. “You just scared the shit out of me.”

Mason stands there, his letterman jacket covering his school uniform, with a smile on his face. Colton stands to the left of him, and Daxon to the right. The other two dressed the same as Mason. It’s a wall of sexy hot man meat standing before me.

Mason pulls his hands from his pockets and holds them out in front of himself.

“We just wanted to make sure you were okay, Red,” he says.

“No. I’m so far from okay that I’m out of the realm of reality at this point.” I shake my head at them.

“What happened, CT? Talk to us.” Colton steps up to me and cups the side of my face. I melt. These three bring down every single one of my walls without me even realizing that they are doing it. Mentally, I try really hard to will my walls back into place.

“Headmaster Fuck-twit moved me out of my dorm. I don’t live with Liz anymore. Apparently, her parents complained and were afraid I’d go after their daughter. Or some bullshit like that.” I let out an exasperated breath.

“What?” Dax exclaims, his expression hardening.

“I got moved into some old staff housing building. Way the fuck away from the center of everything. I’ve been exiled.”

From the murderous looks on their faces, it seems I've struck a nerve.

"Let me make some calls. Let me see what I can get done." Dax shakes off his anger.

"No. You. Won't. I'll be fine. It's a shit situation, but I'm sure it's better than the dump I lived in with my mom. And besides, I don't need your help." I clench my fists.

"Spitfire—"

"No! You think your parents will appreciate you three helping me out? The person they want to get rid of? You haven't even stopped that from happening. Your engagement, or your bullshit with your dads. No, I don't need you guys trying to do anything else. I can handle this."

"We don't give a fuck about our parents," Colt growls. "You're ours."

"You guys, this is too much. You can't just caveman my life. I am capable of living on my own. I'm a big girl and all. Besides, I have enough to worry about. You guys, the threat, and let's not forget about the fucking stalker." I sigh. "I hate that they are doing this to me, but it's the least of my worries at this point. It's more of an inconvenience. It's ... it's just a lot to deal with."

"Red, at least let us check the place out with you." He pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head. "At least let us see where they are putting you."

Pulling back, I look up at him, seeing the love and pain mixed in his eyes. "All right. Let's go."

* * *

I don't know what is more embarrassing, moving into a dump that is probably worse than the apartment my mom and me had, or having the three Kings standing in my new room.

I'm going with the latter, because this is fucking humiliating. All my stuff that was left is piled into a corner of

the room and thrown like they were dumped as fast as they could be.

And this place is fucking falling apart at the seams. I swear this building should be condemned. This used to be the staff housing building. It's old and musky smelling. Lights blink in the halls and most of the rooms now are used for storage. The walls are cinder block walls that were once painted what looks to be white. But the paint is old, dirty, and peeling.

The doors into the building are boarded up, and the sun barely shines through the dirty, dusty windows. The yellowed linoleum floor is torn up everywhere, there are layers of thick dust on every surface. I'll need a tetanus shot just to live here.

When I walked into my new room, I almost said fuck it and left school all together. A strong acrid smell hit my nose the first step through the door. I had to hold my nose and breathe through my mouth. Even the guys recoiled a bit, and I could tell they tried to hold back saying anything.

As we stand there, I hear a throat clear, and I turn to see our wonderful headmaster standing at the door.

"Miss Hayes. I hope you are finding your new surrounding acceptable?" He leans against the door jamb.

"Yeah, this stay will be better than a room at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas." I roll my eyes as I try to keep bile from rising because of the smell.

"We will send some janitors to come in here and clean it up better for you." Headmaster Lockhart turns to me with a frown. "We didn't have time to get it completely ready before you were transferred to this building."

"You can't leave her here." Daxon moves menacingly towards him. I see a sudden flash of fear in Headmaster Lockhart's eyes. *Interesting.*

"We will get it in better shape for you over the next week. If you don't like it, you are free to leave school," he says as he looks back at me.

I let out a disbelieving scream. "This is a joke, right? This can't even be legal! This place is a fucking goddamned

biohazard!”

“The board has to approve things like this.” Dax slowly walks over towards me. “How would they approve something like this?”

His eyes shot right to Dax. “Your father convinced them.” The corner of his mouth lifted, and a pit forms in my stomach. “Take care, Ms. Hayes.” And with that, he turns and leaves the decrepit shit hole that is now my room.

Mason stalks over and slams the door. “What the fuck, Dax?”

Dax stands there, stunned. Colton is typing away on his phone, his face scrunched up, and he is concentrating on whatever he is working on.

“I ... There’s ... Fuck.” Dax runs a hand through his silky black hair and starts to pace the room. He’s obviously just as surprised as me that his dad had something to do with this.

“Why? I thought they were going to leave me alone. You put a ring on it, so why are they doing this?”

Dax shakes his head. “I don’t know. But I intend to find out.”

“We’re taking you back to our dorm. You are *not* staying here for the time being.” Mason comes up from behind me and wraps his arms around me.

“Thanks, but no. I need time to get this all unpacked.”

“Red, I can’t let you stay here. This isn’t safe.”

“No. I need time to think all this through. You guys are ... a lot. I just need some time to process all this. I’m sorry.” Whispering the last part, I drop my head. Mason turns me around and lifts my chin with his fingers.

“Baby, you know I love you. But if you need space then fine. We just want to protect you.” Mason stares into my eyes, emotion filling his.

“I know. But I do need space. Today has just been hell. Please,” I beg.

“Okay.” Mason nods. He glances up at the other two. They look back at me and start walking towards the door. Dax drops a kiss on my lips, and Colt kisses my forehead.

“We are a call away, CT. Please call us if you need us, okay?” He runs his hand through my hair and gives me a weak smile.

Once the guys leave, I shut and lock the door. I lean against it and let out a breath. I take a walk over to what is left of my things. I can’t even begin to go through this stuff. I head over to the window, needing some fresh air in this place.

I flip the lock and try to pull it open. It doesn’t budge. “You gotta be kidding me.” I try again, trying to push it from the top and pull from the bottom. The fucking window doesn’t open. Awesome.

I let out a groan and go to check out my bathroom. But when I flip on the light, I all but throw up. The room is covered in grime and doesn’t look like it has been cleaned *ever*. The tile, what I am guessing was once white, is now yellow. The sink and counter are an atrocious mint green, and the mirror is shattered, and chunks of it missing.

Fucking great. I walk over to the toilet and flush it, finding at least that works. I peek into the shower, and the same green is the base of the shower, the tiles dingy and yellowed. I turn the shower on, and a whining noise starts before water sputters out of the shower head. The water comes out brown but eventually starts to run clear. I gag at the sight.

This isn’t livable.

I head back to my bed and pick up my phone. I hover over Daxon’s number, but instead I scroll to another and hit send, letting the phone ring.

“This is Dr. Parker,” he says when he picks up.

“Um, hi, Doc. It’s Phoenix.” God, I feel so fucking awkward. Literally every session I do everything I can not to talk to him. Here I am calling him to talk to him.

“Phoenix? Are you okay?” His voice sounds concerned.

“Well, define okay,” I quip.

“Phoenix, what’s wrong?”

“Well, it seems that I have a new residence here on campus.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t donate money to the school, I’m not from some loaded as fuck family, so when my roommate’s parents called the school concerned that she was rooming with a crazy person, they moved me into the old staff housing building. Which is where I currently sit now.”

Dr. Parker is silent on the other end, so I keep going. “And you should see this place. It’s a death trap. They claim that they will fix it up better for me, but I really doubt it. It’s a set it and forget it type of situation. Out of sight, out of mind, Doc.”

“Who is we?”

“The headmaster. Oh, and apparently the board. So, you know, Dax’s father had a huge say in this.”

“I can talk to the headmaster. There has to be better accommodations for you somewhere else on campus. What about staying with the guys, the Kings?”

“No, just ... I need some space. Though, I’ll be honest, a new room all the way at the far end of campus was not what I meant when I thought I wanted space.”

“Phoenix, this isn’t right. You need someone in your corner.” Dr. Parker’s voice lowers with concern.

“And I know you are in my corner, Doc. I just don’t need this battle fought for me right now.”

“I’m sorry, Phoenix. You’re right. Okay, let’s talk about this more tomorrow, then. Or I can have a car sent and you can meet me at my office if you need to talk now.”

“No, tomorrow is fine. I just, I don’t know, needed to get it out.”

“I completely understand. All right, I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning. And Phoenix?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for calling me.”

I end the call and stare at my hole-in-the-wall room. At the same time my stomach grumbles and I need to get myself some food. I pick up my ID and purse and head out of the slum room, making my way over to the dining hall.

The walk to the dining hall is long. I’m going to have to get up even earlier just to haul my ass to class every day. This building is off in the back of the campus, so it’s a good ways away from most of the stuff I need to access.

When I finally do make it to the dining hall, it’s pretty packed. Students are chatting away in front of piles of food, probably catching up on the latest gossip. I wonder if my new digs have made it to their lips yet.

I look around to see if I can see the Kings, but they aren’t there. However, the Queens are. And boy, do they look pissed. I swear if they had laser eyes, I’d be a dead woman. So, I do what I do best: I ignore them and figure out what I want to eat.

I head over to the burger center and order a double bacon cheeseburger. As usual, I’m fucking starving. I ask for it to-go and then head out. The last place I need to be is inside with all these rabid fans of mine.

I head out towards my tree by the water and plop down. Then I reach into the bag and pull out some fries, popping the salty goodness in my mouth. I let out a long moan.

“I do love listening to you moan, Red.”

I get startled and choke on the fries I had in my mouth. The three Kings rush over and help me catch my breath.

“Asshole!” I clear my throat. “I told you to stop sneaking up on me. Stalker, remember?”

Mason looks down. “Sorry.”

“How is it that you guys just pop up out of nowhere?” I plop back down and dive into my burger. I stare up at them as I chew the heaven in my mouth.

Dax looks at me, his face creased with worry.

“Dax? What’s going on?”

He rubs the back of his neck and then sits down in front of me. “My dad was involved in getting you moved.”

“Wait, we assumed this. What we don’t know is why did he do it?” I place the burger back in the bag.

“Colt hacked into the headmaster’s emails and dug around. Seems my *father* was rather insistent that you be moved out of the dorms. The headmaster wanted you removed from school, but my father shot that down.” A silence falls over us. All that I can hear around us is the wind rustling the tree above me.

“That’s still doesn’t answer why he did it, Dax.”

“I know. We have no idea why.”

“But I thought they were going to leave me alone!” I jump up from ground and square off with the Kings. “You three told me that they would leave me be if you agreed to marry the queens. What the actual fuck, Dax?”

“We don’t know. And if we ask him or any of our fathers about it, we could do more harm than good.” Colt runs a hand over his face. “And we also need to figure out the third party they were talking to, as well.”

“Third party?” My heart starts to race, and I begin to feel a little lightheaded.

“There was an unknown address in the email chain. Someone else who was copied in on everything but never responded. Their email was untraceable. Or at least, I couldn’t, and that’s saying something.” Colt grimaces.

“Can’t you get one of your other nerd hacker friends on it?” I ask.

“Trust me, already on that. But whoever it is, they have their shit locked up tight.”

I reach down and grab my burger, all traces of my appetite gone. I grab my things and head towards a garbage can, discarding my half-eaten food.

“Spitfire, where are you going?” Daxon comes up behind me and grabs my arm.

“Back to my cage. It’s apparently where I’m wanted.” I shrug out of his touch and start walking. But then at the last second, I turn back to see the three of them staring at me. “You know what I don’t get? What the fuck did I do to deserve any of this? I don’t know your father or your families. I didn’t have a say in what my dad did to your mom, Dax. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry we both lost someone to selfish choices. But why am I the one being punished for their actions?”

With that, I turn and start making the long trek towards my dorm.

My asylum.

The place I’m being forced to live because I’ve apparently made enemies with rich assholes I don’t know. Fuck that.

Yeah, I can understand Daxon’s dad being upset about his wife, but I had no idea my “father” was doing that. I had no control over his actions. He was a grown man. She was a grown woman. They apparently felt that it was okay to betray the ones they were supposed to love.

As I walk back to my jail cell, my head is spinning. I can feel the pounding in my skull starting to knock harder. Rubbing the heel of my hand into my forehead, I let out a groan. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I fish it out.

DAXON:

I’m so sorry this is happening, but we will figure this out. I promise this to you. We promise.

DAXON:

Please talk to me, Phoenix. I’m so sorry.

I shake my head and put my phone away. Right now, I just need space. Space to figure out what’s going on and how to deal with all of this. I still need to find that fucking box.

I head through the front doors that they don't seem to care to lock. I mean, I'm just a lonely student here in this shit storm, please don't provide me any protection. The lights flicker above me as I walk down the hallway towards my room. God, the smell of mold and dust just seep into my nose. I try to hold my breath as I walk as fast as I can towards my door. I need to leave some air fresheners in this hallway. Or find a window to open.

As I get to my door, the air feels off. I look up and around, and my stomach starts to turn. Why do I feel like there are eyes on me? As quickly as I can, I unlock my door and run in, slamming it behind me.

I try to take deep breaths. Then I flip the lights on in the room, and my heart stops.

There's a black lace thong and bra sitting neatly on my bed. Beside it, a black rose and note.

Tears start to cloud my vision as my hands start to shake. No. Not even possible.

My eyes look up and around the room, finding nothing else seems out of place. Just this on my bed. I slowly approach, then reach down and pick up the note, my heart pounding in my chest.

I unfold the paper with trembling hands.

Those words turn everything upside down.

Miss me?



Chapter Eleven

DAXON

“THIS IS KILLING ME, DAX.” Mason lets out a long breath. “Can’t we just have her come stay with us?”

I shake my head. “No, we can’t. Not permanently at least. Fuck. I need to make a call to my father and find out what’s going on. This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sure as fuck doesn’t,” Colt says with a scowl.

“You were all there. You heard them say they would leave her alone. But this is complete bullshit. This is the opposite of leaving her alone. This is directly fucking with her and her safety. She’s not safe.”

We start making our way back to the dorm, trying to make sense of what Colt found and where the school put Phoenix. “We have no idea who this silent partner is on these emails? No one gave any reason as to why they moved her there over an empty space in the dorms?”

“None.” Colt runs a hand down his face. “I’ve tried all the ways I know to trace it, and it comes back empty. I have no idea who that is on the other end or where those emails are going. Whoever it is, they’re covering their tracks extremely well.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would one email be covering their tracks and not my dad? There was nothing in those emails that gave anything else away?”

Colt shakes his head. “No. Just that she had to be moved, but not removed from school. Which is beyond strange since

they wanted her removed from here to begin with. So why keep her here? What's the end game?"

As we make our way up into the dorm, my phone goes off. I pull it out of my pocket and sigh at the name flashing across it. *Daddy Dearest*. Well, this can't be coincidence at all.

"Father, to what do I owe the pleasure of this unwanted conversation?" I stand in the middle of the living area, trying to keep my composure.

"Can't I call to see how my son is doing?" He laughs on the other end.

"No. In fact I can't think of the last time you called to give two shits about how I was doing. So, I'll ask again, what do you want?" I growl.

He chuckles. "I need you boys to come down to the office. We need to talk." With that, he hangs up. The rage inside me starts to come to the surface. I hate this man so much. The lies about my mother, the lies about Phoenix; I can't trust my own father.

"Mother fucker." I grip my phone tighter in my hand.

"What?" Mason leans against the kitchen island.

"We are being summoned to my father's office. Guess we're going on a field trip. Let's go." I start to head back towards the door, hearing the grumbles from my brothers as we make our way back downstairs. This was the last thing we needed on our list of things to do.

We all pile ourselves into the SUV and take off towards my father's office. I see Mason texting next to me, and I'm sure he's texting Phoenix. He's grinning like a cat who got the milk. Mason's been on a whole new level of charm since he told her he was in love with her.

And on some level, I think we all are infatuated with her. I don't know what I would have done if we lost her. Rubbing the ache in my chest, I try to push those thoughts back. The fear of not having her in my life leaves a pit in my stomach. We just got her back; we can't lose her. And this move to the other side of the campus has me on high alert.

This all seems too calculated. Moving her clear across campus away from everyone, with no dorm security, is bullshit. And planned.

Can't get her off campus, so just isolate her.

We pull up to my dad's office and walk in. The ride in the elevator is made in complete silence, as it usually is before these meetings with my father, or any of our fathers for that matter.

When we reach his floor, I can feel my stomach tighten and the pounding in my head become stronger. It's like every footstep echoes inside my head. When we reach his door, I take a deep breath and look back at my brothers. They both nod, and I turn the knob to step through to hell.

"Ah, there they are," Mr. Turner, sorry, Mayor Fuck-face Turner, says as we come into the room. I can feel Mason tense next to me, and Colton lets out a low rumble from his throat when he sees his own dad.

"Nice to see you too, Dad." Mason crosses his arms in front of his chest. "What do you all want? Are the girls not happy? Were the rings you all picked out not expensive enough? Are you here to tell us that you have some STD from them? Because while that would be completely gross TMI, it would be very much expected because of their whoreish nature."

"You're one to talk, son." Mayor Turner narrows his eyes at him.

"Yeah, well, I double wrap for a reason, and I won't touch that pussy ever again."

"You will if you plan to have heirs, and that is in the contract." My dad steps away from his desk.

"Technology's a wonderful thing. I can produce an heir without sleeping with the skank." I shrug.

"Semantics." My dad waves his hand. "Anyway, that's not why we're here. It's time you know about some of the family business."

“We are a weapons manufacturer. Yeah, already know.” I take a seat on the couch, and my brothers flank me on each side.

“Yes, but we don’t make our money from the contracts like you think. Let’s be honest, there really isn’t money in those. This company operates as an umbrella. In reality, we make our money from doing some more unsavory things.” He shrugs.

“What are you talking about?”

His lips quirk evilly. “Well, we supply weapons to a very interested buyer. A whole family of buyers. The strip clubs in Baybridge make it easy to launder money, hell, even keep the women nice and busy. They are so drugged up they just keep that cash coming in.”

“That’s what you wanted Phoenix for, isn’t it?” I ask him.

He raises a shoulder. “Maybe, maybe not. I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Family of buyers? Strip clubs? How did we not know about this? This is some shady ass shit. What family bullshit is this?” Mason asks beside me.

“You know of the Luciano Family,” Mayor Turner says. “They are very important clients. To all our families.”

“The Luciano Family? As in the mob?” Mason scrunches his face in disgust.

“Oh! Look at that! It’s like a light went off in his head,” Mayor Turner sneers. “See you can be more than just a cock to bounce on. Making me proud, son.”

“They do a lot for our families, and you three are going to make sure that continues to happen.” My father takes a sip of his amber drink. “Remember, there is no way out, other than death.”

Mayor Turner laughs, “Ha! That’s funny. Say, isn’t that what we told you three would happen? For you and your little golden pussy of trash?”

Mason growls beside me, but I place a hand on his shoulder to keep him from ripping his father’s throat out.

“Explain this to me, why? Why are we doing business with the Mafia? We don’t need it.”

“Why wouldn’t we? Your children’s children won’t want for nothing. We will be sitting on top of the world! This is our chance to finally be kings. Sure, we rule the town now, but what about the state? The country? Shit, think of how powerful our families will become.” My dad’s eyes are wild as he spits this crazy talk out.

“We don’t want anything to do with it.” I shake my head at my father. “You can go play mobster all you want; we don’t want to be involved.”

“Aw, that’s cute that you think you have a choice.” Mayor Turner turns to Colt’s dad, who has been silent the whole time watching everything. “He has no idea, does he?”

Langford shakes his head. “None.”

“No idea about what, Dad?” Colt tenses next to me.

“Remember when you brought down the systems at the docks? Taking the cameras offline to upgrade the systems? What did you think you were actually doing?” Langford asks his son.

“What you fucking asked me to do. Upgrade the software.”

“This is great.” My dad slaps his thigh as he laughs. “We were moving dead bodies. You were too busy with your head in the software to notice. No cameras, no evidence.”

“Dead bodies?” Mason’s brows furrow.

“Yes, son. How do you think we get drugs and money around?”

“What the fuck is going on?” I exclaim. “Drugs? Dead bodies? The fucking mob?” I pull on the ends of my hair.

“All the jobs you did under the guise of that it was for the business was in fact for the business. So, we thank you for that.” My father cracks a smile.

“Who the fuck are you?” I look at my father.

“I’m a mother fucking king, and your father. Be happy you were given a chance at this life.” His voice starts to raise with each word. “I am ensuring our legacy lives on. Just as you will do with those fiancées of yours. You will be fucking grateful for every fucking second you get to take another goddamn breath!”

The goddamn Mafia. The Luciano family. Fuck me.

The Lucianos are the biggest crime family on the East Coast. Rivals to the Calabria family who operate out of Las Vegas, Nevada. The Lucianos want to be able to take over both East and West Coast territories, and the bigger they are, the easier that will be.

And now it makes sense why my father and the other families are involved. Promises of greatness, promises of riches and power.

Promises of death.

“Did you even love my mother?” I choke back.

“No. I got an heir, and that was all I truly cared about. When she died, eh, not a loss.” He discusses this like it’s nothing more than a chat about the weather.

I lunge towards him, but Mason steps in front of me and keeps me from charging at him. The bastard. The man I call my father. Pure evil.

My eyes drift towards Mason, and he’s shaking his head slightly, his eyes wide, willing me to try to keep it together.

“So why tell us now? Why are you telling us all this now?” I say through gritted teeth.

My father ponders his answer for a moment, running his thumb over his lip. “Well, we thought the arranged marriages would set you three straight. But you three are still obsessed with this Phoenix girl. So, we thought, why not share with you all just how deep in shit you actually are? That even if you were to somehow find an out of the marriages, we could still make sure you are so tied up with illegal activities, you’d be fucked. You have no choice but to do as we say.”

“What is it with her that you hate? Why don’t you want us around her?” Mason asks.

“She’s after our money, our way of life. She already hurt this family; she could destroy us.”

“What the fuck ever. She doesn’t want a fucking dime. Phoenix literally has nothing on us. Time and time again all she wants to do is live her life,” I spit.

“And now she gets to do that. Without you three in it, of course,” Mayor Turner chimes in.

“This is bullshit.” Colt turns to his father. “And you know it. I can’t even look at you right now. Does Mom know?”

“Your mother knows what I tell her. The money keeps her happy, and quiet.” Mr. Langston shrugs.

I can’t believe any of this. “What about Phoenix?”

“What about her?” my dad quips back.

“I want her left alone,” I growl.

“And she will be. Just don’t fuck off with the marriages. Uphold your end of the contract and she will be left to live whatever boring ass life she wants.” My dad knocks back the rest of his drink and sets it back on the bar cart.

I stand up and the guys follow along with me. “I think we are done here.”

“Sure.” My dad laughs. “Think all you want. Just don’t forget who you work for. See you soon, boys.”

The three of us silently back out of the office and walk our way to the elevator. The entire ride down, the instrumental version of a-ha’s *Take On Me* plays over us. It’s enough to drown out my heartbeat, which is currently ready to burst from my chest. No one is saying a word until we start the drive back towards campus.

“Fuck,” Mason says to his phone. “We need to get back now.”

“What’s going on?” Colt says from behind me.

“It’s Phoenix.”

My throat feels like it’s closing. I am completely on edge after finding all that out today. “Talk to me, Mase.”

He holds the phone to his ear, I’m assuming trying to call her. He shakes his head. “I don’t know. She just sent a text message to us. All it says was ‘I need you, help’. I’m trying to call her now, but she’s not answering.”

My foot presses the pedal to the floorboard as we fly down the highway towards Darkwood. Colt and Mason are talking, but the sound of the engine and the blood pumping through my veins drown them out.

By the time we get to the school and park, we are all but running out of the car and towards the back of the campus to her “new” dorm.

When we finally reach her room, I pound on the door. “Phoenix! It’s us, open up. Come on, sweetheart.” I hear shuffling on the other side, and then the lock disengages and the door slowly opens.

Standing there is a very pale red head. Her eyes are red, and her cheeks are streaked with tears. She steps aside to let us in, but I brush past the door and wrap her in my arms.

“What happened? Was it the Queens? Someone else on campus? What’s wrong?” I pull her back and study her. She looks ghostly.

“He’s back,” she whispers.

“Who?” I ask.

“Uh, Dax.” Mason calls from the side of her bed. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I know without even looking who she’s talking about.

Her stalker.

Fuck.

“Mason, get some stuff together for her. She’s staying with us for now.” I nod towards her duffle bag.

Mason picks it up and starts to throw some clothes in it. He runs to the bathroom to get her products from in there but stops in the doorway.

“Uh, Dax. You need to see this.” He looks over his shoulder at me.

I move Phoenix to the chair next to her desk and then walk towards the bathroom. The minute I process what I’m looking at, rage fills me. When Colt comes up behind me, he curses under his breath.

Her bathroom is covered in black roses, and pictures of her around campus. The word beautiful written in red on all the photos taped everywhere and on every wall. My stomach drops.

I turn and look at the mirror, and my fists clench at my sides. Written in something red, in big letters: MINE.

“Let’s get her out of here.” I rush towards her and help her stand. Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her close to me. “We’ve got you, sweetheart. You’re coming back with us until we can figure this out. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispers.

All four of us head out of her ‘dorm’ towards ours. She has her arms wrapped around me, and her eyes focus on the ground in front of her. She’s quiet, and I don’t like it. I can’t tell if she’s minutes from losing it and breaking down.

When we get her back up to our dorm, we place her on the couch. I sit next to her and tell the guys to grab her some water and blankets. She leans in close to me, and I kiss the top of her head.

“Talk to me, Spitfire. You have me a little worried.”

“I ... I’m scared, Dax. Being in that dorm, I have no one to run to for help, no one is in that building. Fuck.” She sighs into my chest, and I pull her tighter into me.

“I know. I don’t like you there. You being there, it puts you so far out of reach. They have never done this before. Colt looked through records, and there are dorms that are available

for use, but they stuck you out there. So, until we can find out why, you're staying with us." I run a hand over her hair.

She doesn't say anything else. She just lays on me, her eyes closed, her lips turned downward.

There's a fire in me. A need to protect her. This woman means more to me than I can even put into words. I did a shit job protecting her last time, and that won't happen again. My father, the Queens, the Mafia, fuck them all.

Every fiber of my being will go into keeping Phoenix safe.

The world be damned.



Chapter Twelve

PHOENIX

“THANKS FOR WORKING with my schedule. This week has been a little hectic.” Dr. Parker looks at me through his black rimmed glasses. His light blue button-down dress shirt and khaki dress pants give nothing away that he has had a busy week.

“Sure, Doc. I mean, glad I could be flexible for you.” I lean forward and put my arms on my knees. I’m tired. I’m exhausted. “Happy to give up my Friday morning.”

“What’s going on, Phoenix? You seem a little distressed.”

I let out a small groan. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Phoenix.” Dr. Parker looks at me, his eyes narrowing.

“Like I said yesterday, the headmaster moved me into this decrepit fucking hole in the wall, inside a building that is used for storage. Well, except for now the guys have me staying with them, temporarily. But that’s not even the worst part.” I bite my thumb nail. “Well, that’s probably the catalyst. God only knows the motive, but fucking put me in the fucking crosshairs.”

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is I’m out of the frying pan into the fire.” I lean back against the couch and look up at the perfectly unstained ceiling. Which of course it is, because this school would never let anyone really see the cracked disgusting version of itself.

“You know I can help, but you have to talk to me. Look, I know things are hard, and I’ve been doing all I can to help, but

you have to talk to me,” Dr. Parker pleads.

For a moment, I merely sit there in silence. Truthfully, Doc here has been more helpful, though slightly annoying at times, than I thought. But I don't know what he can actually do. If the Kings can't do anything, why the fuck would Dr. Parker make headway?

“He found me.” I let out a long sigh.

“He? Who?” He scrunches his face. “Your biological dad?”

I shake my head. “No. I only wish it was. It's him. The stalker.”

He nearly jumps from his seat. “Wait, what? Phoenix—”

“Stop. The Kings are taking care of it.” I wave him off. “There's nothing you can do.”

“The authorities. We can get you moved back into a normal dorm. The hell there isn't something I can do!” This is the first time I've heard a very uncontrolled Dr. Parker. He looks like he's pissed.

“Doc. Just drop it. You worry about you, and I'll worry about my bullshit.”

He walks over to the couch and sits down next to me. “Phoenix, let someone worry about you. Let someone want the best for you. Let someone in. You have been dealing with so much over the last year, but I have the ability to help. Let me.”

I stand up and grab my bag. “I have someone I let in. Three someones. Who, strangely enough after all the bullshit, I still let in, and look where that got me.” I head to the door and reach out towards the handle. “I'll be fine. They will protect me. I can't even piss without one of them standing outside the door. I mean, when I open this door, Mason will be standing right outside. Waiting. I'm good, Doc. I'll be fine.”

I pull back the door and step out of the room to see Mason leaning against the receptionist's desk. He cracks a smile, but it quickly disappears once he sees that I'm just not in the mood to deal with it.

“You all right, Red?” Mason asks.

“Yeah, I just need to get out of here. Can we get to class?”

Mason checks his phone and stuffs it back into his back pocket. “Come on. It’s time for math.”

Mason and I make our way out of Forthright and head towards Emerson. He takes hold of my hand and squeezes it. Of course, because people here love a good gossip column, people are staring at the sight before them. Since we all know, the Kings are engaged to the Queens.

I’m the whore they know and hate.

“You tensed. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I look down at the ground as we walk.

Mason stops and hauls me into him. “No. Fucking bullshit, Red. Talk to me.” He grabs my chin with his fingers and forces me to look up at him. “Now.”

“Hey, you two okay?” Colt’s voice comes from behind me.

“Yeah, just trying to get our girl here to tell me what’s going on in that mind of hers,” Mason says as he stares into me.

Our girl. God, I love hearing that. But then the reality sets in. The reality that I’m not fully theirs. Sure, they can say I am, they can call me things that make it seem like I am, but they are still supposed to marry the Queens of Darkwood.

I’m just the fucking court jester.

“It’s nothing. I just have a lot on my mind. It’s been a bit of a long week. You three didn’t get moved into a new shit hole. Not to mention, these past couple weeks have been fucking a roller coaster of emotions and truths. So, if I seem out of it, yeah, that’s why.” I don’t break eye contact; I don’t want any more questions.

I don’t need the anxiety of it.

This week has been full of people in this school, back on the bully train. People reminding me that I still have no clue who my father is. That my life has been nothing but a lie.

And even with the kings, I'm still nothing but alone.

I don't want to need them. But I still feel more whole with them than without. They have become a weird sense of stability in my very unstable life.

Colt wraps his arms around me from behind. He kisses the top of my head and turns me around to face him. "Baby girl." It's all he says before he leans down and meets my lips with his. A soft caress of his lips against mine. His arms squeeze me, pulling me closer as he continues to kiss me. When Colt pulls back, the corner of his mouth lifts, and I can see the fire in his eyes.

Colt's always the quiet one. A man of very little words. He tends to show me how he's feeling, a look, a touch, it's his way of telling me. And right now, the man looks like he wants to lock me up in his bed and get lost in me for the foreseeable future.

A shiver of excitement runs through me.

Shaking my head, trying to bring myself back down to earth, I clear my throat and take a step back. "Come on, boys. We've got some numbers to add." I start walking backwards and then spin on my heels and take off towards the Emerson building. I hear the two of them jog up behind me, Mason reaching for my hand on my right and Colt on my left, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

We walk into class, Mason heads off to his row, while Colt and I make our way to our seats.

When I get to my desk, I let out a gasp. "What the fuck?" I'm staring at a giant dildo on my chair and the word 'WHORE' written in marker on the top of my desk. I hear a shuffle come from my left and hands that wrap around my arms from behind me.

I reach down to rip off the dildo only to find it glued to the seat. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Let me try." Mason grabs hold of the world's strongest dildo glued to a seat and yanks. Nothing. "What the hell was this bonded with? Gorilla Glue? Jesus fuck." Colt goes to hold

down the desk and Mason yanks again, finally freeing part of the dildo. Except the base is still stuck to the chair and now it's just ripped dildo balls on my chair.

"Is there a problem, folks?" Mr. Fellows calls from the front of the class as he approaches his desk.

"Not really, sir." Mason waves the dildo in the air. "Sort of solved the problem. Seems someone trashed Ms. Hayes's desk."

I can feel my face turning red. There's a good possibility that I match the shade of my hair right now. "Oh my fucking god, stop waving it around." He looks at me and smiles. "Mason! Put the broken dildo dick down!" I say through gritted teeth.

Mason continues to study it and play with it when Bianca walks in and starts cackling like a hyena. "Oh my god. Phoenix! You really shouldn't bring your toys to school. This isn't a place for show and tell with things like that."

"Actually, I think someone moved your desk over here. See? It has your name on it." I point to 'WHORE' on the top of the desk. "And that dick you normally have shoved up your ass got stuck to the seat. So, you're welcome. We removed it for you." I cross my arms over my chest.

"You fucking bitch. You know all you are is a warm hole they can stick their dicks in, right?" She takes a step closer to me. The room has gone completely silent, minus a few snickers here and there. Even the teacher is sitting there watching this play out.

Way to take control there, teach.

"Hm, yeah. Could be true, but at least they *want* to stick it in my hole. They wouldn't touch you if their dicks were rotting with disease and your used up pussy was the cure."

Audible gasps echo around the room as my fellow classmates wait to see what happens next. I stare at the Duchess of Bimbos, not backing down to her bullshit. Because let's face it, I know this desk shit was her doing.

"Sit down, Bianca," Mason rumbles from behind me.

I turn to him and furrow my brows. “I don’t need you fighting my fights.”

“Aw, how cute! Big strong Mason to save the day.” My head snaps back towards her. Bianca puts a hand over her heart. “Trailer trash and Mason, forever. Well, not really forever. I mean, they *are* going to marry us.”

“Let me assure you, I do not need any of them to fight my battles.” I clench my fists at my sides, willing myself to keep from having her meet my left hook. My nails dig into my palms.

“Are you sure about that?” she says ominously.

“All right. How about we settle down,” Mr. Fellows says, directing our eyes to him. “Ms. Hayes, please find another open seat for this class, and let’s make it fast. We have wasted enough time.”

I roll my eyes and mutter, “Yeah, because you just sat there, getting your jollies off waiting for a cat fight.”

“What was that, Ms. Hayes?”

“Oh! Nothing. I was just thanking you for letting me sit elsewhere.” I head over to the other side of the room and throw myself into the first seat that I see is free.

I turn and look at Mason and Colt who are both staring back at me. Colt looks pissed, while Mason looks sad. Mason mouth’s ‘I love you’ and gives me a reassuring smile. I grin back and then turn my attention towards the front.

About halfway through class, I hear commotion over on the other side of the room, and I look up to see both Colton and Mason getting up from their seats. I pull my brows together in confusion. Mason shoots me a look and points to his phone. I nod, not even sure if he’s telling me to check my phone or they got a call.

Mr. Fellows ignores the disruption, of course, as they are the Kings of Darkwood. They get away with anything and everything. I roll my eyes and look back at my notes.

When class does finally let out, I grab my things and pull out my phone. Sitting there is a text from Daxon.

DAXON:

Hey, Spitfire. We got summoned. Hope to be back by lunch. If not, when school lets out, we'll see you in our dorm. Your code to let you in our door is the same as yours in your old dorm.

I smile and head to my next class, knowing they will be back soon. And then they can also explain to me how the hell they get out of everything all the fucking time.

I want that fucking privilege too.

English goes by pretty uneventfully, well, minus the stares I get from Tiffany. Between her eyes flitting back between her phone and me, I thought she would give herself a stroke. No. Such. Luck.

By the time English is done, I still haven't heard from the guys. Heading towards the dining hall, I pull out my phone and send them a text in the group chat.

ME:

Hey are you all okay?

Radio silence.

Letting out a sigh, I put it back in my pocket. When I make my way inside the dining hall, I realize there are a lot of eyes on me. Students watching my every move.

Take a picture, fuckers, it'll last longer.

I head over to the pizza station and grab a couple giant slices of the meat lovers. In my head I laugh knowing Mason would've definitely made a joke about this. I look around and find a table off in the corner with no one sitting at it. I pass the Kings' table and frown a bit at seeing it empty. Even the deplorable Queens aren't here.

Which, for the record, I'm okay with.

I have had enough of their bullshit today. Well, I've had enough of their bullshit to last a lifetime, really. They are relentless. Dax needs to figure out how to get them under control. You would think since they got what they wanted, they would back off.

But they won't give up until there's nothing left of me.

Good luck, cunts.

I set my tray on the table and slide into the seat and look at the yummy goodness in front of me. Seriously, fuck diets. Give me pizza and greasy burgers every fucking day. These snobs have no idea what they are missing.

I pick up the gooey slice of pizza and take a huge bite. The tomato sauce leaves a tanginess on my tastebuds and satisfying crunch of the crust has me closing my eyes as I enjoy my bite.

A throat clearing has my eyes shooting open. Fuck.

"Why, Phoenix. How nice to see you here." Chad smirks.

I look up and swallow the food in my mouth. I narrow my eyes at him. "It's a dining hall, Chad. Where else would I be at lunch?"

"How have you been, Phoenix?" He leans forward. "I mean, since your failed attempt of unaliving yourself."

I drop the pizza in my hand back down to the plate and stare right through him. "I'm going to say this as nicely as I can. Take your dick out, curl up in a ball, then reach underneath and try to stretch that tiny dick of yours back to your ass and go fuck yourself."

"Wow, what a mouth you have on you. Do you kiss your daddy with that mouth? Oh, wait. My bad. You don't know who your daddy is." Chad chuckles at his own lame attempt to hurt me.

"What do you want, number two?" I pick up my pizza and take another bite.

"Number two?" He tilts his head in confusion.

“Well, yeah. I mean, I know you were hoping Bianca would choose you over the Kings, but she used you for what, a hot minute? Then as soon as she got that ring, pushed you right out the door. Always second best. I mean, your second string on the football team too? That’s gotta hurt. Shit, I didn’t even choose you over the Kings. You’re like always the bridesmaid and never the bride.” I take a sip of my water and continue to stare at him. If he thinks he can come over here and intimidate me, he’s got another thing coming.

“Oh, the Kings? You mean the guys who are engaged to the Queens, yet keep you as their side piece? Tell me, Phoenix, do you really think this’ll end well for you?” The corner of his lips turn up, and his smile is nothing but sinister.

Truth be told, nothing in my eighteen long years already on this earth has turned out well for me. Do I think this will? No, I don’t. But I can’t tell him that. I can’t let him even think I worry about it. Worry that I’m head over heels for the Kings of Darkwood and they will rip my heart right out. Again.

“Are you always this charming with the ladies? Regular ladies’ man, are you? I bet you have them crawling over themselves to get to you.” I look past him dramatically. “Oh, damn. I guess not.”

“You get easily distracted, don’t you?” He leans back in his chair.

“What are you talking about, Chad?”

“You really should pay attention to your surroundings.” He winks.

“What do—” My words are cut off by a cascading cold liquid being poured over the top of me. When it stops, I hear a sound of crashing behind me and the smell of lemon and dirt hit my nose. I stand up and turn around to see Bianca and the two other Queens laughing and pointing at me. On the floor is a mop bucket that the liquid came from.

The fuckers poured dirty mop water on me.

“Ew. Phoenix, you really should take better care of your hygiene. You smell like mildew!” Bianca holds her nose, and

the other two fake gag.

“Oh man. You really do stink, Phoenix.” Chad holds his hand over his mouth.

“What the ever-loving-fuck, Bianca?” I stand there, cold and wet. I’m sure at this point they can see my bra through my very wet shirt. I don’t even care.

“We could smell your skanky garbage pussy across the dining hall. We just wanted to help you shower.” Tiffany cackles.

I look around and see teachers headed this way, students have their phones out, now recording the whole thing. Bianca and the fuck faces leave, and Chad follows like the dog he is, making a gagging sound as he walks past me. I stand there completely stunned.

“Ms. Hayes. What is the meaning of this?” Mr. Fellows walks up to me with his arms folded over his chest.

“You know, I have no idea. If and when you find out, could you send me the memo?” I scoff as I flap my arms, water flying off me.

“Well, you will need to get a mop and clean this up.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I clench my fists at my sides. Even though the water was cold, my rage is now making my blood boil. “You saw them dump that on me! Why are they not here cleaning this up? They did this!”

“I didn’t see anything. I just see you standing here soaked, with dirty water all over the floor. I can only assume it’s your fault,” he says matter of factly.

“So, I just poured dirty mop water all over myself? Does that seem like a logical thing I would do, Mr. Fellows? In the middle of me eating my lunch, stop, grab the bucket, and pour it right over my head?”

“Seems like that’s what happened.” He puts his hands now in his pockets as he rocks back on his heels.

“You know, for a teacher, you’re as fucking stupid as they come. How the hell did you get a teaching license? Who did

you suck off?”

“Enough! Get down to the headmaster’s office now!” his voice booms, echoing off the walls.

Smiling, I grab my bag and throw it over my wet shoulder. “Well, guess that got me out of cleaning up!” I taunt as I walk away.

Though, I’m not headed to the headmaster, I’m going back to the guys’ room to shower and clean up. It’s Friday, so I’m completely over this week, and the boys have a party tonight.

And I need a night to forget about everything in my life right now.

I want to forget it all.



Chapter Thirteen

COLTON

“WHERE ARE WE EVEN HEADED TO?” Mason turns towards Dax, who is driving us to an unknown location. “It’s Friday. I wanted to be balls deep inside Red. Not being called to some bullshit assignment.”

“Wherever these coordinates are leading us to. And we don’t have a choice in the matter. I’d rather be anywhere but where we are going,” Dax sighs.

He’s right. Our fathers are into some heavy shit we had no knowledge of. The fucking Luciano Family. The Mafia. Drugs, money laundering, and fucking weapons. Even the marriage contracts are all tied to this.

They dropped a fucking bomb on us.

Their businesses are so deep in all this. All these companies and shell corporations. Fuck, I didn’t even know they had strip clubs. Everything I do, I have to be careful about it. Derek Langford is good at what he does.

Last thing I need is for him to know I’m looking into all this. And I’ll be honest. I’m not even sure I understand what all “this” is. I only know how dangerous this whole situation we are in, is. I don’t know all the players or how far down the rabbit hole this goes.

And how much this may affect Phoenix.

We pull up to a warehouse in a remote location pushed back behind a thicket of trees. If you didn’t know it was here, you would never find it. The gravel crunches underneath the

tires. Dax stops and turns off the engine, letting out a loud sigh. I immediately go into a heightened alert state of mind.

“Let’s get this over with.” He pushes open his door and hops out.

Mason follows from the passenger side. I take a moment to look around from inside the vehicle. There are other cars here, one that I notice is my father’s. Of course he’s here. My money is on Emerson and Turner being here, too.

I hop out and survey the area around us. Immediately, I spot the cameras hidden in the trees. Well, I can guarantee they already know we’re here. I look towards the warehouse and notice two armed men step out and stare at us. I instantly recognize them from my father’s security detail.

Nodding to Dax and Mase, all three of us make our way over towards them. When we approach them, I step in front of Dax and Mason. Going in first will allow me to scope out any exits and threats. Without saying a word, the bald one punches in a code on a keypad at the door and nods for us to proceed through.

The warehouse is dark, but towards the back, there’s bright light and loud voices, some laughing and coughing. I can smell the cigar smoke the closer I get to the back. I look up and around and again, seeing all the security cameras and guards posted around various doors. It’s an empty warehouse. No crates, no signs of use. Just a large hot and sweaty warehouse. We walk through a set of doors to find who we came to see.

“Ah, there they are.” Mayor Turner turns as we step closer. I hear an audible hitch in Mason’s breathing as all three of us see what is before us.

“Boys, I’d like you to meet Mr. Luciano, Don of the Luciano Family.” Mr. Emerson introduces us to him, and he stands to shake our hands.

“So nice to finally meet you three. I have heard some great things about you,” he says as he sits back down at the head of the table.

My father gestures to three chairs next to us, and we pull them out and sit down. They move to stand behind us. Already, I can feel sweat drip down the back of my neck. I look across the table and see three other guys sitting around us.

“Let me just start off by saying, I’m sorry my brother couldn’t be here. He’s my second in command. He had other things to take care of, but you’ll get a chance to see him soon. But I digress. Boys, I’d like you to meet Jasper Ricci, my consigliere.” He gestures to the man sitting to his right. Ricci is an older gentleman, bald and overweight. His breathing is heavy, and his fingers look like sausages. He sits in a black suit that looks to be about a size too small.

Ricci looks like he is one plate of meatballs away from a heart attack.

“The man next to him is one of my capos, Carmine Agosti.” Carmine is a relatively younger looking man. I would venture to guess he’s in his late twenties. He’s dressed in a black button-down shirt, which is all I can see from where I sit.

“The man standing there behind Carmine is one of my enforcers. Nicholas Pellegrini.” Now this man is not a man I want to fuck with. He must stand at least six foot five. He looks like he does strong man competitions.

“And this is my soldier, Giovanni Russo.” He points a kid that is probably not much older than us. “Gio here is what we like to call a ‘man of honor’ or as I just said, soldier. Now, Gio helps us by collecting some of the payments from our dealers, don’t you, Gio?”

Gio’s eyes suddenly go wide, and his face pales. “Yes, boss. I-I do.”

“Yeah, yeah, you do.” Luciano sighs. “Maybe you can share with the class, then, where the fuck my money is.”

“I-I don’t know what you mean, boss.” Gio looks like he’s going to hurl. His leg is shaking, and his eyes are darting back and forth between all of us.

“Oh. You don’t know what I mean? You don’t know what I fucking mean? Ha. I didn’t know you were a fucking comedian, Gio. I woulda had you entertaining us.” Luciano goes quiet, and I notice that his enforcer has now moved directly behind Gio.

This isn’t good for Gio. Oh, fuck, this isn’t good.

“You were short. And this isn’t the first time. So, tell me why? Why did you do it? Why would you steal from me?” Luciano suddenly puts on an act of concern. His voice softening, his hand on his heart.

“N-no—”

“Don’t lie, Gio. Just tell me. I get it.”

Gio starts to tear up and sniffle. “My sister. She didn’t get her scholarship for college. I-I was gonna pay it back. I swear.”

“Why didn’t you just come to me? Tell me? I woulda helped you.” Luciano sits back in his chair.

“I was too scared to ask for help.”

“You were too scared.” Luciano shrugs. “Not too scared to steal from me, but too scared to ask for help. See, I don’t think that’s the real reason, but that’s okay. Either way, I can’t have someone as a part of this family, that I can’t trust. And that’s too scared to come to me.”

“No! Please! Don’t! I’m sor—”

It takes everything in me to not flinch from the gunshot. Pellegrini held the gun up to the side of Gio’s head and pulled the trigger. Brain matter and blood splattered all over the floor, next to where Gio was sitting.

His body slumps to the side, and he falls out of the chair into the blood. I feel Mason tense beside me, and I can hear Daxon take in a quick breath. All three of us are frozen as we watch the blood start to spread out along the floor.

I take a quick survey of the room, and everyone is still just staring at the dead body on the floor. As if they are waiting for it to jump back up.

Fuck, this isn't good.

I hear Mason's breath start to quicken, and I tap my leg with his to try and get him to calm down. We can't show any weakness in all this. I still don't know why we're here. For all I know, we are next in line for a bullet to the head.

"Such a shame. I liked the kid." Luciano shakes his head. "But I don't like liars."

Our fathers are still standing behind us not saying a word. I can hear my heart beating, and I'm pretty sure I can hear Mason's too, but I need to remain as calm as possible.

"He was spending it on hookers and blow. I got eyes and ears, everywhere. I don't like to be deceived." Luciano tilts his head to the side as he continues. "You never know who's on my payroll."

"Here's the thing." Mayor Turner walks around the table until he is facing us from the other side. "You three are now business partners, like ourselves, for the Luciano family. You're an extension of us, so to speak." He turns his head and looks at the very dead Gio. "So, when we send you on little jobs, we want you to remember who it is you're working for."

"Yeah, remember it's not just us that you have to worry about," Mr. Emerson speaks up behind Daxon.

"You're scaring them." Luciano laughs. "Look, I'm a nice guy. I don't like to kill. I just really like my money. Just as your fathers do. Play nice. And we will all get along swimmingly for years to come." Luciano gets up and buttons his suit jacket. "Don't worry about the mess. I'll have my cleaners come in and take care of it."

Luciano and his goons all walk towards the exit of the warehouse, leaving us with our fathers. And the dead body. Which is going to really start stinking up the place sooner rather than later with how hot it is in here.

With Luciano finally gone, Daxon is the first to speak.

"What the fuck was that? What the hell are we involved in?" He runs his hands through his hair, pulling at the ends.

“I told you, son, this is our business. We work with the family. I don’t understand how you can’t comprehend that.”

“Dad, that was fucked six ways to Sunday! Those men ...” Dax bends over, his hands on his knees as he tries to suck in deep breaths.

“We already told you we weren’t fucking around. Your marriages, your lives, they are all planned for a reason. Get the fuck in line son. Stop fucking with the trash pussy and get the fuck in line. Now, I’m headed out of town for business, do yourselves a favor and get your shit together,” Emerson growls.

“We just wanted you boys to understand how deep this goes. Our lives, our businesses, depend on all of this. Don’t let us down.” Mayor Turner smiles and heads towards the door we came in from.

My father and Emerson follow.

And all three of us are left standing there, not even sure what just happened. Yet we saw it with our own eyes.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Mason clutches his stomach, his face pale and sweaty.

“That makes two of us.” Dax runs his hands over his face.

“Let’s just get the fuck out of here.” I start to head towards the door. The smell of blood and gunpowder still lingers in the air, and I know all three of us need a shower and some hard liquor to forget what we just witnessed.

We make our way back to Darkwood in complete silence. The three of us trying to process what the hell we just witnessed. My mind is thinking of Phoenix and how to keep her safe from all this.

And I know my brothers are thinking the same.

Still, in the back of my mind, I am trying to figure out the connection that she has with our fathers. What is it about her that threatens them? Or does it run deeper?

I know that’s what it is. She’s a threat. Just not sure anymore to whom.

When we make it up to the dorm, each breaking off into our own rooms. I'm suddenly stopped by the figure under the covers of my bed, her red hair sprawled out on my pillow. Instantly, my cock hardens.

Goddamn she's fucking beautiful.

And completely asleep.

I turn towards my bathroom and quietly close the door so I don't wake her. Turning on the shower to the hottest setting, I step under the water and try to wash away the terror that we faced today.

I always knew my dad had a plan for me. He has been training and grooming me to take over his business since I could walk. But I never thought he was involved with something as nefarious as the Mafia. Working for the fucking Mafia. Fuck me.

I quickly clean off and get out, needing to slide up against the angel in my bed. I grab a towel from the hook and dry off, not bothering to put anything on. When I enter my room, I see her still sleeping on my bed. But the covers have slipped slightly off her, and her tits are hanging out. Her beautiful, silky, bitable tits are staring at me, begging to be played with.

Slowly, I peel the rest of the comforter away from her, revealing she's laying in my bed completely naked. I immediately grab my cock and stroke it, holding back a groan. Fuck, she's perfect.

I need a taste. I need to taste her on my tongue. Have her coming in my mouth.

As quietly as I can, I get on the bed, softly grabbing her legs and slowly opening them. With no resistance, she opens for me, and I can see her pussy glistening and wet.

I bend down and with a long slow swipe, lick up her slit. When my tongue runs over her clit, she lets out a soft moan. Her eyes are still closed, but her body starts to respond to me.

I spread her open and circle her bundle of nerves with my tongue, then ever so slightly graze my teeth over it. Her hands

fly to my head, and she starts grinding against my face. I look up and see her eyes start to flutter open.

“Colt. Oh god.” Her breathing picks up, and hands grip my hair tighter, keeping me right where she wants me.

“Baby girl, you taste so good.” I pull back slightly to slip a finger inside her. “Fuck.” She’s so wet, so tight. It’s heaven. I can feel her squeezing my finger as I slide it in and out of her. My mouth goes back to sucking and teasing her clit, as I enjoy watching her start to find her release.

And I love this. I love watching her moan for me. Knowing I’m pushing her to the edge. My cock is weeping for me to slide into her.

She’s everything.

This woman, this strong fucking woman, has stood and faced things no one should ever have to face. Every time she gets knocked down, she rises up.

She deserves the world.

And I plan on giving it to her.

“Oh, fuck. Just like that, Colt. I’m gonna come. Please. Please don’t stop.” Her breathing becomes heavy, and her body starts to vibrate.

And then she falls. In a beautiful bliss of a release, she lets out a loud scream coming from her beautiful lips. Screaming my name as she rides out the wave.

“Fuck, Red. That’s music to my ears.” I turn to see Mase and Dax sauntering into the room. Her orgasm is like a sirens call, beckoning to them.

I slowly kiss my way up to her lips. I kiss the sides of her mouth before I crush my lips to hers, letting her taste herself on my tongue.

I feel the bed shift and I know Mason and Daxon have joined us. I pull back and settle between her legs, needing to feel her pussy wrapped around my cock.

Mason leans down and captures her lips with his. Daxon's mouth finds her nipple, and she moans into Mason's mouth. I grab her ankles, spreading her legs apart as I rub the head of my cock along her pussy.

"Please, Colt," she groans against Mason.

"Do you want Colt to fuck you, baby? You want him to stretch that tight pussy of yours with his cock?" Mason asks.

"Y-Yes. Please. Please fuck me," she begs, her voice husky and low.

I rub the head of my cock up and down her slit and then slowly push inside her. My head tips back, and I feel like my cock is being swallowed up by her. She's so tight, so warm. I've died and gone to pussy heaven.

"Fuck, baby girl. You're squeezing my cock," I breathe out. Slowly, I start thrusting into her. Mase and Dax both have their cocks out with her hands wrapped around them. Daxon leans forward, pressing the head of his cock into her mouth.

"That's it, sweetheart. Let me use that mouth of yours. Fuck," Daxon hisses. She lifts her head up as Dax grabs the back of her head to hold her there while he begins to fuck her mouth, her hand still wrapped around Mason, stroking him.

I watch as her tits bounce with each thrust into her. She moans around Dax's cock, tears starting to well in her eyes. I can feel her pussy tightening around me, squeezing me. Fuck, she's perfect.

Everything about Phoenix is perfect. She fits us. She was made for us. Every king needs a queen.

Phoenix is our mother fucking queen.

I reach down between us and slowly start to circle her clit with my finger. I want to feel her come all over and squeeze the fucking life out of my cock. As I slowly tease it, I feel her hips slightly thrust up to try and meet my movements. Dax pushes his cock deep into her mouth, holding it at the back of her throat. She gags slightly, and her pussy tightens. Fuck.

“Come for me, baby girl. Come all over this cock with Dax’s cock in your mouth.” I instantly feel her pussy vibrating around me, her eyes rolling back into her head as she lets out a muffled scream.

I grab her hips and slam into her, her entire body shaking through her release, and I feel the telltale sign that I’m about to come. I thrust one last time and roar as I flood her pussy. My vision blacks out, and my heart is beating wildly out of my chest. Holy fuck.

I slowly pull out of her and try to catch my breath and come down from the high of my orgasm.

“Oh, look at that, baby. Colt’s just dripping out of you. Think you can take another cock?” Mason says as he kisses the side of her face.

She doesn’t say anything; she just moans around Dax’s dick.

Mason and I switch spots. I lean down and nibble on her ear. “Phoenix, you have no idea how good you feel wrapped around me. I could bury my cock in you all day.”

“Holy ... baby. Oh my god you feel so amazing.” Dax pulls his cock out and nods to Mase. Mason picks her up and turns her on her hands and knees.

With her ass up in the air, Mason slams back into her, causing her eyes to go wide, her mouth hanging open. Dax moves around to her front, lying against the pillows, and drags his cock along her lips.

I wrap my hands around her hair, and her breathing picks up, her pussy being wrecked by Mason.

“See that cock in front of you, baby? Wrap your pretty little lips around it, suck his dick and make him come down your throat.” I push her head down around him, she gags slightly at the intrusion.

“Fuck, sweetheart. That’s it. Make me come. Oh shit, you feel so good.” Dax drops his head back as I hold her hair. Her body is jolting forward as Mason fucks her hard. His hand comes down on her ass, leaving a nice red tinge.

She looks beautiful like this. Her ass red, her mouth full of cock, her body and mind lost in the pleasure. I start to see her body shaking, and I look back and see Mason reaching under to play with her clit as he fucks her. Within seconds, she's screaming around Dax's dick, her body convulsing from wave after wave of her release.

"Oh fuck, I'm—" Dax groans as he stiffens, coming down her throat.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Mason's breathing heavy and then shuts his eyes as he finds his own release. He squeezes her hips and groans as he comes.

I release her hair and catch her as she starts to fall forward. I wrap my arms around her, pick her up, and take her into the shower. I start the water back up again as her head rests in the crook of my neck.

Once I get her in the shower, I get her cleaned up. She opens her eyes and looks at me she pushes up and kisses my lips. She rests her head against my chest, and I feel my heart swell.

When I finally have her all cleaned up, I turn off the shower and dry her off. I lean down and place my arm under her knees and lift her up, carrying her to my bed. The other two have already left the room, leaving her with me.

I lay her softly in bed as she stares up at me. I pull the covers up over her and kiss her forehead. Then I walk to the other side of the bed and slide in beside her, pulling her chest to mine.

I capture her lips in mine, pulling back slightly to see her smile. My hand caresses her cheek. "Do you have any idea how much you mean to me? I would do anything for you, Phoenix."

"I know," she whispers. Her eyes well, and a tear slips down and wets the pillow.

"I love you, Phoenix. I fucking love you." I brush my lips along hers.

“I love you, Colton.” My lips crush into hers, and I tug her into me, her body molding into mine.

She falls asleep not long after, tired from our activities. I tuck her head into me and rest mine on hers. With her body against me, I finally let the darkness pull me under.



Chapter Fourteen

PHOENIX

I LET OUT a sigh as I sit listening to the ring on the other end of the line. She just lets it keep ringing. I honestly don't know why I'm even bothering calling my aunt. She never picks it up, and she ignores me every chance she gets. But I would like confirmation that I'm being abandoned for Thanksgiving. Finally, I get her voicemail. I sigh as the voice in the phone tells me that her box is full. I end the call and open up my text messages.

ME:

Hey. Your voicemail box is full. Guess you're not checking it. Anywho, are you having Thanksgiving, or am I going solo with a turkey sandwich on rye? Maybe a bit of potato salad and a pickle on the side. So yeah, let me know, Auntie.

I hit send with such force, I'm surprised the screen doesn't break, and then I return my phone to my bag. I head over to Forthright for English, stopping at my locker to pick up a couple books that I need to return. As I walk towards the lockers, I see students huddled in front of where mine is. I stop for a moment, my stomach sinking at the crowd gathered by my locker. This can't be a good thing. A few turn and see me coming, moving out of my way.

I look at my locker, instantly having to shove down my anger. Razor blades are taped to the locker with the word "slut" written in what is made to look like dripping blood.

“Wow, you really aren’t liked, are ya? Aw, it’s okay. Just use one of those blades and end it. I mean, no one really wants you here,” some auburn-haired guy says to me, and him and his friends laugh. “I mean, what do you have to look forward to?”

“She’ll be a cheating whore like her mom!” someone else calls out behind me.

“And I know you tried once, but maybe give it another try. You could succeed this time!” another person yells from beside me. I refuse to look at any of them. If I do, I’m liable to smash their fucking faces into the locker.

My skin feels hot, and I want to scream; each laugh breaks yet another piece of me. I shoulder check someone in my way and yank open my locker door. Then I grab the couple of books I need and slam my locker shut. Pushing past them, I start to walk away, until I find myself falling forward.

My knees hit the floor and my books go flying out of my hands. “Mother fucker!” I turn my head back towards the crowd and immediately stand up with my fist cocked. Before I can take a swing on the auburn-haired guy who has the most annoying snort laugh, I’m hauled back into a strong chest. A familiar scent of birch and zest hits me, and snort boy just got saved from a nosebleed, compliments of my fucking fist.

“All of you, get the fuck out!” Daxon yells, and everyone scatters like the cockroaches they are. He turns and looks me over. “Are you okay, Spitfire?” He glances down at my knees, noticing the redness in them.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

“You know you don’t always need to be okay,” he says softly. His hands run up and down my arms, comforting me.

“I don’t have a choice.” I lean down to pick up my books, but he stops me and picks them up. With his free hand, he reaches for mine, and we start our walk towards the library.

“I know you don’t think you have a choice, but you do. It’s okay to lean on someone, on us.”

“And what? Learn to depend on you? Need you to help me through things? Great. Sounds good. Except when you three are ripped from me to marry the Queens,” I scoff. Everyone disappears on me eventually. The guys are having their fun now, sure, but if they haven’t found the way out yet, they won’t.

“We are going to find the loophole. I promise, sweetheart.”

There’s nothing else I can say. Will it hurt when they can’t find that way out? It will break me into pieces. So, I need to live in the moment now, because the day they leave me ...

It will be a dark fucking day.

Once we reach the library, I drop my books off in the return slot and we make our way over to our table. Dax pulls out a chair for me, and then he drops in the one next to me. His arm drapes around the back of mine as he leans over and kisses my cheek.

“What are your plans for Thanksgiving?” He pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Um, well, considering I haven’t heard from my aunt, probably whatever the dining hall is serving up.” I shrug.

“You still haven’t heard from her?” He frowns.

I shake my head. “Nope. She’s radio silent.”

“Well, you won’t be having Thanksgiving here. My dad doesn’t ever celebrate it since my mom ... He usually schedules a weeklong business trip. So, all four of us will be having Thanksgiving at my house. The guys already know, and they’ll be there.”

“Wait, what about their families?”

“Not that big of a deal. Mason will probably have some stupid thing he has to do in the public eye with his family that morning. Probably a parade or some bullshit, but we will all be having dinner at my house. Just us four.” His hand cups my face as he plants a kiss on my mouth. He leans his forehead against mine, and the corner of his lips turn up. “You gonna spend the week with us, Spitfire?”

“Uh, the whole week?” I blink.

“Yeah. The whole fucking week. At my house. Where we can just be us, where I can just feel you up against me while you sleep, and where we can fuck you in every single room there.”

Fuck. Me.

Oh, wait, that’s what they plan on doing. And I really like that idea. A-fucking-lot.

I nod. Unable to answer.

“That’s right you are. Come on. Let’s go pretend to check out books and make out. Maybe I’ll even make you come a few times, too.” Dax stands up, winks at me, and grabs my hand.

And of course, I wouldn’t miss a chance to suck face with him. So, like the whore I am, I take his hand and let him lead me to the land of more orgasms.

* * *

“All right. Listen up.” Ms. Moretti stands up at the stage and calls for our attention. “You only have a couple more weeks left to get your song ready. I need the final list before the end of this class of what song you will be performing. This is it! No more changing. We don’t have time for it. I will leave the clipboard here at the edge of the stage.”

I can feel the nerves start to twist my stomach. It’s one thing to sing to no one, but to have to sing in front of the entire student body who has it out for me is a whole serious thing.

“If you need a band to perform with you, I need to know what you need. If you need a piano, or more than one mic, I need to know. Fill out this list. Now, who has their music or song choice and wants to give it a go?”

No one, and I mean no one, raises their hands. I look away, trying to not meet eyes with her.

“Phoenix? I know you already had your song choice picked out for a while now. What do you say?” Ms. Moretti waves me on stage.

“Um, no thanks. I, uh, would need others.”

“I know. That’s why they pay me the big bucks!” She winks at me and waves me onstage again.

I grab my bag and slowly make my way up.

She pulls me aside for a moment and leans into me. “I took it upon myself to make sure you had people who knew the song for you. I know you have had some struggles with people here.” She places an arm on my shoulder. “But you have a voice that needs to be heard.”

“So, you basically are putting me on the spot. Gee, thanks. That’s sure to win these assholes over.” I cross my arms over my chest. Then I turn slightly and see people getting behind some of the equipment, sound checking. “I don’t know who these people are. They could be setting up to make a fool out of me. I don’t trust them.”

“I know, but *I* trust them. They aren’t easily persuaded by the social norms of this school. Plus, they don’t have a choice.” She smiles.

Great. Fucking wonderful. She’s holding their grades over their heads. I sigh and place my bag on the ground.

“So, they know the song?”

“Yep. They know it. All you have to do is go out there and blow these fucking stuck-up upper-class elite assholes away with what you can do.”

My fucking mouth drops at the words she just let fly out her mouth. I’ve never heard her talk like this, ever. And I think she just became my favorite teacher ever.

I grab the microphone from her and look at the band behind me, faces of those I have never seen here at school. Maybe they’re underclassmen. Then again, I keep my head down and try to avoid everyone at in this hellhole.

“Hi! I’m Brooklynne Foster. But you can call me Brooke.” The girl fiddles a bit with the guitar and then looks back at me. “*I Am the Fire* by Halestorm, right?”

“Uh, y-yeah.” I pull my brows inward and look at all of them.

“Don’t worry, we got you. That’s actually a favorite of mine, so I make these guys play it often, and we know it well. You ready to kick some ass?”

Am I ready to make a fool of myself? Hell no. I let out a long breath. “Fucking ready as I’ll ever be.”

Brooke nods to me and then to the other guys on stage with us. I turn to look out at a sea of faces and suddenly, something feels different. There’s a warmth in me. A surge of sudden power as I hold the microphone. I’m different. For a moment, I feel stronger, more superior. Like I’m done with the bullshit. I’ll always be better than any of these assholes. And I refuse to let them keep kicking me down.

The first notes and chords of the song kick in, and I feel it. I feel the strum of the guitar pulse through me. I hold up the microphone to my mouth and become entranced. Everything fades to black around me. I feel every note, every beat, and every single word. I lose myself in the chorus, and I give everything I am to every beat of that song. With no cares of who else is around me or who is watching, I belt out the words. I let my voice be the powerhouse I know it is, and I fucking roar.

By the time the last note is played, I finally come down from the high I put myself on. Goosebumps form on my skin, and there’s a bit of sweat from the light dripping down my neck. I look over at Brooklynne, finding her mouth is wide open. I see Ms. Moretti with her hands over her mouth. My heart’s still beating a million miles a minute as I look out at my classmates, and they are all sitting there with their jaws on the floor.

Fuck. This was a mistake.

Heat is slowly creeping up my neck. I no longer have the strength I had a few minutes ago. I can feel my breathing starting to come faster. My chest tightens, and I try to swallow the lump forming in my throat. Embarrassed, I drop the microphone and grab my bag. I take off towards the door and I don't turn around, even when I hear Ms. Moretti calling my name.

I head towards my shithole of a dorm room, not wanting to talk to anyone right now, I don't even want to head back to the Kings' dorm. My footsteps are on pace with the beat of my heart. The faster I get there, the better I will be.

Heading into the should-be condemned building, I walk down the hallway to my door. The guys had my room cleaned up and the bullshit taken down. Colt installed a new lock on my door that only the four of us have access too. Not even the school has access. Which Colt told them they could fuck off for even putting me out here in the first place. So, he installed one of his family's security locks on the door. No code, no entry.

When I finally get to my room, the dust and dirt smell hit my nose. No matter how much this place gets cleaned, it doesn't ever get rid of the old smell in here. I crinkle my face at the disgusting and offending odors and drop myself on my bed. Then I pull out my journal and stare at it. Reaching for a pen in my bag, I let out a sigh. It's been a while since I have "Dear Diary"-d myself.

Dear Mom,

Yeah, I know. It's been a minute. But today made me realize how much of a liar you are. I know, a bit harsh. But my give a damn is fucking on zero at this point.

Remember you used to tell me that it didn't matter if no one liked my singing because you do? Well, let the record show that you were not here for that little performance, and it was the most uncomfortable thing ever. Standing there, no one saying anything. No one to tell me it was a good try or clapping for me. No one to hug me when I was done and tell me that I sounded beautiful.

Silence. Pure fucking silence.

And now as I sit here and write this, I think about all the other lies.

What the fuck were you thinking, Mom? How could you keep who my dad was from me? How could you do that to your husband, the man who acted as a father to me?

You know it amazes me that my entire life you and dad told me how important it was to not lie. "Tell the truth, always be honest. People don't like liars. Lying hurts people." You probably should've taken your own advice on this one.

How did you sleep at night!

I hate you for what you did. I hate that you put answers in a box but didn't tell me that they were there. I hate that I have no clue as to where that fucking box is. I hate that you left me to your sister. I hate that she hates you and apparently me as an extension of you.

And even with the Kings, I hate that I still feel so alone.

And I hate that there was no one to tell me they were proud of me today.

That no one was there as I stood on stage to tell me I was an F5 tornado with my voice. That I moved the entire room. No one was there.

No one was there because of your lies and selfishness. And that's what I felt like on Homecoming night.

I was abandoned.

These people around me know what you did. They found out the same time as I did. I'm a leper. They

have literally written me off as a
whore, trailer trash. Worthless to
breathe the same air as them.

And your lies led me to all this
bullshit.

There's obviously nothing I can do
about it, what with you not being here
and all.

Are you still looking down on me?
Do you see what you caused?

I need answers, not lies. And I
wish you'd find a way to give them
to me.

-Phoenix

I close my notebook and turn to look at my nightstand. Opening the drawer, I pull out the locket I can't bring myself to wear anymore. This and the framed picture are all I have left.

I hold the locket in my hand and stare at it. I have so many mixed emotions when it comes to this thing. This was hers, my anchor to her. The one thing that made me feel close to her after she was gone. I swore I would never take it off.

But this also reminds me of all the betrayal. The lies. It reminds me of so much that I don't know, still to this day. There are so many unanswered questions that still surround me and my life. And now I can't bring myself to wear it.

Internally, I chastise myself for not picking through that box sooner. I had so many months to open it and go through it.

My anger and hurt were at the forefront. I should've cast that aside. Instead, I got blindsided by my enemies. My tormentors.

I guess hindsight really is twenty-twenty.

Tears start to stream down my face. What is it about me that makes me no one? Yeah, sure, the guys seem to care about me. Hell, Mason and Colton love me. But still, that doesn't afford me a single thing. It doesn't make my life any better or less complicated. In fact, it just complicates things more.

It doesn't protect me, it doesn't change what happened with my parents, and it doesn't change the fact that they hurt me. They could still hurt me. All of these confessions of love could mean nothing if they have to follow through with the marriages.

And I'm not holding my breath that things will change.

Let's be honest, I love those three. In some weird, fucked up way, I don't think I could do without those three in my life. And yet, I may have to.

I'm drawn to them. They make me feel like my entire body is a live wire when they touch me. My heart beats faster around them. And knowing I may have to give that up ...

I curl up with my pillow and cry. Not because I'm weak, but because I'm strong enough to know and admit that it may come to an end.

Maybe not next week, or even a year from now, but if they can't get out of that marriage contract, all of them will be ripped from me.

Along with my heart.



Chapter Fifteen

PHOENIX

BANG! *Bang! Bang!*

I shoot up from the position I fell asleep in. The room's dark, and I have no idea what time it is. I slowly get up from the bed to another loud set of banging.

"Who's there?" I look through the peep hole, but I see nothing but black. "Hello? Who's out there?"

Silence.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I spin around towards my window. My eyes widen over the fact that someone just tapped against my window. I slowly start to make my way over when the banging on my door starts again.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Who the fuck are you? What the fuck do you want?" The tapping starts up again, but now on both windows. I can't open my door; I can't risk leaving. I have no idea who the fuck is screwing with me.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My head whips from the door to the windows, my heart beating wildly in my chest. It's not stopping. I hear maniacal laughing outside the window, and a growling coming from outside the door.

"What do you want?" I scream. I clutch my chest as the fear sinks deeper in me.

I run over to my nightstand and find my phone. I pull up Daxon's number and call him. As the phone rings, I walk backwards to the corner of the room, clutching the phone to my ear.

"Hey, Spitfire," Daxon answers. "What's all that banging? Are you okay?" His voice suddenly sounds more concerned.

"Please tell me that's you three fucking with me." My voice shakes.

"What're you talking about? Where are you?"

"I'm in my dorm room!" I holler over the banging and tapping.

"What the fuck are you doing there? You know you're supposed to come back to ours!" Dax yells into the phone.

"How about you save your fucking lectures and just get here?" I scream into the phone.

And then it's silent.

Eerily so.

"Talk to me, Phoenix."

"I-It stopped." I look back and forth between the door and the windows. Waiting for the sound to start up again, but the silence carries on.

"Okay, we are on our way there. Do not open the door. We will let ourselves in. Do you hear me, Phoenix?" he commands into the phone.

"Y-Yeah, I hear you." I slide down the corner of the wall and huddle myself into it. I end the call and bring my legs up to my chest.

Who the fuck was out there? My stalker? Students?

This has to be the work of the Queens. Their constant torment and need to push me over the edge. And even though they are engaged to the Kings, they know they don't truly have them. I'm a threat to their plans.

Time seems to move slowly. I have no idea how long I stay like that, frozen, until I hear the beeps on the keypad.

“Red? Phoenix?” Mason’s voice calls out in the dark. He flips on the light and sees me in the corner, still scared to move. He crouches down in front of me. “Hey, hey. It’s okay, we’re here.”

I shake my head. “Where are Dax and Colt?”

Mason cups my face. “They went to go walk around the building. Make sure no one is around. We’re all here for you, baby.” Mason leans forward and kisses my forehead.

“Okay.” My body is still shaking from the adrenaline. I can feel my heart still trying to burst from my chest, and I’m aware of every single sound in the room at this point.

After a while, the other two join us in my room. Daxon looks at me with fury in his eyes.

“Why the fuck did you come here?” Daxon charges towards me. “Where are you supposed to go, Phoenix?”

I raise my chin defiantly. “I needed some alone time. I needed to just get away and be in my thoughts for a goddamn minute.”

“Why? Why the hell do you need to be in your thoughts?” He pushes back.

“Why? Oh, I don’t know, gee. Let me think. Oh! Maybe because this school is Hell on Earth. I don’t have any friends here. People are literally still bullying me, even with the almighty Kings around me. I live in a cesspool of a dorm room. And now I have people terrifying me in this dumpster fire of a room.” Daxon starts to open his mouth, and I hold my hand out to stop him. “No! I don’t care if you are letting me live at your place for now. The fact is, that’s not my home. And who knows how long it will go on for?”

“Forever,” Daxon shoots back at me.

I shake my head. “Not forever, Dax. It may be nice to think, but you three are not any closer to getting out of those marriages. I don’t think your future wives will like me living

with you all. So no, this is not a forever thing. Besides, sometimes I just need me time. I can't be around you three all day long."

Daxon sighs and runs his hands over his face. "Look, I know this is a lot. I get that being here and the shit you deal with isn't easy. But we can't keep you safe if you disappear off on your own."

I scoff, "Like you three do? Like you did the other day?"

Mason winces at my comment, Colton just stares at me. I can see it in both their eyes how much they hate whatever happened when they up and left me there to fend for myself this past Friday. I still never found out why they left class, but they still left me. And there is no way for them to always be around me.

Daxon growls, "We didn't have a choice. You don't understand the bullshit we have to deal with."

"But that's what I mean. Are you going to lock me up in a tower every time you leave? You can't. And I'm done talking about this. The whole conversation doesn't help what just happened. Did you find anything?"

Colton shakes his head. "No, nothing. And somehow the cameras recorded nothing. I need to go back and see if anyone messed with them. They shouldn't have been able to be tampered with."

"Who the hell would do that? Scare me like that?"

"The Queens? Chad? Could've been anyone. We will figure it out." Colt assures me.

"Ugh, this is just too much shit to deal with. Can I not just get through school and move on? If they would just let me be, they wouldn't even know I existed."

"We want you to exist in our lives, Red."

"I get that Mason, but ... I just needed time to decompress. I needed time to think. It's why I came here. I was tired, I needed to write in my journal. Get things out. Today in vocal

class, it just became too overwhelming. Being up there on stage.”

“And look what happened,” Dax snaps.

“Do you think I’m not scared shitless? That I don’t worry every second of my life right now? Dax, I am. But what else can I do? My entire life has been thrown upside down, tossed and torn apart, then burned until its nothing but ash. Sometimes I just need to disappear.”

“Phoenix—”

“No, Dax,” I sigh. “I’m trying. I really am fucking trying here. But even Dr. Parker said that sometimes it’s okay to walk away and come back when you are more level-headed. And that’s what I did.”

“We just want to protect you from all this.”

“Dax, I get it. And you three came to my rescue when I needed you. But what is all this? We don’t know who that was, and there’s still something crazy everywhere I look. I need a bit of normalcy.” I run my hands through my hair. “I just need to find a way back into the dorm rooms.”

“Fine. I get it. But you’re ours to protect, Phoenix. Still, I get that we can be overbearing. We will try to understand that you need some time to work through things. But you have to promise that you call us the moment something happens.”

“I did tonight.”

“I know.” He nods.

“Look, how about all four of us go down to the dining hall and get some food?” Mason cuts in.

“I’m not sitting at your table, I want to sit alone. Can I just have some more time to myself? Also, your table is infested with whatever disease of the month the Queens have.” I fake gag.

Colt lets out a laugh, and Mason smiles.

Dax just shakes his head at me. “Okay. We will sit at our disease infested table, and you can have your space you want.”

“Just make sure you disinfect yourselves before I touch you. I don’t want cooties.”

“Red, I’ll bleach myself clean. Just for you.”

I let out a laugh. “Okay, well, a shower will do. No need to go that extreme.” I smile at the three of them. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Dax asks.

“For coming to my rescue. For understanding that I just need to deal with things in my own way. And sometimes that’s being there but at a distance. For just everything.”

“You’re ours, Spitfire.” Dax leans in and kisses my forehead.

I swallow the words I want to say, *For now*.

The four of us make our way to Dorian, the dining hall, and I immediately head right to the station that has chicken fingers. Once I have my tray loaded up on fingers, fries, and enough ranch for twelve people, I make my way over to a table under the windows.

As I walk past them, I don’t miss how they are staring at me. Dax’s face shows no emotion. His eyes just follow me. Mason’s pouting, and I know he’s fighting the urge to just pull me back to their table. Colton looks like he’s watching whatever is on his phone, but I can see his eyes looking up at me through his black frames.

With my back to them, I sit. I know they are watching and acting like cavemen from afar. Maybe this is me trying to protect myself. I don’t know why I need this, but I do. Maybe this is my getting used to not having them. Or accepting my fate. I just know I need this.

And don’t get me wrong, they will always be my first call for help. But the minute I need help, they smother. Today was an emotional day, and I just need distance to process it all. I need balance.

How the fuck do I find that balance?

As I start to dip my chicken finger in the ranch, an excited voice comes up next to me. “Phoenix! Hey!”

I look up and see Brooke with a tray in her hands smiling down at me. “Um, hi.”

“Mind if I sit?” She pulls out a chair and drops her plate down on the table before I have a chance to answer. “Oh! Chicken fingers! Great choice. That’s a favorite of mine.”

Okay, so she’s the only other student here at this school to eat actual food. Note to self.

“Um, yeah,” I say as I look down at my plate.

“So, you ran out of class today,” she starts. “Why? Do you have any idea how amazing you sounded? Phoenix, you blew it out of this universe!”

“No one said anything. I-I thought ...” Basically, I thought I sucked. I thought they hated it. I thought I embarrassed myself. But I don’t voice these to her.

“No one said anything because you blew everyone away. Your voice is so awesome, it left us all speechless. Look, I know things have sucked around here for you. Well, minus the three slabs of hotness that have not stopped looking at you since you sat down. But, girl, wow. Just, wow. Don’t let the jerks here dull your shine.” She takes a sip of her drink and smiles at me.

Before I can respond to her, I feel a presence behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “Little birdie.” His voice is like nails on a fucking chalkboard.

“Go fuck yourself, Chad. Preferably with a pointy stick.” I look at him as I take a bite of my chicken, and I can hear Chad’s name being called by the Kings. Chairs scrape against the floor, and I know they are on their way over.

“I heard you singing. Just wondering, do you suck dick as good as you sing?” The corner of his mouth tips up in an evil grin.

“Get the fuck away from her, Oliver!” Mason rushes over and slams his body into Chad, pushing him off to the side of the table.

“Whoa, whoa!” He holds his hands up in a defensive position out in front of him. “Fellas, I was just telling Little Birdie here how wonderful her singing was. Nothing to get all protective over.”

“Don’t get it do you? Back the fuck off,” Dax growls.

Chad glances at me. “You know, they can’t be around you all the time. Just saying.” Chills run down my spine, and I can feel all the blood drain from my face at his comment. Chad shrugs, turning on his heel and making his way out of the dining hall.

“Sweetheart, look at me.” Dax puts his finger under my chin and turns me towards him. “Are you okay?”

“I-I don’t know.” I shake my head. This is too much. Too fucking much. “He ... the name ... I can’t ...”

“She’s starting to lose it. Let’s go.” Mason helps me up and starts walking with me out of the dining hall. “I need you to breathe. Some fresh air will help, baby.”

My mind tries to make sense of today. I’m not able to ever just exist. I can’t be alone. If it’s not the guys, it’s the stalker, or the students here. My life is a constant state of chaos.

When we finally get back to their dorm, I walk over to the couch and drop down on it. I rest my head in my hands and let out a long groan of frustration.

“He has to be the one fucking stalking me. He keeps saying the same things the stalker writes.” I let out a shaky breath.

“She’s right. He could be the one. Obviously, we can’t trust him. He’s a creepy fucker. Damn it, I wanna kill Oliver.” Mason comes over and sits down on the couch, pulling me into his side. “We will keep him away from you. I swear.”

“You can’t promise that, Mase. If your dads pull you again ...”

Mase gives me a determined look. “We will figure out a way to keep maybe one of us here with you.”

Dax comes over and sits in front of me and places his hands on my knees. “We don’t have to figure anything out right now. We have our papers to write and Monday starts Thanksgiving break, and we have a whole week together to just enjoy each other and forget about what’s going on around us.”

I start to feel like the walls are closing in again. My head is starting to hurt, and I can feel a tightness in my chest. “I need a shower and some time to think.” Dax nods, and Mason kisses the top of my head. I look over to Colton, who is standing at the kitchen island. He just stares at me as I get up from the couch and head towards Daxon’s room.

When I get inside his bathroom, I lean against the door and let out a sigh. My vision starts to tunnel, and I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. Everywhere I turn, there’s people who hate me, people who judge me, a fucking stalker, or the three demigods in the other room. And this will be the first Thanksgiving without my mother. I feel like I’m losing myself in an ocean of bullshit.

I run my hands over my face and head to the shower, needing to wash away the feeling that I am slowly falling apart. Trevor Hayes dying was the catalyst in my life being turned upside down. The man I thought was my father. The man who raised me as his own. The man I loved as a father. The man who lied to me, along with the woman who carried me inside her.

Had he not died, I wouldn’t be in this position. I’d still be blissfully ignorant to the fact that he wasn’t my dad.

But who is my real father? Who was with my mom before Trevor was? Did my mother even know who it was?

But the other thing that starts to bother me is her death. Sure, the loss of her husband depressed her, but something isn’t right. I can’t put my finger on it, but in the back of my mind, their deaths are not adding up.

They were in love, despite the bullshit. The cheating, the lies, they don’t make any sense. Confusion swirls in my head as I step under the scorching hot water. The sting of the heat

feels so good against my skin. It's almost soothing taking my mind off the pain of my reality.

Almost.

As I wash my hair, my mind floats to my aunt and her lack of communication skills. Seriously, she isn't that old and decrepit that she can't call. Or answer a fucking text. I don't understand her blind hatred for me. Is it really because her sister is my mother?

It's not like I asked to be brought into this world. I certainly did not order up this fucking life.

No, I have the single sperm that beat out all the other sperms to thank for that.

As I rinse my hair, my mind floats to this fucking school and the three appendages that have grown attached to me, who come with their very own set of arranged marriages. I let out a long breath. I have no idea what I am even doing with all this. I can't change how I feel for them as much as I can't change the fact that they are supposed to marry the Queens.

When I got here, I had a clear mission. Get through this year and graduate. Get the hell out of this place and figure out my life.

But now my mission is so murky and muddled, I can't see what tomorrow is supposed to bring.

I'm drowning in quicksand and fighting to get a hold of anything that can help pull me out.

But no one is there. Nothing is around me.

I keep getting pulled under, closer to the darkness.



Chapter Sixteen

MASON

FUCKING THANKSGIVING. Family holidays are a complete joke with my family. We have to be in parades, meet and greet people, kiss babies' heads. Fuck.

I straighten out my tie as I wait for the signal that we need to meet out on the steps outside our house for my father to give his annual Thanksgiving bullshit speech. Looking around my room, I take in how much it truly doesn't feel like home.

My room's decked out with a stone fireplace and dark wood trim. Giant tan drapes hang off my window. My furniture is a dark stained wood with ornate detail along every surface. The walls are covered in a wallpaper that has a golden sheen to them, causing them to shine when the light hits it. Everything about this room isn't me.

I look outside my bedroom window and see the news trucks and crews outside, scattered throughout the front yard and driveway. Don't these assholes have anywhere to be other than here? It's Thanksgiving, I'm sure they want to be with their family.

I know I do.

And I'm not talking about my biological family. In fact, I can't wait to get out of here. The first chance I get, I'm running out the front door. My brothers and Phoenix, that's who I want to be with. Not these people and definitely not Tiffany and her family.

And yeah, they are here too, the Ives.

Gotta put on a front, make all of this wonderful town think we are the perfect family. We will make their lives better, blah blah blah. It's all a crock of shit. My dad, the Ives, they only care about themselves. They would burn this whole city down to the ground if they could, along with every single person in it.

My phone beeps, and I pick it up off the dresser.

DAD:

Downstairs.

I let out a sigh and try to calm myself. This stupid suit feels like it's suffocating me. I rub my temples and count to ten.

I can do this. Get through this and then get back to Red. The woman I fucking love.

And I really do fucking love her. She's my bright light. This stuff that we are involved with, with the Luciano Family, it drags me down. But knowing I get to come back to her, that I get to hold her, kiss her, it makes it better.

She's my way out of the darkness.

You think it would be weird, being in love with a woman you share with your best friends, but it's not. It works for us, it feels natural. I can see it in her eyes how much she loves each of us. And even when she pushes us away, there is still that longing.

I know the situation with our fathers isn't ideal, and I know that keeps her from fully feeling like she can put her walls down. But she's the best thing to ever walk into our shit lives.

And to think we almost lost that. That we could possibly still lose that.

It makes me sick to think about.

I reach the mirror over my dresser and stare back at the Mason who needs to put on an act. The Mason who needs to

be fake and calm. The Mason who needs to play the part of all-American son.

I'd prefer to be the Mason who is balls deep inside that tight pussy of Red's.

And now I'm hard. Awesome.

I internally groan as I try to think of anything to calm my dick. Ah, thoughts of Tiffany do the trick.

Leaving my room, I head down the lavishly decorated hall that makes you afraid to touch anything. Paneling lines the walls, along with expensive artwork from who the fuck cares? Rugs that are probably worth more than a Ford Focus are laid on top of the dark grey marble floor. Gold accents on the lights and door handles pop off the white walls and doors.

When I make it downstairs and into my dad's office, I find all the people I don't want to see waiting on me. Except my eight-year-old little sister, Isabella. She was an accidental pregnancy according to my parents, but I couldn't be happier she's around.

Isabella runs over to me and squeezes me. "Mase!"

"Hey there, squirt. Let me see you." I take her hand and spin her around. Her beautiful blonde hair is braided, and her blue eyes light up in any room. Her maroon lace dress twirls around as she spins. The ruffles on the skirt push outward, making her look like a beautiful ballerina. "You look gorgeous," I say as I bring her back in and kiss her forehead.

"Hey, Mase?" Isabella looks up at me. "Who are these other people?" she whispers.

"Friends of mom and dad. No one important."

"I don't like them."

I let out a chuckle. "That makes two of us, squirt."

"Mase!" a high-pitched squeal comes from where my parents and the Ives are standing, and I instantly feel my stomach turn. Tiffany bounces her way over to me and wraps her arm around mine. She yanks me down a bit to place a kiss on my cheek.

Now I want to set my skin on fire.

Everything in me wants to pull back and push her away, but I'm under the watchful eyes of my parents and hers. I have to make the effort to make this look real. So, I give her a smile, and pat her hand that's wrapped around my arm.

"Aw, did you miss your big brother, Izzy?" Tiffany leans down to smile at my sister.

My sister, not one to take any shit from anyone, puts her hands on her hips and leans forward to go face to face with the whore on my arm. "First, it's Isabella. I know your pea brain can at least remember that. Second, why wouldn't I have missed my brother? Third, how about you mind your own business?" Tiffany lets out a gasp, surprised my sister had the gall to snap at her.

I bite the inside of my cheek and try my best not to let out a laugh.

"Mase, sweetie, are you going to let your sister talk to me that way?" Tiffany turns to me.

"My sister can do whatever she damn pleases," I shoot back.

"Mason," my dad calls from his circle of assholes. My mother, elegantly dressed in a modest hunter green dress, stands next to him, her eyes narrowing at me. I know it's a warning to behave. But the woman's as scary as a fly.

I never respected my mother. Heather Turner's a money hungry, backstabbing bitch of a mother. She married my father, James, simply for the money and power. Once they had me, my mom had fulfilled her obligation. Nannies raised me, helped me with my homework, even sometimes ate dinner with me.

Unless it was an election season or some bullshit fakery we needed for promotions. Then we were one big happy family.

I am thankful that the same nannies that helped raise me are raising Isabella. And the fact that our mother is a cunt doesn't seem to be affecting her at all.

I head towards the sharks and stop next to my father. With my hands in my pockets, I nod to the Ives and give a tight smile to my parents. “Mom, Dad.” I feel Tiffany slide up next to me, again holding onto my arm.

Acid. Maybe acid can take her touch off of me.

“Son, we were just talking about venues and dates for the wedding.” My father smiles as Tiffany clutches tighter against me.

“Yeah!” Tiffany breaks in. “We were thinking the Black Shore Golf Course. Oh, it would be so pretty to have the wedding there. It would definitely hold all three-hundred and fifty guests. Or more, even.”

That turning in my stomach has now become bile in my throat. The thought of even marrying her makes me so sick, I could vomit on their Italian designer shoes right now. I’m willing myself to keep it down and make it through the next couple hours of hell.

Then I can get back to actually being where I want to be. With my girl and my brothers.

“Great.” It’s the only word I can muster up.

Maria Ives takes a small sip of her red wine and looks at my *fiancé*. “I think we should have a couple wardrobe changes. Your dress for the ceremony and maybe like two or three for the reception. Oh! And of course, one for when you two leave on a honeymoon.”

Tiffany breaks from my side, and suddenly the talk of dresses has her full attention. Thank fucking God.

I turn away and head towards the backyard, needing some air and space. Taking out my phone, I check to see if I have any messages.

DAX:

You surviving?

ME:

Barely. Every time Tiff touches me, I want to claw my skin off.

DAX:

Diseases. That's all they are.

ME:

I just want to bleach my skin until I can't feel her touching me anymore.

DAX:

I don't think Spitfire would appreciate you having no skin. See you when you get back.

I lock my phone, place it back in my pocket, and take a deep breath as I look out at the grounds around me. The landscaping here is usually pristine, but since it's winter, things are more bare and brown. Trees have lost their leaves, and the grass isn't as green as it would normally be.

"Son, let's go," my dad says through the opened back door.

I roll my eyes and make my way back inside the house.

Two things are happening today. My dad is going to make a speech, and then some news outlets will be invited in to see us all sitting around a table like a happy fucking family eating a goddamn turkey.

I look up at the grey sky, the wind blowing against me. Here we go.

We find ourselves outside on the front lawn at a podium that has been set up in a garden. My mother stands next to my dad. My dad's advisor, Dillon I think is his name, puts me next to my mother and then moves Tiffany next to me.

The suit I'm wearing is already starting to feel tight, and I feel like I'm ready to combust with her near me. She loops her

arm through mine, and I fight the urge to shove her right off the fucking stage.

Actually, that's not a bad idea. But I don't think that would help a thing right now.

Tiffany's family is on the other side of my dad with Izzy between them. What a fucking picture we all make. Rich fucks just standing here showing shit off.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes as I pull my lips into a tight smile.

"Happy Thanksgiving to everyone here in Black Forest," my dad begins. "I hope everyone here and around the world is with family and friends, celebrating what is most important and enjoying each other's company. Well, at least until it's time to go stand in line to get some Black Friday deals." The crowd laughs, and some yell out the store they are going to.

Looking out at everyone, I see our neighbors, citizens who probably live nearby, and news crews. A mix of constituents that I recognize from previous speeches that have been held here. Same faces, same blind devotion to his lies.

"You know, this year is actually a very exciting one for our family. We get to welcome the Ives family into ours as our dear son, Mason, has asked Tiffany Ives for her hand in marriage." My dad grins as the audience gasps and claps like a bunch of trained seals. Flashes go off, cameras point at Tiffany and me, and I try to keep my fake smile from slipping.

Because all I want to do is run and never look back.

* * *

"You're back!" Phoenix yells as she comes bolting from the kitchen, jumping into my arms. She knew I had to spend the day with Tiffany and our families, and by now I'm sure that the news of the engagement has spread. I don't know how she does it. How she keeps fighting against all this bullshit.

She fucking amazes me.

Red places her forehead against mine, and her eyes bore into mine. “How are you doing with all that?”

See? This is why I love her. She should be pissed, upset, crying over the announcement today. But she’s not. She’s more worried about me and how I’m doing.

“Why are you worried about me? I should be asking you how you’re doing, Red.” I run my hand along her cheek and brush my nose against hers.

She sighs, “It doesn’t matter how I’m doing, Mase. Nothing I can do about any of this. But it’s you guys who are locked in this nightmare marriage contract with the Reginas of Darkwood.”

I scrunch my face. “Reginas?”

She lets out a chuckle, “Well it’s obvious you’ve never seen *Mean Girls*, and we may have to remedy that this week.”

“I don’t know what that is.” I shake my head. She just tips hers back and laughs, jumping down off me and planting a kiss on my lips.

The fire from her touch burns me, sears into my skin. She pulls away, but I grab her wrist and tug her back. My hands cup her cheeks, and I bring my lips to hers. Pushing my tongue into her mouth, I revel in her taste, swallowing her moans. When we part, we are both breathing heavy, and a smile breaks on her face.

“If you don’t let me go, no one will have mashed potatoes for dinner, and I think Dax will be plenty pissed about that.” She chuckles.

“Yes, I will!” Dax calls from wherever he’s at. Red’s eyes widen, and she takes off towards the kitchen with a huge grin.

Heading towards where I heard Dax, I find him and Colton sitting in the living room watching football. Colt throws me a beer, and I fall back onto the couch, cracking it open and taking a long pull.

After a few minutes, I break the silence. “Why is she making mashed potatoes? Don’t you have a company catering

dinner?” I turn towards Dax.

His arms are rested along the back of the couch, and his lips turn down slightly. “She said before her fath—Trevor died, her mom and her used to make mashed potatoes together every Thanksgiving. It has been a long time since she made them, and she wanted to make them for us. You know I can’t say no to that one.”

I nod and focus back on the game. My heart warms at the simple idea that she’s wanting to cook for us. She has been so different this week. So light, so free. It’s been incredible to see this side of her. Like the weight of the world has disappeared off her shoulders.

“And don’t even think about going in there to help,” Colt says without turning his eyes away from the television. “Already tried and she threw a spatula at me.”

My head tips back, and I laugh to the point of my stomach hurting. First, I can’t even imagine that scene playing out, but the nerd that Colt is and him trying to help mash potatoes. “You should know better than to get in her way.”

He smiles and shakes his head. We all sit there quietly and watch the game, and soon, a warm feeling comes over me.

A content feeling.

I don’t know what the future will bring, but whatever it is, it’s this that I want. It’s her in our lives.

She has a hold of my heart, and I never want her to let go.



Chapter Seventeen

PHOENIX

I SURVEY the table one last time as the catering company puts the last of the food out for us. I really hope the guys are hungry because there is a shit fuck ton of food. Like enough to feed the football team amount of food.

And it all smells delicious.

The seasonings and aroma from the turkey take center stage, followed by the buttery scent of the rolls that they just placed out. My mouth waters at the sight of the sweet potatoes and the green bean casserole. There's a bread stuffing that sits next to the gravy boat and I can't wait to stuff myself.

Sauntering into the living room, I take note of the three guys sitting there, and my heart beats just a little faster. Part of me wants to revel in it. Let them fill the holes in my heart. But the other part still has it guarded. Keeping the last remaining pieces intact.

"Hey, you guys hungry, or what?" I call out to them.

"Fucking starved, sweetheart." Dax jumps up and runs over to me. He bends down, grabbing me around my legs and throwing me over his shoulder.

"Put me down, Dax!" I laugh.

"Let's go woman! Food!" He spansks my ass, and I look up to see the other two following close behind.

It's been this way all week long. Playful, light. I can almost let my hair down and just relax. I have actually felt less stressed being here. I have found a nice little world away from my reality. I get to work on my homework with them, watch

movies with them, just exist in our own bubble with no one breathing down our neck. No Queens.

Also, we have had copious amounts of sex, and I have never in my life had more orgasms.

And I love every second of it.

But still in the back of my mind, I know this won't be forever.

“Fuck, this all looks amazing!” Mason rubs his stomach and pulls out a chair for Dax to sit me in.

When Dax gets me in the chair, he leans in and kisses my forehead and then sits next to me. Mason and Colt take the seats across from us. The table is huge, and we're really only taking up a quarter of it, but I chalk it up to rich people shit and their need for the biggest dining room table ever.

We start to pass around all the food and slowly fill up our plates. Mason grabs my mashed potatoes, and I hear him hum.

“I can't believe you made these for us.” He smiles at me as he takes a huge scoop, and it makes a slopping noise as it hits the plate.

I shrug. “It's one of my favorite memories from around the holidays.” I look down at my plate; the guys are silently watching me. “We would sing and dance in the kitchen. We obviously didn't have any other family, but all we needed at that time was us. My dad—I mean, Trevor, would be yelling at the football game, my mom and me making a mess in the kitchen. It was the first thing she showed me how to make. As I got older, she just let me make them on my own.”

I feel the tears start to well up in the back of my eyes, the emotion lodged in my throat. Those were some of the best times of my life. They were all I needed. I had no idea that I would be forever without them in those moments. Trevor was still my dad, and my mom was never a liar. They were everything to me. They were my parents.

And they led me here.

“Hey, Spitfire, we don’t have to talk about it. Let’s just enjoy the now.” Dax rubs my back, and I force a smile.

We spend the rest of dinner filling up on turkey and stories from when the guys were younger. And that was a nice change of pace, learning about them from their little tyke days.

I had offered to clean up but was immediately informed that there was staff to do that. I rolled my eyes at Dax and might have murmured “rich people problems” under my breath.

Seriously, how nice is it that you have people that not only cook you food, but also clean up after your ass? How do rich people even learn basic life skills?

We make our way into the game room, which also doubles as a theater, and sprawl out on the couch. Mason and Dax sit next to me, my head in Dax’s lap and my legs on Mason’s. Colt grabs a bean bag and throws it down in front of the couch and plops down in it. I place my hand on his chest, needing to touch him.

I convinced the guys to turn a Christmas movie on. So of course, Die Hard was the one they agreed upon.

As I lie there, Dax runs his fingers through my hair, and Mason is softly caressing my legs. Everything is innocent and sweet. My vagina, however, has her own agenda and apparently a simple touch opens the flood gates.

Colt brings my hand up to his mouth and softly kisses it. I instantly feel my lady bits clench. Apparently so does Mason, because I see his eyebrows tick upward.

“Doing okay there, Red?” A hint of a smile crosses his face.

“Yeah, I am.” My voice comes out raspy, and my heart flutters.

“Doesn’t sound like it, sweetheart.” Dax starts to slowly trail his fingers along my neck. “In fact, I bet your nipples are very hard right now. What do you think Mason?”

“I’m inclined to agree. I bet she’s even soaking wet.” Mason’s fingers move closer to my center, his fingers leaving goosebumps along my thighs.

Colt turns around and rests on his knees. His fingers make quick work to unbutton the buttons on my dress.

Three sets of hands are roaming all over my body, and every inch of my skin sparks with electricity. Goosebumps are left in the wake of their touch, and my breathing quickens.

“Spread those legs, Red. Let me touch this pretty pussy of yours.” I groan at Mason’s words as my legs gladly open on his command. His fingers immediately find my very wet center. “Fuck, she is soaked.”

“Let’s stand her up, help her out of these clothes.” Dax nods to the other two.

Colt jumps to his feet, grabbing my hands and pulling me up. With Colt in front of me, working the buttons of the front of the dress, Dax grabs my chin and makes me face him. His lips meet mine, and he slowly kisses me. Mason’s hands are working my dress off me, letting it fall to the ground.

All three gasp, and I pull away to see when they see the black lace bra and thong I’m in.

“Red.” It’s the only words Mason can croak out. His eyes float up and down my body, taking me in.

“Baby girl, you are fucking beautiful.” Colt bites his lip and groans. He leans in and kisses me, while I feel Dax’s hand rubbing my ass, grabbing my flesh and squeezing it. I let out a loud moan against Colt’s mouth.

“You like that, sweetheart?” Dax says into my ear.

“Yes. Please, give me more,” I beg. Suddenly, I’m spun to face Dax, and before I can say anything, I’m thrown over his shoulder. He smacks my ass and I let out a little yelp. “Hey, what the hell, caveman?”

“Don’t worry, Spitfire. Just going somewhere a little more comfortable.”

“I can walk, you know,” I spit back.

“You won’t be saying that when we’re done with you.”

I look up and see Mase and Colt following us up the stairs towards what I’m assuming is Dax’s bedroom. When we get through the room, I’m thrown on my back onto Dax’s bed, the three of them standing at the edge of the mattress. They eye me like I’m their prey.

“Spread those legs, Red.” Mason’s hooded eyes graze over my body, and he bites his lip. Dax starts to strip out of his clothes, and Colt soon follows. “Look at me, Red.” My eyes snap to him.

Mason’s hands come up, and he slowly unbuttons his shirt, shrugging it to the ground. No matter how many times I see it, I can never get over how good these three look naked. I want to bite them, mark them as mine.

Mason steps forward and hooks his fingers under my thong, pulling it down and throwing it on the floor. Dax steps over and unhooks my bra, tossing it somewhere in the room.

“Now, Red, I want you to turn around and get on all fours.”

I nod and slowly turn on the bed, getting on my hands and knees, pushing my ass up towards Mason. “Like this?” I smirk.

“Just like that, baby. Just fucking like that.” Mason nods to Dax, who gets on the bed and leans against the headboard. “Crawl to Dax and give his cock some attention with that sweet little mouth of yours.”

I look back at Mason and then again at Dax sitting in front of me. Slowly, I crawl up the bed towards Dax, who is slowly stroking his cock.

I hover my face over his cock, looking up at him. I can feel my skin prickle with excitement. I stick my tongue out and lick the tip. Dax lets out a moan as his head tips back against the headboard.

I swirl my tongue around the head, then slowly wrap my lips around it. His hands immediately wrap themselves in my hair as he hisses.

“Fuck, sweetheart. That mouth is fucking heaven.” I moan as I take more of him down my throat. “Jesus, fuck. Heaven.”

Internally, I smile knowing I’ve made Dax speechless. I keep working my mouth up and down his hardness when I feel the bed shift and the chill of something running down my spine.

I take my mouth off Dax’s cock and look back and see Mason behind me naked, holding his belt while he rubs my ass.

“Mason ...” I groan.

“You want me to make your ass a little red, baby?” Slowly, his hand caresses each cheek, and I push back into him wanting more.

“Yes, please,” I beg.

“Keep your hands on Dax’s thighs. Don’t move them. Keep your eyes forward and look at him. If it gets to be too much, just say stop. Okay?”

“Yes. Please, Mason.” I turn away from Mason and stare at Daxon. Our eyes lock as I grab onto his thighs. Colt climbs onto the bed and sits against the headboard next to Daxon. Both are watching me with such intense heat in their eyes that the temperature in the room skyrockets.

“Such a good girl,” I hear Mason say before I feel the crack of the belt on my ass cheek. I let out a gasp and feel my pussy clench.

“I think she likes it.” Colt looks to Mason.

“Did you like that, sweetheart? Do you want Mason to do it again?” Dax runs a hand along my cheek.

I let out a breathy moan. “Yes, please. More.” Out of the side of my eye, I see Colt shift, crawling towards me. He reaches out and runs his fingers along my back. Goosebumps break out from his touch.

Another crack on my other cheek echoes in the room, and my fingers tighten around Dax’s thighs as my eyes squeeze

shut. I let out a couple quick breaths and look back at Mason. There's a wicked look in his eyes, and it's beyond sexy.

"You should see how beautiful your ass looks, Red." He slides his fingers down until he finds out just how much I like it. "Oh, someone is drenched. Is this making you wet, baby?"

My voice comes out raspy and needy. "Yes. Please, I need more."

"Happy to oblige," Mason says before he whacks me again. This time, it's lower on my cheek, causing my clit to tingle from the reverberation of the belt against my skin. I feel like I'm ready to explode.

"Oh, sweetheart, you should see how flushed you are. How turned on you are." Dax pulls me forwards slightly as he sits up closer to me and smashes his lips into mine. He pulls back just in time for another smack across my cheek.

"I need to come. Please. Please," I beg. My entire body is vibrating for a release. Seeking that ecstasy it craves. "Please fuck me." Before I even finish that sentence, the belt drops and Mason slams his cock into me. "Fuck!"

"Goddamn, you are soaking wet. Holy shit." Mason groans as he slams into me.

"Did the belt make you wet and needy, baby girl?" Colt's low voice in my ear sends shivers down my entire body.

"Holy fuck, whatever you just said to her, her pussy just became a vice grip on my cock," Mason says. "She's so tight. So fucking tight." I feel him thrusting in and out of me, and Colt's fingers skate across my skin, down between my legs.

"Colt, please. Oh fuck, I need to come. Please, make me come." My body shakes as it searches for that release. Every inch of my body feels like it's going to explode. And it always does when I'm with these three. A single touch causes a full-on internal combustion. My entire body heats up, and I have to have them. They are like a drug to me and my body.

And to my heart.

A sudden surge to my clit has me gasping and moaning. Colt's fingers circle my clit as Mason grips my hips and slides his cock in and out of me. Dax leans forward again and runs a tongue along my lips.

"Let go, sweetheart. Come all over Mason's dick. Come," Dax commands.

And like a good slut she is, my pussy tightens, and I feel the telltale sign that I'm about to fall over that wall. Like a freight train, it hits me. My vision goes white, and my entire body tightens in response.

"Oh fuck, she's coming. Shit, she's taking me with her. I'm coming with you, baby. Holy fuck. Fuck. Fuck." Mason starts to thrust faster. His cock pulsates inside me as he comes. I scream out as my release crests, and the wave of ecstasy causes every nerve ending in my body to be electrified.

"Fucking beautiful. So fucking beautiful," Dax says against my lips. I feel Mason slowly slide out, and Dax pulls me up so I'm straddling him and slams his cock deep into me. "You want Colt to fuck that tight little hole of yours?"

Still in an orgasm haze, I nod. "Yes. I need you, Colt." Dax adjusts me as I hear a cap of what I am guessing is lube being opened. I feel a cold liquid poured on me and a finger slowly sliding in my back end.

"Fuck, she's so tight," Colt says as he sticks a second finger in, getting me ready to take him.

"You ready for Colt? You ready to feel us both?"

"Yes. Now, Colt. Fuck me." I moan.

Colt removes his fingers and I feel the very much larger presence of his cock as he slowly pushes the head in. My eyes widen at the intrusion.

"Hey, look at me, just relax. I can feel him pushing slowly in, sweetheart. I bet it feels so good to have both of us in you."

"Y-yes. Holy fuck. So fucking tight. Everything feels so full." I dig my nails into Dax's chest, trying to calm myself as Colt continues to push in.

“Doing good, baby girl. Just breathe.” And with a final thrust, Colt and Dax are both inside me.

I take a few seconds and close my eyes, just enjoying the feeling of having them both inside me. My body takes over, and I start to rock against them. “Oh fuck, it feels so good.”

Dax grips my hips and holds me as him and Colt start to find a rhythm as they slide in and out of me. The friction between Dax and I starts to build against my clit. It’s already incredibly sensitive from Colt playing with it, so it’s not taking much to get me back up to peak level.

Dax finds my nipples and pinches them, causing me to scream at the pain. My clit is throbbing, and my body is yelling at me for another release.

Colt’s fingers dig into my ass cheeks as he thrusts into me. I hear him groaning with each thrust, cursing under his breath. Fuck, I love feeling them inside me. One at time, two—fuck, even all three. Feeling them inside me is all I need.

My guys. The pieces I need in my life to make me whole.

My stomach starts to tighten, and I know I’m about to fall over the edge again.

“I can feel your pussy tightening. You gonna come for us, sweetheart?” Dax says as he thrusts up into me.

“Yes, oh god, yes. I’m ... oh ... coming!” My eyes squeeze shut as the wave slams into me, and my body convulses through my orgasm.

Colt freezes behind me as I hear him grunt as he finds his release. Dax roars as his cock pulsates inside me.

When all of us fall back down from the high of our releases, my head falls to Dax’s chest. I wince when Colt pulls out gently, and Dax lifts me up to pull out of me. I feel their cum dripping from me, but I’m too worn-out to care.

A cold towel suddenly appears between my legs, and I turn my head to see Mason. “We got you, Red. You are fucking amazing, you know that? Don’t move. I am going to put some

aloe on you, help cool the burn from the belt.” A cold liquid touches my skin, and I hiss.

Mason gently rubs it in as I lay on Dax’s chest. When he finishes, he rolls me over, spreading my legs to clean me up. Mason leans down and kisses me when he finishes.

“I love you, Red.”

“I love you, Mase.”

My eyes start to get heavy, and I feel Daxon brushing hair around my face away.

“Get some sleep, sweetie.”

The guys start to talk, but I can’t make any sense what they are saying. I feel the bed shifting, but I’m too tired to care.

They wore me out, made me reach wonderful highs, and my body is fully sated.

“Stop fighting it. Sleep, Spitfire,” Dax says in my ear.

It’s the last thing I hear before my body finally gives in and succumbs to the sleep it desperately needs.



Chapter Eighteen

PHOENIX

IS THERE SUCH a thing as a food and sex coma? If so, I am definitely having one of those right now. Also, I may be burning up, but that is solely because I'm surrounded by my men.

My Kings.

Last night was one of the best Thanksgivings I have ever had. I had everything I was thankful for in one room. My Kings.

Mason's head is on my stomach, Colton lays to my left and Daxon on my right. I look at each one of them and something happens; my heart swells. A sort of peace passes through me.

I softly run my fingers through Mason's blond hair, watching him sleepily try to pull himself closer to me. His hands squeeze my hips, and he lets out a little moan.

Colton's lying on his stomach, but his arm is draped over my chest. Daxon is on his side, his head up against mine, his arm under my head. I'm overheating, but there is nowhere else I'd rather be.

I let out a yawn, moving my hand from Mason's head to cover my mouth.

"Don't stop. Keep going." Masons nuzzles into me. "Red, come on," he whines.

I let out a laugh. "Sorry, I had a yawn. Didn't mean to use my own hand for what I needed."

Mason's head shoots up, and there's a fire in his eyes. "What else do you do with that hand, Red?" he drawls. He

slowly turns and starts to crawl up me, biting his lip as he looks at my very naked body.

“That’s none of your business what I do with my hands.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Oh, baby, it very much is my business. Tell me, Red. What else do you do with those hands? Do you run them down your stomach, down to your pretty pussy? Do your fingers circle your clit? When you are dripping wet, do you reach down and slide a couple fingers inside?”

I let out a breath, my heart beating wildly. I can feel my face flush. Mason hovers over me, his eyes locking onto mine. He tilts his head down, pressing a kiss to my lips.

“Dude, we don’t have time, even for a quickie. Rein it in.” Daxon stirs beside us.

“Come on, we got time,” Mason whines.

Dax rolls onto his back and shakes his head. He picks up his phone. “We don’t. We need to be out of here in five minutes. Get your asses up.”

“Wait. Where are you three going?” I look towards Dax, who has a blank expression on his face. Turning my head, I look up at Mason above me, who frowns and shakes his head.

“Business, Red. Sorry.” He shuffles himself off of me, and the three of them roll off the bed.

“Hold the fuck on.” I sit up in Daxon’s bed. “You are not leaving me here alone, for one. Secondly, what the fuck? ‘Business’ is not an acceptable answer. Don’t hide shit from me. We all know how that turns out.”

“Phoenix, stop.” Daxon places his hands on his hips. “We can’t tell you because we don’t want you involved for your safety.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“We mean it, CT.” Colton leans over the bed and places a hand on my shoulder. “You can’t get involved.”

“What about yourselves? What if something happens to you three?” I counter.

“We will be fine, Red. Trust us, please. One day, this will all come crashing down, and we don’t want to find you under the rubble. Let us fight this fight.” He purses his lips and turns out of the room. The other two give me a sad look before following him.

I let out a huff as I lean back on the bed, running a hand over my face. I don’t like that they are keeping me out of the loop. Fuck it. Whatever.

I jump off the bed and head into the bathroom. My body is still hot from being surrounded by the Kings. I need a nice long shower.

I reach into the large walk-in shower and turn on the water. I head over to the closet and grab a towel, hanging it on the hook next to the shower door.

When the water is finally scalding hot, I step inside and let it cascade over me. Running my hands through my hair, I let out a sigh. I know they want to keep me safe, protect me, but the last time they tried to protect me, it ended up hurting me more.

Shutting off the shower, I get out and dry off. I head into Daxon’s closet and grab one of his t-shirts and a pair of sweats. I slip my feet into my crocs and sigh. I yank his Darkwood Football hoodie off of the hanger and throw it on. I bring the collar up to my nose and inhale the scent of my king.

But I’m still mad at him.

I head down into the kitchen and head over to the coffee pot. Caffeine is my blood. Before I can reach for a cup, I hear a throat clear, and the hairs on the back on my neck stand up.

I spin around to see an older man sitting at the kitchen table. His hair is jet-black with a bit of grey peppered in. His skin is tanned, and there are bags under his eyes. His lips are turned down as he folds his hands in front of him on the table.

“Hello, Phoenix.”

“Who the fuck are you? And what are you doing here?” I slowly start to shift towards the exit, only to be met with a burly looking guy blocking the door.

No, more like filling the door. The guy is huge. Taking up the entire width of the door. Fuck this fucking wrestler wannabe.

“Oh, sweetheart—”

I sneer, “Who the fuck are you? And don’t call me sweetheart.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, I forgot about that mouth. Well, I own this house. Gregory Emerson.” He stands up and walks closer to me, holding his hand out. “I believe you’re being *fucked* by my son, Daxon.”

I step back and walk behind the counter, my mouth dropping open in surprise. My stomach twists in knots, and red flags are starting to fire off. What the hell is he doing here? He was supposed to be away, somewhere on business. How did he know I was still here? The guys. They left to do whatever it was they had to do. They left me here alone.

“Yeah, I can see you putting the pieces together.” He chuckles. “My son seems to think him and his friends are so slick. Trying to pull a fast one on me.”

I move around the kitchen island, trying to keep some distance between him and me. His dark eyes hone in on me, tracking my every move. He looks at me like I’m his prey.

“It’s a shame. I thought I did the right thing by bringing you into Darkwood, I thought I could punish you from there, get what I needed, but they had to go and fuck you. And now all three are head over heels in love with you.” He stops and a deep laugh rumbles from him. “You must have one hell of a pussy to trap those three.”

“Go to hell, asshole!”

“Hm, yeah, I don’t see what they see. Though, it doesn’t matter. Look, Phoenix, I tried to be nice about all this, but you’re getting in the way. The boys have an obligation to fulfill.”

This time I let out a laugh. “Oh, you mean like marry the Whores of Darkwood? Yeah, okay.”

He puts his hands in his pockets and tilts his head. “They may be whores,” he chuckles. “Oh, who am I kidding? I know they are. But all we really care about is the money they’ll bring our families. That’s all I care about. I’ve worked too hard for this family, way too hard to see some trash from the wrong side of town try and weasel her way into our pocketbooks.”

“Wow, so much wrong with that statement. Do you always just randomly make shit up?” I ask as I grip the sides of the counter. “I want nothing to do with your pocketbooks.”

“Oh, now look who’s making shit up. You’re no different than your father, trying to worm his way into our fortune. And when he couldn’t, he took my wife with him!” His fist flies down hard on the countertop, and for a moment I’m fearful he broke something.

Only for a moment.

“Fuck you. I had no control over him or your wife. And I doubt he wanted a single fucking penny from you. Just because you’re rich doesn’t mean everyone wants a piece of you. Maybe my dad just wanted a piece of your wife,” I seethe.

He stands there for a moment, and if looks could kill, I would be dead in a nano second. But then a mask comes over his face, and he smiles. “I guess you didn’t have control over him, now did you? But you have control over my son and his friends, right? Finish what your father was too chicken shit to do.” He pauses. “Oh shit, sorry, I mean the guy who played your dad.”

“Fuck you.”

“That has to hurt, doesn’t it? Knowing no one wanted you. Not even your dad-for-hire. Your mom even offed herself to rid herself of her problems, one of them being you.” He starts slowly towards me again; I counter his moves around the island but am stopped by a solid slab of bodyguard.

Or serial killer. I don't know what this behemoth is hired for.

God, I hope it's not serial killer. *Focus, Nix!*

"What the hell do you want from me?" I ask him as he slowly approaches me. He-Man's hands grip my shoulders, holding me in place.

"I want you to leave the boys alone. Get the fuck out my house and stop mesmerizing them with your trailer trash pussy. Though, I honestly wouldn't mind sticking my dick in that, seeing what all the fuss is about."

I can feel the bile rise in my throat. "Touch me, and I'll vomit all the fuck over you and that Armani suit. I'm not sure you will ever get the smell out. Or the memory of me projectile vomiting on your vile ass."

"First of all, this is Prada. Second, you're fucking disgusting. Get the fuck out." He nods to The Rock behind me who yanks me towards the door.

"Hey, Godzilla, can you at least let me go get my stuff?" I try to yank my arm out of his grip, but he has a hold on me that isn't budging. He doesn't respond, just continues towards the front door, which once we get to, he pushes me out of.

He stands in front of the door with his arms crossed. "There's your ride. Your stuff will be shipped back to you. Don't return." I turn and see a car pulling up. "It's all paid for." With that, he vanishes inside, slamming the door behind him.

Motherfucker. My phone and my clothes are in there. Awesome. Fine, I'll just have to find a way to let the guys know. Well, when they find out I'm not here, that should clue them in that something's up.

I slide into the back of the dark BMW and lean against the cool black leather seats. I let out a sigh. At least campus will be empty. Most students won't be returning until Sunday, so my walk of shame will be less shameful.

Is it a walk of shame? I mean, I got kicked out and I'm not in my clothes. Usually, it would be the clothes I wore the

previous night. But also, it's obvious that I bumped uglies with someone, or someones, because I'm wearing their clothes.

Is this really what you want to think about, Nix?

Hm. Yeah, I have a point.

When the fancy car finally pulls up to Darkwood, I thank the very not talkative driver and walk towards my hell hole. The crisp air bites at my skin as I walk down the paths. The sun still rising and the wind whipping my hair around. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to gather some warmth since I'm left to trek through campus in a t-shirt and baggy ass sweatpants.

Then it hits me as I reach the ramshackle building. I don't have my fucking keys.

My purse, my phone, my everything is at Daxon's house. They shoved me out of there so fast I didn't even think about my keys. I just wanted my phone so I could send the guys a message.

Fucking great.

Not that I know what the big boulder of a man would have done. Actually, I do. He would have told me that it would have been shipped to me. Asshole.

I let out a groan and tip my head back and close my eyes. Think. Where can I go until I can get ahold of the guys? Dining hall. I can't get anything to eat, but I can at least be warm. Though, food would be nice since I'm starving at this point.

Plus, maybe there's someone there that will let me borrow their phone to message the guys.

As I walk down the path, a voice calls out to me and stops me.

"Phoenix. Hey."

"Doc? What are you doing here?" I shiver as I run my hands over my arms.

“Jesus, why are you not wearing a jacket?” He immediately shrugs his off and places it over my shoulders.

“Long story, Doc. One I really don’t want to get into off the clock.”

“Are you okay?”

I shake my head. “No. Not really. I don’t have my keys to get into my building. I need to call one of the guys, Dax’s dad threw me out of the house without my stuff.”

“What? Wait. Where were the guys at? Why didn’t they stop him?”

“They weren’t there. They left to go handle something and that’s when papa Emerson surprised me and then kicked me out. Well, his Jolly Green Giant of a bodyguard did. The guy was fucking huge.” I laugh.

“Hm. Okay, well, if you want to call the guys, I actually have their numbers stored in my phone from ... well, from when you were in the hospital.”

“Would you mind if I gave them a call?” I pull the jacket a little tighter around me.

“Not at all, I left my phone in my car because I had to run in real quick, so let’s head that way. We can wait for them and warm up in the car.”

“Thanks Doc, but I don’t want to put you out. I’m a pain in the ass as it is. I can just call them and then wait in the dining hall.”

He smirks at me. “Hardly a pain in the ass. More like keeps me on my toes. Come on.”

We make our way over to the faculty parking lot that is practically empty. He walks over to a black Ford SUV and opens the driver side door to grab his phone. I walk over to the passenger side and try to open the door, but it’s locked.

“Hey, Doc, door’s locked.”

I hear him as he comes around the car. “Sorry, yeah. Gotta use the key for this door. Been meaning to get it fixed.” He

hands me his iPhone. “Here. Give them a call.”

“Thank you.” I take the phone and turn my back to give Daxon a call, except I can’t get past a locked screen. “Hey, Doc, I think you forgot—”

Before I can react, an arm wraps around my middle and another one with a cloth, covers my mouth, a sweet smell coming from it.

“I didn’t forget a damn thing, Phoenix,” Dr. Parker growls in my ear.

I try to struggle against him, but whatever is on the cloth is starting to make my body feel heavy and sluggish. My vision starts to tunnel, and I can feel myself slipping. I will myself to move, but nothing happens.

My body starts to shut down and my eyes close.

“Beautiful,” is all I hear before everything goes dark.



Chapter Nineteen

PHOENIX

MY HEAD FUCKING HURTS. Why does my head feel like there is a battering ram pounding through my skull? I open my mouth, which feels like it's stuffed with cotton balls and I ate sand. I lick my lips, but they are crusty and dry.

Placing my palm against my head, I roll over onto my back. That's when I realize I'm on a hard surface. I try to open my eyes, but they feel like they've been glued shut. Once I finally get them open, I see that I'm surrounded by metal bars all around me.

My breathing hitches, and panic starts to creep in. I'm in a metal cage. It's small and cramped. It's like something a person would use for animals. I start looking around for a way out, but when I locate the cage's door behind me, I find there's a lock on it.

Where the fuck am I? What the fuck is going on?

"Help!" My voice barely comes out as more than a whisper. My throat is dry and scratchy. How long have I been like this? "Help, please!" I cough from straining my voice.

I shift and try to turn myself around to face the locked door of the cage. I shake it, but it doesn't budge. Same for the sides. I push at the end with my legs, but either I'm too weak or I'm truly fucked.

I look out at the room surrounding me and see that I'm in a very plain and clean bedroom. The walls are stark white, and there's nothing on any of the dressers or other surfaces in the room. No photos, no personal items. The bed has a navy-blue

comforter. I try to sit up more to take more of the room in but bang my head on the top of the cage.

A loud sound causes me to freeze. Then suddenly I hear footsteps approaching. The door handle turns, and the door creaks open.

Suddenly, everything comes rushing back.

“My little birdie. You’re awake.”

“Dr. Parker, what the fuck is going on? Let me out of here!” My voice is still hoarse as I try to scream at him. I shake the cage, the metal making a loud noise.

Dr. Parker, or should I say psycho boy, shakes his head. “No can do. Birdies who misbehave need to stay caged.” He crouches down and stares at me through the bars. “Open, I’ll give you some water.” He holds up a water bottle.

“That’s not going to fit through the slats.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“I know. That’s why I said open, Phoenix. I’ll pour some into your mouth.”

Fuck. My entire body is vibrating with rage right now. What the hell is going on? I look up at the water, and my throat feels drier than the Sahara Desert. I need that water. If I refuse to drink it, who knows when I will get it next? I have no clue what is even happening at this point. Because it definitely doesn’t look like I’ll be let out of this cage anytime soon.

I tip my head back and cautiously open my mouth. The asshole doctor smiles at me. “That’s my little bird.” He slowly pours the water into my mouth, and I take in as much as I can.

My stomach rolls as I stare at him while I drink. I’m not sure if it’s what he drugged me with or the predicament I am in, but I’m sick to my stomach.

Everything is starting to come back to me. Being thrown out of Dax’s house, Dr. Parker finding me on campus and then drugging me. And then it hits me. Like a fucking freight train.

“It’s you. This whole time, it’s been you,” I choke out.

He nods and tilts his head to the side. “And you had no idea.” A sinister smile spreads across his face. “But you’re here now. Where you belong.”

“What do you mean? I don’t belong here!” I scream and cough. “Let me out of here, now!” I shake the cage around me. “Please!”

“Tsk, tsk. Behave yourself, little bird. You don’t want to get punished.” He stands up and heads towards the door.

“Punished? What the fuck is this, then? A goddamn vacation? Get the fuck back here! Let me out of here! Help!” I scream at the top of my lungs. My body hurts from being curled up in this cage. Tears are starting to form in the corners of my eyes as I drop my head.

A loud bang startles me, and I look up. “You can shout all you want. No one will hear you. No one will save you, and no one is coming for you. You belong to me and always have. I will collect what I am owed.”

With that, Dr. Parker spins on his heel and leaves the room, slamming the door shut on his way out. My chest tightens with panic, my breaths coming short. Someone has to find me; the guys have to save me.

They have to know I’m gone by now.

All I have are the guys. And they have no way of knowing where I’m at. How the fuck are they going to find me? Save me from this obvious fucking psycho who thinks I owe him something?

Did my aunt not pay his bills? What the fuck is he collecting?

As I look around me, the gravity of it all settles deep in my chest. I am truly stuck here. Fuck. I’m stuck in a cramped as fuck cage with a crazy person who I trusted as my fucking doctor.

My eyes start to water, and I can feel the pressure in my throat start to push up. I let out a sob and curl back up on the metal bottom of the cage. My body shivers from fear as tears pour from my eyes.

I'm so confused. So lost. How the fuck is this even happening right now?

Please find me. Please get me out here.

I continue to send out a silent plea for the guys to find me as my eyes get heavy and the drugs in my system or the stress of the ordeal take over. Then there's only darkness.

* * *

"Wake up, little bird." A tapping noise wakes me, and I pry my eyes open. My surroundings suddenly hit me and I jump, hitting my head on the cage. A chuckle sounds from next to me. "Easy there, I don't want you getting hurt."

My breaths come out rapidly as I try to come out of my daze. A sudden need to pee hits me, my bladder on the verge of explosion. "I need to use the bathroom, please."

"Sure. But here's the thing. You have two options. Option one, I can take you to the bathroom and you listen and do everything I tell you without argument, or option two, you can piss in your cage." Dr. Parker's face is stone cold. Not an ounce of emotion shows on him.

"Option one. Please," I whimper. He stares at me for a moment and then begins to unlock the cage. He uses his finger on what I am assuming is a fingerprint reader to detach the lock.

I'm fucked if he loses his fingers.

He opens the door to the cage and holds out his hand. I have no choice but to take it. I gingerly reach up and try not to pull back the moment my skin touches his. It's repulsive, his touch.

As he pulls me out, my body, which has been cramped in that cage for who knows how long, is stiff and hurts. I groan as my body tries to straighten out from the hunched position, I was in.

“If you are a good little bird, maybe I’ll be able to take you out of the cage more.” Dr. Parker stands in front of me, his eyes black with delusion and evil. His hand caresses my cheek, and I will the bile in my throat down. “Come on, let’s go to the bathroom.”

Before I can move, he grabs my left wrist and slaps a brace on it, then yanks my right and does the same. It takes me a moment to register that he handcuffed me.

“What the hell?” I scrunch my face as the cold metal rubs against my skin.

“Can’t having you escaping, now can we?” He laughs.

He pulls me out of what I now see is a giant bedroom. There’s a large bay window that looks out to a thick forest. There’s a sitting chair and lamps near the window. If this wasn’t a psycho lair, this would be a nice relaxing place to read or stay in.

But this is a prison.

We step out of the room and make our way along the worn hardwood floors. I look around me and find more doors, walls that are bare and white. I catch sight of stairs that go up and I realize that we must be on some underground floor. I don’t see a kitchen or living space, so those must be above us. He opens a door and leads me in.

The bathroom is very sterile. Plain. Brown cabinets with a white granite countertop. A glass shower takes up the side opposite the sink. It’s large and long, and there’s a shower head on each side of the shower. The toilet sits next to the sink, and I stand there waiting for him to leave.

“Here, let me help you.” He bends down to pull my sweats down, and I jump back.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He looks up at me and doesn’t say anything for a minute. “You have to go to the bathroom. I’m helping you.”

“Or, and here’s a thought, you could un-cuff me and I can do it myself.” I shake my head at him and hold out my hands.

“No can do. Either you let me help you, or you can make a mess of your cage. Your choice. I can’t take the risk of you being free yet, little birdie.”

I can feel my face get red. I’m still so confused about everything that has progressed and gotten me here, and now I have to let the Doc here help me go to the bathroom. It’s fucking humiliating.

“Are you even a doctor?”

“You know, I almost laughed when you asked me that the first time. What was it, several months ago? But no, I’m not a doctor, I just play one. It’s amazing what you can do when you know people.” He winks at me as his lips turn up.

My body freezes, and I have no idea how to respond. This entire time he has been only acting as my therapist. What the fuck is going on?

As I stand there stunned, he pulls down my pants and sits me down on the toilet. The utter embarrassment of this whole situation has me locked up. I can’t force myself to let go and pee.

“Um, do you think I could just pee in private? Please? I can’t go with an audience,” I plead with my hands in front of me, trying to keep what little decency I have left.

He stares at me for a minute, but then nods. “Okay, I’ll let you, but the door stays open. And if you try anything at all, you won’t get this privilege anymore.” He takes one final look and leaves the bathroom. And of course, the door is wide open.

Even though it’s not the privacy I want or need, I take it. I finally relax enough to let my bladder go and finally feel that pain evaporate. I take a moment to myself and look around and try to make sense of what is happening.

He’s not a doctor. He obviously kidnapped me. I’m in some home somewhere in the middle of what looks like a forest. Oh, and he keeps me caged. These are the things I know and yet I have so many more fucking questions.

How the fuck did my aunt hire him? Where did she find him? How did he get away with faking all this?

“Are you done in there?” His voice breaks my thoughts.

“Yeah.” Before I can try to wipe and pull up my pants, he’s on me. He grabs toilet paper and holds me still.

“Spread your legs so I can wipe you.”

“Are you fucking out of your insane mind? Do not touch me!” I scream at him.

He kicks my feet apart and locks me under his arm against his chest. I try to fight the intrusion, but I fail. He wipes me and laughs.

“You are a sick fuck,” I spit.

“Oh, Phoenix. I was going to let you eat with me, but it’s apparent you can’t be civil enough to do so. Here I am, just helping you out, and you fight me. I guess it’s back to your cage you go.” He bends down and pulls up my pants, grabbing a fist-full of my hair before yanking me out of the bathroom.

I let out a scream as he drags me down the hall back to the room. “Fuck you, asshole!”

He stops at the cage and tilts my head back so that I’m looking up at him. “You don’t get it, do you? This is it for you. You’re mine. Bought and paid for. This is the only future you have now.”

What the fuck does he mean “bought and paid for”? Did she sell me to him? No, she may hate me, but there is no way even she would be that cruel. I am a fucking human after all.

“My aunt will wonder where I’m at,” I seethe.

He lets out a high-pitched laugh. “Your aunt is six feet under, sweet cheeks. Dead as dead can be. And as I recall, she didn’t really care for you anyways. Doubt she’d come looking.”

My eyes go wide, and my mouth drops open. *No!* That can’t be true. Before I can even respond, I’m bent over and pushed into the cage. The handcuffs are still on, and my ability

to catch myself from smashing my face in doesn't exist. My face hits the metal floor of the cage, and I let out a grunt.

“Yeah, sorry to spring that on you. I was going to break that to you at a later date, but it felt like a good chance to break your spirit a bit.”

“She can't be dead.” I shake my head and choke up. “Please tell me you're lying.”

“Aw, little birdie, I wish I was. She was a loose thread that needed cutting. I got what I wanted. Didn't need her anymore. Now, you were a little cunt back there in the bathroom, so because of that, no food for you. Let's see if tomorrow we can play nicer and then I'll give you some food.” He locks the cage and stands over me. “Good night, Phoenix.”

He drapes a sheet over the cage, and I cry in disbelief. “Fuck you! Fuck you!”

I kick against the cage as the door to the room closes.

Mother fuck! “Doctor Asshole! Let me the fuck out! Let me go!”

I scream until my voice starts to go hoarse. My stomach cramps, and my eyes are blurry from tears. Everything in my head replays like a broken record. The guys, Thanksgiving, Mr. Emerson chasing me out, and finding Doctor Asshole at the school. I don't even know how long I've been here or out cold.

The guys have no clue where I'm at. My heart aches for them, calling to them to find me. They are all I have left. My entire family is gone. There is no one left.

“Daxon! Please! Dax! I need you,” I whimper. My entire body shakes as I cry. Snot falls from my nose, and tears pool at the bottom of the cage.

How did I not see that it was him? Doctor Justin Parker is no doctor. And I trusted him. I told him things, only to play into his sick game.

He mentioned that he collected what he was owed. How was I what he was owed? Who is he? My mind is flipping

through all my thoughts, but nothing makes sense, nothing fits. It's a giant puzzle that I have no idea how I fit in.

Remember when I just wanted to graduate and move on with my life? This was not on my agenda. I don't even know how I ended up here.

I strain against the handcuffs but all that does is cut them into my skin. This can't be it for me. I can't die here.

I'll fight and claw my way out.

This is not my end.



Chapter Twenty

PHOENIX

“GOOD MORNING, MY LITTLE BIRD.” The sheet comes off the top of the cage, and light seeps through the bars. His voice turns my stomach.

“So, tell me, Doc. What’s the plan for today? Who are you impersonating today? A cruise ship captain? Restaurant owner? A guy on Wall Street? Just let me know so I know what I can call you.” My throat is raw from the screaming last night.

“Justin is just fine. So, are we planning on being snarky today? Or do you want to eat?” At that moment, my stomach growls. He looks down at me from above the cage, his eyebrow raised up. Fucker must have heard it.

“Can I please eat? I don’t even know how long I’ve been here, so I have no I idea how long it’s been since I’ve had food.” I rub my face with my handcuffed hands.

“Are you going to behave today?” the doctor says simply.

I bite the inside of my cheek. Everything in me wants to be a smart ass, but I really need to get some food in me if I am going to try and get out of this place. And be more of a smart ass. I need energy for that. “Yes, I’ll behave.”

I lock eyes with him, and he stands there with his hands on his hips. He studies me and waits for whatever he’s waiting for. I’m sure he’s hoping I’ll act out so he can get off on locking me back up. Jokes on you, psycho, my stomach overrides all need to talk back right now. After a minute, he nods and then proceeds to unlock the cage, allowing me to crawl out.

The utter humiliation of climbing out has my face heating up. My entire body is sore and stiff from being crammed inside this cage. My calves are tight, and I'm sure I'm extremely dehydrated at this point. I grunt as I pull myself through the door of the cage. His hands grip my arms as he helps me up.

"There we go." His hand caresses my cheek, and the nausea makes my stomach roll as I fight my body from recoiling from his touch. "Let's go feed you."

He wraps an arm around me and leans in to kiss the top of my head. Bile burns in my throat, and I fight my body from shaking. I'm not sure if it's lack of food or his touch that has me vibrating. More than likely both. Because I want to do nothing but shove something sharp in his eye right now.

He walks me towards and up the stairs and we enter into a large open living area. I can see the kitchen from where I stand, the living area off to my left and the dining room in between. Windows and large glass doors surround us, and I can see out into the world I'm hidden away from. The porch seems to wrap around the house from what I can see.

Again, there is little personalization to the house. Walls are stark white, the furniture is grey and plain. There's no decor or pictures, no rugs on the floor. The hardwood that was downstairs is up here too. The ceilings are vaulted with the wooden beams exposed.

If this wasn't a kidnapping hideaway, I really would love this place.

Justin sits me down at the table and unlocks the handcuffs but swiftly pulls my hands back behind me and locks me to the chair.

"Are you fucking serious?" I gawk. "How the fuck am I going to eat?"

He doesn't say anything as he moves about the kitchen. He pulls out a bowl from the fridge and opens a drawer, taking out a fork. He sits down next to me and uncovers the plastic bowl, then spears the fork inside it.

He holds the fork out towards me. “Open up.” I look at the pieces of cold penne pasta covered in a white sauce on the fork.

Is this mother fucker for real?

“Are you feeding me?” I pull my head back away from his offering.

“Yes. You obviously can’t eat with your hands tied up, so I’m helping you, little bird.” He pushes the fork towards me.

“Stop calling me that.”

“Calling you what?” He tilts his head.

“Little bird.”

“But that’s what you are, my little bird.” His hand comes up and brushes my cheek, but I recoil in my chair.

“No.” I can feel the muscles in my body tighten. “You don’t have the right to call me that! That nickname does not belong to you!” I pull against the handcuffs, but they just dig into my skin. I let out a hiss.

Justin throws the fork down, and I see the red in his eyes. “I can call you whatever I want. You don’t get it do you? This is it for you! You belong to me! Me! You. Are. Mine.” He reaches behind me and takes the cuffs off.

I don’t wait longer than half a second, I jump up from the chair and grab the fork, spinning and stabbing him with it. I hit him in the arm, and I take off running away from him.

But I don’t get far.

A sudden burn from my scalp has me screaming as he yanks me back by the hair on my head. His hand comes around my throat and squeezes. My heart races as I struggle to breathe.

“You know, I thought you would be a little more appreciative. I’m giving you life. A chance to live. Anything you could want. And you fight me. But it’s apparent that I need to take more drastic measures with you. Get you to understand. I need you to understand,” he says breathlessly.

My scalp feels like it's on fire, my hair being ripped from it. The lack of oxygen from his other hand around my throat is causing me to feel lightheaded. I try to push him away from me, but he's so much stronger than me, it's futile.

Tears pour from my eyes. *Kings, where are you?*

He turns and drags me towards a sliding door in the kitchen, onto the deck. My bare feet drag along the wood, I'm sure I have broken skin or even splinters. I struggle against his hold, trying to find something to pull on, but he is too quick. He yanks me down a set of stairs towards a building that looks like a detached garage.

My feet slip on the cold wet grass. I struggle, screaming at the pain.

"Scream all you want. No one will hear you," he grunts.

With the doors already opened, through my tears I look into the barely lit space. It's a large shed-type structure, a workshop that he's dragging me into.

"Stop! Let me go! Please!" I try to kick and hit him, anything to get him off me. My heart is beating so fast, I'm panicking.

"You had your chance to listen. Now, you get to sit and think." He throws me against the wall. My head bounces off of it, and I fall to the ground. Pain radiates through my skull as the room spins.

My body's too weak to try and stand up fast enough. Suddenly, Justin grabs my arms, and I feel metal cuffs placed around them. I lift my head up off the ground the moment his hand touches my ankles. The cold metal of the cuff he locks around my feet scrape against my skin.

"Why? Why are you doing this? You were supposed to help me!" Tears fall from my eyes. The realization of my nightmare is starting to become clearer.

I'm trapped. No one's going to find me. And I'm stuck with this psycho.

“They wanted to kill you. They wanted you dead. They were going to trick you! Kill you! I saved you. I protected you!” he screams in my face. “You can have it easy if you just do what you need to!”

“Who? What are you talking about?” I sob.

“You were never supposed to survive. Just like them! You were sold out! But I stopped them! I told them I would take care of you. That I would make you mine!” Spittle flies in my face as yells at me through his teeth. “You ungrateful bitch! You have no idea the shit I had to do to get you!” His hand flies up and he slaps me across the cheek. My head snaps back down to the floor.

The pain makes me gasp, and I squeeze my eyes shut. My head is on fire. I blink and try to push away the pain.

I have no clue what he’s talking about. Who wanted me dead? Who sold me out? I know the Kings’ fathers wanted me gone and threatened my life, but that wasn’t going to happen as long as the Kings married the Queens. The slack in the restraints allows me to rub my cheek.

“You’re speaking fucking nonsense. You know,”—I take a deep breath and groan from the pain it causes—“for someone who showed real fucking patience all these months, you’re starting to lose it, *Doc*.”

“I’m losing it?” He laughs maniacally at his own question. “Look at yourself, little birdie. How you have truly fallen. Your wings were clipped before you even got a chance to fly.”

“Stop fucking calling me that!”

He bends down again, his face an inch within mine. “Your mom and Trevor were killed. Your aunt was killed. Your real father was killed. You were supposed to be, too. Your entire family wiped the fuck out. The Kings, the boys you whored yourself out to, they were supposed to lead you right out of school and right back to your aunt’s. Sign your life over. Then it was done. We could have taken care of you just as we did your aunt. Two birds, one stone.”

A tear slips down my face, and he sticks his tongue out and licks it up.

“Who is we? Who the fuck are you?” My chest rises and falls as I struggle to get the words out.

“Justin Luciano.” The corner of his mouth turns up, and his eyes blacken.

“Is that supposed to fucking mean something to me, you nutbag?” I bite back.

“The Luciano family. Most powerful family on the eastern seaboard. You have no idea who we are, do you?” His eyes study me, and I can see them bounce around my face. “Your parents really kept you away from all the bullshit.”

“No. Fucking. Clue. And to add to that, fucking don’t give a shit.”

“Oh, my little bird, so innocent. You know, you should absolutely give a shit. I may want to keep you, but if you keep up with your back talk, all I have to do is snap my fingers and you’re in a shallow fucking grave.” He rubs his thumb over my lower lip. “Your family owes mine. And we have been trying to get that for years now. When your family failed to give us what we wanted, we made the decision to just wipe you all out. No one would obviously miss all five of you.”

“The police will catch on. Especially now that I’m gone!” I scream through the blinding pain in my head.

“Still not getting it. We own the police, we own the government, we own everything. We can get away with everything.” He smiles down at me, his lips twisted cruelly. “How do you think Dax’s mom ‘ran’ away? We all know what really happened. Poor Daxon.” He laughs.

I roll, trying to maneuver away from him, and that’s when I realize I made a huge mistake doing that. Justin jumps at the chance to straddle me, locking my legs under him. I try to push him off me, but he wraps his giant hands around my wrists and forces them up over my head. I try to wiggle out of his grasp, but it’s pointless. He’s so much stronger, so much bigger.

“How? How do they owe you something? We were nobodies! You didn’t have to kill them!” As I say those words, the realization washes over me. They truly were ripped from me. They didn’t commit suicide. They were murdered. My eyes grow wide as he leans closer to me, his nose skimming my cheek.

“Your father promised us something. Then he took it back. It was going to make us so much money. We would have been even more untouchable than we are now.” His lips graze my neck, and my skin stings from the touch. He shudders a breath, and I can feel him smile. “Now that I’ve answered all that I can, you get to stay here and be a good little girl. Think about what you did that brought you here. When I think you can behave and not cause me trouble, you can come join me back at the house.”

He grinds into me, and I can feel something I definitely do not want to feel. The man rubs his hard micro dick against me, getting off like the sick fucker he is. I close my eyes, trying to picture anything happy, anything to put my mind out of realizing what is happening.

The guys. I miss the guys. I need them to find me. Get me out of here. Suddenly, he stops, jumps off me, and I turn and curl into a ball, my back to him.

“Think about what you did, Phoenix. You’ll have plenty of thinking time out here.”

With that, I hear footsteps receding and the workshop doors being shut and locked.

I immediately scramble to my knees and get as close as I can to the wall the chains are attached to. The bile from my empty stomach burns my throat as it comes up. My eyes water as I vomit all over the floor. Tears streak down my face, and I try to calm my dry heaving. Snot flows out of my nose; I cough from the acid taste in my mouth.

There’s so much that doesn’t make any sense. Nothing he said adds up to what I know. It’s true I thought my dad—Trevor’s death was suspicious, but my mom’s was a suicide. I found her. I saw the body.

Fuck, and Aunt Julie.

Luciano. Luciano. That name.

My eyes go wide as I recognize that name. I've heard it before around town, I even remember people talking about them at school. Mafia. The Luciano family. They are a high-powered mafia family out of New York. They run the East Coast like it's their personal playhouse.

What the fuck was my family doing messing with the goddamn Mafia?

We were a normal, boring, everyday family. Nothing screamed illegal doings with gangsters. What the fuck?

My mind floats through everything Justin told me. *"Nobody would've missed all five of you."* *"Your real father was killed."* *"Your father promised us something. Then he took it back. It was going to make us so much money."* *"Your mom and Trevor ..."*

My father stole from them. My real father was killed. Trevor wasn't my real father. My mind tries to make sense of the equation.

My mom.

Trevor.

My Aunt Julie.

My Uncle Ronald.

I would have made number five.

My chest starts to heave at the realization of his words. My mind flashes back to my aunt calling my mom a slut. Her pure hatred for her. Disgust.

Now I know why.

Trevor Hayes wasn't my dad.

Ronald Trivets, the man who married my Aunt Julie, was.



Chapter Twenty-One

COLTON

THERE'S a nagging feeling I have in the back of my head that something's off. Not sure what it is, but something feels weird in the air. But of course, there's nothing that I can do about it right now, as we sit here in the warehouse with the goons that work for the Luciano family.

Which this whole situation is weird, I'm not even sure why we're here.

I watch each of them move around their targets. The shit dicks that stupidly tried to skim some money off the top of what they were supposed to collect. Then, these fuckers were taking some of the product before they delivered it. I get that you need your fix, but I wouldn't steal it from your employer. Especially when your employer is the fucking Mafia. I shake my head at the scene in front of me.

Sweat drips down the back of my neck as I sit in front of the laptop pulling up the video from the drop last week. We are inside one of the Luciano's warehouses that they have here outside of Black Forest. It's dim and damp. It's actually cold out, but they have the heat cranked up so hot to make these assholes sweat.

And now the guys and I are sweating our asses off too.

"Did you get the video?" the bald asshole, who I think goes by Matty, asks me.

"Yup." I turn the laptop towards him and hit play. The video shows the three fuckers, that are tied to the chairs before us, taking some of the money out of the bags and placing it in containers around their house.

They had no idea they had their place under surveillance. We set it all up a few days ago. They were passed out from whatever drugs they had taken, and we snuck in and set up video and audio surveillance in their den of drugs and whores.

It was fucking disgusting.

“Please! We’re fucking sorry! We can give it back!” One of the captives sniffle as blood pours from the side of his head, snot running down the front of his face. He’s a fucking disgusting mess.

A maniacal laugh comes from behind him. Asshole number two, who goes by the name of Enzo, steps closer to him. Enzo is one of soldiers of the Luciano family. From what I understand from warehouse gossip, he’s looking to be promoted to Capo. Good for him for having goals.

Internally, I roll my eyes.

Enzo, dressed in all black, puts his hands on the shoulders of the sniffing mess. The guy jumps and whimpers at the touch.

“See, Carl, here’s the thing. We know you don’t have the money. You spent it all on blow and hookers.” He clicks his tongue and shakes his head. “Tsk, tsk. Look, I get it. Who doesn’t love a good pussy to stick your cock into? Best feeling in the world. But you did it with money that wasn’t yours to take. And come on, buying pussy? Can’t you three assholes just not pick up a needy chick to fuck?”

“S-s-sorry,” Carl stutters.

Bang.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you are now,” Enzo says to the lifeless body as it falls forward. Dax and Mase are standing behind me, and I can feel them tense.

“Billy, Luke, it’s a shame you had to see your friend go like that,” he says to the backs of the two others now outwardly crying. “Where’s my money? Who else is taking my money? Because we have been short product for a few weeks now. Where the fuck did it go?”

The mess named Billy starts to look around and stutter. “I-It ... w-well ...”

“It? Well? Spit it out fucker! Where the fuck is my shit? Who are you selling it to? I know you fuckers didn’t use it all!” Enzo yells in his face.

“It was the Calabria family! They paid us to take some of the product!” Luke screams next to his blubbering friend.

Enzo stops in his tracks and looks at the two. “So, you’re telling me, you gave our product to another family? The Calabria family? Our fucking enemies?”

“Y-Yes.” There’s a sudden dripping down under Luke’s chair. The man just pissed himself. Which, under the circumstances, I can understand why. He knows he fucked up.

“Who else?” Enzo presses Luke.

“W-Who ...”

“Yes, shitbag. Who else? Who else has the Calabria family approached? What else of ours has gone missing? Who the mother fucking else?”

“I-I don’t know. It was just us. I swear—”

Bang. Bang.

Two more shots ring out, and two bodies slump forward. Blood from all three soak down to the plastic tarp beneath them.

“Now you fuckers can join him.” Enzo stares at the bodies, his face red and his eyes black. Enzo is fucking pissed. “Mother fuckers.”

Outwardly, I show no emotion. It’s how I’ve been trained. Take in, observe, show nothing. Inwardly, I’m screaming at the scene in front of me.

“Well, that definitely was not what I was expecting,” he says. “Fuck. Well, that’s going to be a huge ass fucking problem now. Matty, we need to find out if they got to anyone else. And we need to find out why they want it. Besides the obvious to fuck us in our own ass.”

I bite the inside of my cheek as I process the words he's saying. This is so not good. We could be getting involved in a war between these two families. What the fuck did our fathers get us involved in?

Fuck.

This wasn't what we signed up for.

"The cleaners will be here to take care of this. Enjoy the rest of your evening." Enzo and the others simply turn and walk right out, leaving us three there, stunned.

"You gotta be kidding me!" Dax yells and he runs his hands through his hair and pulls at it. "Did they seriously just up and leave this here?"

"What the fuck?" Mason starts to pace back and forth. "No, I can't do this. We can't do this. You heard them! This is going to be a war! I don't want any part of this."

"We don't have a choice," I say honestly. "Whatever deal they have worked out with the Luciano family, it involves us now."

"Why? Why the fuck is this even happening?" Mason stops and stares at us.

"Our fathers think there is an advantage with doing business with the Mafia. Too fucking money hungry. But I think it goes deeper than the marriages. I don't even think our families are in control," I whisper, not sure if this place is bugged as well. I would hope not, since this is where they kill people, but who the fuck knows?

"I can't do this. I just can't." Mason is slowly losing it, staring at me bug-eyed.

"Mase, brother, you need to fucking relax. Just go. Let's get the hell out of here."

Mase hesitates for a moment but then turns and heads out. Dax and I look over the mess and the blood. I blow out a long breath and then look over at him.

"We are in shit fucking deep."

* * *

The ride back to Dax's was long and quiet. None of us said a word. But that pit was still twisting inside my stomach. The events of today had me in knots. I don't see what we gain from this. The Mafia is nothing but trouble; you don't ever get out, so why get in bed with them?

When I get out of the car, the air chills me, and I pause for a moment, trying to center myself. Mason is going to keep her occupied while Dax and I clean up.

As we make our way into the house, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It's quiet, too quiet. All week, Phoenix has been blasting music through the stereo systems and singing her heart out, or she has a movie playing on the surround sound ready to burst anyone's ear drums.

But the house is eerily silent.

"Phoenix?" Mason calls out, but there is no response.

"Maybe she's sleeping," Dax says. "Let's check upstairs."

All three of us run up the stairs and head over to Dax's room where we have been spending the week sleeping. The door is wide open, and the bed is still unmade. I look and see her phone and stuff next to the bed. The light in the bathroom is on, and as I step through, finding it empty.

Mason and Dax leave the room in search of her. I pick up her phone and see that she has no missed calls or texts, which is typical. Her crocs are missing from the side of the bed next to the nightstand, where she has had those atrocious looking things all week.

"Her keys are in the foyer, and so are her Docs." Mason runs back in. "Where the fuck is she?"

"Did we check the game room?" I suggest.

Daxon comes out from another wing of the house and all three of us head to the game room. But when we get there, it's empty.

“Where the fuck is she?” Dax growls.

My stomach tightens as that feeling of doom starts to get stronger. Where the fuck could she have gone? Did something happen?

We hear a laugh down the hall and freeze in our tracks. We know that laugh. All too well.

“What the fuck is your dad doing home, Dax?” Mason’s eyes go wide.

He shouldn’t be here. He should be in whatever country he was staying in all week.

“Fuck if I know, but this can’t be good.” Dax shakes his head as we follow him out towards his dad’s office. Dax opens the door, and we find Emerson behind his desk on the phone. He looks up at us and holds up a finger as he finishes his conversation.

“Yeah, listen, let me go. I’ll give you a call when I get back. Okay. Bye.” He presses end on his phone and looks up at us. “Hello, boys.” He smirks, glancing between the three of us. “Missing something? Or should I say, someone?”

“Where is she?” Dax steps towards his father, murder in his eyes.

“Let me ask you this: Did you really think I wouldn’t find out about her being here? I have eyes everywhere.” He laughs.

I clench my fists and grind my teeth together to keep from saying or doing something I’ll regret.

“Where is she?” Dax repeats.

“Is she really worth it? She could destroy everything this family, our families, have worked so hard for. She’s trash.”

Dax sneers, “Fuck you.”

“Wow, son, that mouth. Is the silver spoon I fed you with not enough? Is her pussy made of gold? Maybe I need to put her in one of the clubs. She can give back to the community. Use that perfect little body to bring in more money. She could use that pussy for good—”

Before he can finish that sentence, Dax cocks his fist back and swings at his father's face. The hit knocks him off balance, and he lands on his ass. Mason barks out a laugh, and I sit there watching Emerson's next movements.

"Now, *Dad*, I'm going to ask again. Where is she? If I don't get something, I'll beat it out of you," Dax seethes.

Emerson chortles. "That's hilarious. In what universe would I even let that happen?"

"The universe where it's three against one," I cut in. "Odds aren't in your favor. So do yourself a *favor* and answer his question. Where is she?"

He wipes the blood off of his lip and smiles. "She left. No idea where she went. She got in a cab and took off. I have no idea where to."

Dax looks at me and nods. We need to get back to Darkwood. It's the only logical place she would go. We run out of the office to the tune of Emerson laughing, grabbing her stuff she left behind and heading out the door as quickly as we can.

When we finally pull up to Darkwood, we run over to her building, but we don't find her waiting outside. The doors are still locked. She wouldn't have been able to get in without her keys anyways. Fuck.

"Maybe she went to the dining hall," Mason suggests, glancing around out of breath from all our running.

"Yeah, let's head there." Dax takes off in a jog, and we all follow.

When we make it inside the dining hall, there's barely anyone there. I see Brooklyne sitting at the table, typing away on her laptop. She looks lost in whatever she is working on and doesn't hear us approach.

I clear my throat as the guys come up behind me.

She stares at us, her lips in a thin line. "Um, am I sitting at the wrong table or something? Because I'm pretty sure this is not King territory."

Mason steps up between us and sits down in the chair next to us. “No.” He shakes his head. “We are looking for Phoenix. Have you seen her at all?”

She bites her lip, and her brows furrow. “No. I would think she’d be with you three brutes. She hasn’t been on campus.”

“So, she didn’t show up here at all?” Dax says, his voice raising as his panic starts to set in.

“No. But you guys are starting to scare me. Did something happen to her? Was she not with you?” Brooklynne slams her laptop closed.

“Why are you on campus?” I question.

Her head snaps to me, and her face pales. “I-I had nowhere to go.” Her voice weakens, and her head lowers in shame. “My family didn’t want to celebrate this year.”

I study her for a moment, but I can see the sadness in her eyes. The tears coming.

I cannot deal with that right now.

“So, you haven’t seen her?” I change the subject back to Phoenix.

She shakes her head. “No, I swear. I’ve been in here most of the day working on my paper and chowing down on the goodies they laid out. She hasn’t been in here since I got here.”

“Fuck!” Dax pulls on the ends of his hair. “Where the fuck is she? Where the fuck could she have gone?”

“Call her?” Brooklynne suggests.

Mason holds out her phone and shakes his head. “She won’t answer. She didn’t take her phone with her.”

I watch the color drain from her face. Her eyes move back and forth between Mason and the phone, like she’s calculating something.

“You know, for someone that just met her, you seem very bothered by this,” I point out.

She doesn't say anything for a moment, but then speaks. "She's had a shit time here. I see and hear what you three did to her, what the rest of the school body still does to her. So yeah, I am bothered by this. Because she doesn't deserve that sort of hate or bullying. In the end, she's human. She has a heart, and it beats like all of ours does. I know about what happened at homecoming, how you all destroyed her." She suddenly stands up from the table, picking up her laptop and her bag. "That girl has been pushed, pulled, shoved, jumped, and shit on since the moment she stepped foot on campus. And your fiancés have it out for her, they want her blood. So, I'm fucking bothered more than you can even begin to understand."

She starts to walk away and then turns back to us.

"Every time she tries to pick up the pieces of her life, something else comes along and knocks them all back down. Each time, she loses another piece of who she was, who she is. Either help her put herself back together or get the fuck out of her way. She's in a dark place. If you really cared, you would see that."

She throws her bag over her shoulder and a tear drops from her eye.

"Before you can rise from the ashes, you need to burn. Remember that."

The three of us stand there, completely stunned, but she's right; Phoenix hasn't been the same. She still struggles with existing in this life. We assumed it's from the arranged marriages, but it's from everything. And we haven't been there to keep her together.

From day one, we've let her down.

"Um, okay. So, that was a bit weird." Mason looks at me, his lips turned down. "That little speech she gave ... what the fuck?"

I shake my head. "I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I intend to find out."

We need to find her—fuck, we need to find her. We have no idea what happened back at the house with Emerson Sr. Whatever he did scared her. And God only knows what place her head space is at right now because of it.

Phoenix may be able to pick up her pieces, but they might not be put back in the same places as they were before.



Chapter Twenty-Two

DAXON

IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS. Three days and we haven't heard nor seen her. It's now the first day back at school from the Thanksgiving break, and she still has not come back to campus.

I'm fucking losing my mind over this.

A part of me had hoped that she was just hiding out somewhere. That maybe she had used the money her aunt gave her and went to a hotel or another city to just decompress. Do her writing or whatever that bullshit is that Dr. Parker has her so into doing.

Except she didn't. Colt checked all her accounts. Nothing has been touched.

Where the hell is she?

Her phone had the tracker, but it's useless if she doesn't have the phone on her. And if luck would have it, all the school cameras were shut off all day on Friday. And by luck, I mean that's not normal and sends all sorts of red flags up.

Colt is still trying to figure out how that could even happen. The system has a backup for when the power get shuts off, but that didn't kick in. It shows no sign of tampering, but that could mean if it was, whoever did it knew what they were doing.

My mind has been playing out scenarios all weekend. Her showing up to our dorm all hunky dory. Her walking into class this morning. Even the worst case scenario that she's lying dead somewhere. That thought I try so hard to keep from

surfacing. Because the fact is, she isn't here. She wasn't seen around campus, and she left in a hurry after my father kicked her out. She never made it back to her room.

Just gone.

Hell, we don't even know if she made it back to campus. The driver was an associate of my father's, so he didn't give us anything when we approached him.

Even after beating the shit out of him. He said he would rather die than betray my father.

That can be arranged, fucker.

All of this does not add up to her just leaving of her own accord. I run my hand through my hair, pulling at it.

I want to scream at the top of my lungs. Call out her name. Pray she hears me. Inside, I am a volcano ready to fucking erupt. Outside, I am trying to remain as calm as I can be for both appearances and my brothers' sakes.

And I'm ready to crack.

Colt has been going at all this for days, trying to comb through anything that could give us a single grain to go off of. But he has come up completely empty-handed. He hasn't slept much—shit, none of us have. But the circles under his eyes get darker with each day that passes and I know by the consistent shaking in his leg, his blood is pure caffeine at this point.

All of us are on the edge of burning this whole city down. She can't just up and disappear. She wouldn't do that to us. Not after everything.

Or would she?

I shake that thought from my head. No. She wouldn't.

Mase is a fucking zombie. He's completely devastated. He hasn't moved from the couch since we got back. He just stares at the door, like he's willing her to walk through it. He doesn't talk, he barely eats or drinks. He's hurting.

And I know he is because I am too.

I rub the pain in my chest. I should've never left her. Fuck. I knew it was a bad idea. Everything was going so well that week. It was pure fucking heaven with her. Being inside her whenever I wanted. Sleeping next to her, hearing her soft little snores, it was perfect.

But I left her in the enemy's territory. I never thought my father would come back early. I should've known he'd have eyes on the place, but I didn't think he gave two shits.

I miscalculated.

She's in trouble, and we can't find her. We can't get to her. Our power, control, our fucking names mean nothing because we can't help her.

Because we don't know where to even start looking. Anything and everything is us just grasping at straws.

I scroll for the millionth time through all her socials, but there's still no change. I run my hand down my face and let out an exasperated sigh.

Three days.

Jumping out of my bed, I head over to Colt's room. The door is wide open, and I can hear him clicking away on his keyboard.

"Hey, anything?" I ask him as I walk over the threshold.

"Nothing. But I did find something interesting on a Brooklyn Foster," he says without looking away from his screens.

"All ears."

He turns and takes off his glasses, rubbing his eyes as he lets out a long breath. Placing his glasses back on his face, he looks me. "She was new too."

"Wait ... what? How can that be possible? We only knew of one new person and that was Phoenix. Where did this girl come from?" I press the palm of my hand into my head; I can feel a headache start to build with all this stress.

"She was new last year. So, she came in as a sophomore."

I shake my head. “That’s impossible. We didn’t hear of anyone new coming in.”

“It’s not. Her family enrolled her. She got in. Board approved it.”

“What? Did they donate to the school or something?”

“No. She was actually enrolled as a freshman, but she just didn’t go here for her first year. Board approved her late start.”

“Wait, so her freshman year was paid for, but she didn’t attend here?” Yeah, the headache is definitely getting stronger.

“I mean technically, she was enrolled her freshman year. It wouldn’t have set off any alarms. But her first classes were her sophomore year. Before then, she went to public out in California.” Colt pushes his glasses back up along his nose.

“So, her school is paid for then. Even this year, her junior year.”

“Fully paid for.”

“What the fuck is going on? How did we not know that she slid in here last year? We know everything that goes on.” I furrow my brows as I try to think back at any conversation where that would have slipped. “This can’t be a coincidence.”

“I don’t think it is,” Colt says as he grabs his coffee and slams the rest back.

“The stuff she said, she was angry. Who are her parents?”

“Jared and Bonnie Foster. They own a couple tech companies. Usually buying startups, getting them up and off the ground and then selling them.” Colt shrugs. “Nothing that seems special about them. They have money, but that’s it.”

“Okay, so do we consider her a threat? Because she seemed more protective of Phoenix.” I rub the back of my neck. I need to find something strong for the pounding my head is taking.

Colt shakes his head. “I don’t think she’s a threat, but I’m curious about her.”

“Yeah, me too.” I let out a sigh. “Maybe we need to see the headmaster about the cameras. Start there. You sure there were no scheduled updates?”

“I checked the company logs. No one had it down for updates. They should not have been down. And if something did bring them down, that backup should’ve kicked in,” Colt groans. “Someone brought them down. It had to be an inside job.”

“Well, then let’s go ask the headmaster who was messing with it.”

Colt nods and grabs his keys and wallet. I also see him take Phoenix’s phone. He’s kept it close to him. I don’t know if he’s hoping it will magically bring her back to us or what, but he has a death grip on it.

He loves her, they both do. How could they not? I’ve been drawn to her since the first day I saw her on campus, as I hid behind that tree like a fucking creeper. I have never seen my brothers this head over heels in love. Fuck, she’s everything to me, to us. I should have told her how I feel. How much she means to me.

“Hey, Mase. Snap out of it.” I hit his foot at the end of the couch. “Get up, we have to go.”

He jumps up, his eyes wide. “Did you find her?”

I shake my head, “No. But we need to figure out where Brooklyne fits in all this. Plus, the headmaster has to have logs of anyone who needed to access the security systems.”

He cocks his head to the side. “What do you mean where she fits in? She’s a geek. She doesn’t fit in.”

I let out a laugh. “Yeah, she is. But she also got very defensive over Phoenix. And she was supposed to be here freshmen year but didn’t show up until last year.”

“Wait, what?” Mason cocks his head and frowns. “Why?”

“No clue,” Colt says from behind me.

“Million-dollar question.” I turn toward the door. Mason and Colton follow close behind.

Mason jumps off the couch and throws on his shoes. “Let’s go find out the answers then.”

As we walk across campus towards Forthright, we scan around us, looking for the slightest hope that Phoenix will show up. Just run out of nowhere and pop back into our lives. For that bright red hair blowing around, that swing her ass has as she walks.

My heart twists, and it feels like it’s squeezing in on itself inside my chest.

Students walk around, catching their peers up on whatever it was they did over the long time off. I’m sure there were a lot of fancy vacations and a shit ton of high-end classy foods. Meanwhile, we were lost in our own world with Phoenix. And it was the best week ever.

Until it wasn’t.

We approach Forthright, and students that are standing at the doors, part for us. Girls bat their eyelashes, as some of the guys look down and try not to make contact. Which is probably a good thing. Because right about now, I feel like I can go a few rounds with someone’s face.

As we walk into the office, Ms. Hodgens looks up from her computer screen and scowls. She really needs to learn how to be much more pleasant.

“What do you three want now?”

“To see Lockhart. Now.” I step around the side of the desk.

“Well, he isn’t going to be here today. In fact, he took the whole week off.” She shrugs and turns back to her computer.

“We just had a week off with the holiday. He needed another one?” Mason questions.

“Look, I don’t get paid to ask questions. He said he was taking the week off, so he took the week off. Guess you’ll have to wait until he gets back,” she bites back.

I look at Colt, and he gives me a nod. If the headmaster isn’t available, she’s the next best thing.

“The campus cameras went down on Friday. How the fuck did that happen?” I narrow my eyes at her. Her face immediately pales. She says nothing as she stares at her computer monitor, barely breathing.

“I ... uh ... well ...” She closes her eyes for a moment and seems to try and get a hold of herself. When she opens them, she stares right at us. “They had to be pulled for an update. That’s all I can tell you. Now go to class.”

“That’s funny, because I checked Langford Tech logs. There was nothing scheduled for Darkwood. No one called anything in, and no one came out,” Colt pressures. “What’s going on, Hodgens?”

Her lips purse, and she looks between all of us. “Some things are better left alone. Don’t go poking your nose in places it doesn’t belong. Now get the fuck out and get to class.”

My eyes widen at her choice of words. She’s a grumpy cunt, but she’s never sworn at us like that. She turns and runs towards the back of the office out of sight.

Well, that’s interesting.

We walk out of the office, and I’m not sure what our next move should be. There are dead ends everywhere we look. Things get more twisted the further down the rabbit hole we go.

“My dad.” I turn to my brothers. “He kicked her out that day. We are gonna need to get it out of him. He fucking knocked the first domino over.”

“You want us all to go?” Mason looks around us, still hoping to spot her in the crowd.

“No. You two stay here, in case Phoenix shows up. This shit between my dad and I ... it’s gonna be ugly.”

I nod to them and take off towards the parking lot. Whatever is going on, I know I’m not going to like the answers I’m about to find out.

* * *

“Father. We need to talk,” I say the moment I walk through his office door. He looks up from his desk, his eyes wide in surprise.

Yeah, fuck face, I’m here.

“Son. I wasn’t expecting you.” He lets out a nervous laugh.

“Surprise visit. You know, like the one you gave Phoenix the other day. The one that ran her the fuck out? You weren’t even supposed to be home. So, please tell me what the ever-loving fuck you were doing at the house.”

“Look, she’s no good for you. She’ll destroy everything.”

“You keep fucking saying that. But yet she hasn’t done anything but exist!” I yell at him, slowly creeping closer to his desk. “She hasn’t done anything to anyone. She didn’t even want to be at Darkwood!”

“There are forces at work here, son. Things you will eventually understand, but right now, you can’t. There is so much at stake here. Our future, your future. You have to trust me.” My father holds up his hands in front of him, like a plea.

“Fuck your forces. Fuck trusting you. That went out the goddamn window the day you lied to me about my mother. I may have not known the piece of shit you were then, but I do now!” My voice rises with every word.

“Calm down. Look, I’m sorry about what happened with your mother. I just couldn’t let you think your mother was a cheating whore, much like that Phoenix girl.”

I move so fast I catch him off guard, and his breath catches in his throat, causing him to cough. My hand snaps up to wrap around his neck, and I squeeze just enough to cut off a bit of air. He is so shocked at the move that he doesn’t fight back.

“If I hear you call my mother or Phoenix a whore again, I don’t care if I came from your nut sack or not, I will fucking end you.” I spit in his face.

“You have no idea what you’re doing. Who you are dealing with.” My dad can barely get the words out with my hand still wrapped around his throat. “This isn’t a war you can win. They own everything.”

“Who? The Luciano family? Is that who’s behind all this? Did they do something to mom? Who, Dad, who?” I remove my hand and take a step back.

“Stay out of it. I can’t lose you too.” His voice is hoarse, and there’s a sadness in his eyes. And I almost actually give a damn.

“I can’t do that. Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head. Suddenly, his face loses all show of emotion, and he’s back to himself. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“Bullshit. Who has her?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know something! You came home purposely to surprise her. I wouldn’t even put it past you if that job we had to go to was a setup to get us out of the house.”

His lips don’t move; they stay in a tight line. And while his mouth says nothing, his silence speaks volumes.

“It *was* a setup. You put us on that job to get us out of the house. Do you even know what we had to watch?”

“I am well aware of what they had you part of. That was a test of loyalty. One you three passed. Then again, if you didn’t, you wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “You lying son of a bitch. Those tests are bullshit. We watched three people get killed. Murdered in front of our eyes. Let’s not forget about watching poor Gio get his fucking brains blown out in front of us. Is this really the legacy you wanted for us? No, this is all such shit. Your excuses, your lies.” I shake my head and take a deep breath. “You got us out of there to corner her alone. You are the reason she’s gone.”

“And that’s a good thing. You need to focus on school and your fiancé. You have a company that you will run someday. That’s your focus. Not some loner whor—”

“Watch it!” I growl. I let out a long breath and start to pace around his office. “Who is Brooklyne Foster?”

“Who?” My father scrunches his face in confusion.

“Brooklyne Foster. I think she’s a junior at Darkwood. She got in her freshman year but then didn’t show up until her sophomore year. How did that happen?”

My dad looks away for a moment, then turns back to me. “I don’t know that name. So, whatever her family had worked out, I wasn’t privy to.”

“Well, you’re on the board. You have to approve all those applications.”

“Daxon, I can’t remember everyone who gets let in. Plus, I’m not always there.”

“Well, she goes to the school, I need to know why she was allowed to skip her freshman year. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Is she a problem?”

“You know, I am starting to think our definitions of problem people might be different. Considering you felt Phoenix was one.” I reach back and squeeze the back of my neck. The tightness I am sure is from being so stressed out with all of this.

“Well, I don’t know anyone by the last name of Foster. Look, son, there are things you don’t understand and so many things at work I can’t even begin to tell you about. I am trying to keep you safe until this is all over.” He looks at me, his face hardening.

“Until what is all over?” I ask him, but he stays silent. “It’s the Mafia, Dad. The only fucking way out is death. You signed all of our death certificates with this move.”

His eyes narrow. “That’s not true.”

“Do we even own our businesses? Or is that all lies too?”

“Of course we do. This is just a way to solidify our place in this town. Make us all more powerful. We will have power over the police, our government, every fucking thing.”

I scoff at him. “You’re a disgrace of a father. Such an asshole. I’m glad Mom’s dead. She never would have wanted this. Because if that accident didn’t kill her, this would have.”

“Phoenix is not coming back. Get the fuck over it.” My father turns back to his laptop, his jaw set so hard I wonder if it will break.

“I’m not going to give up until I find her.” I make my way to his door.

“You’re playing with fire, Daxon.”

I scoff, glancing at him over my shoulder before leaving the room. “Then watch me burn.”



Chapter Twenty-Three

PHOENIX

I SHIVER from the cold air as I lay here on the floor of what I am now calling the dungeon. I have no idea how long I have been chained to this floor; the light I once saw is now gone. I think at some point he covered the windows to keep the light from getting in.

He does feed me at least. He came in a while ago; it was dark when he opened the door and brought me food. All he had was rice and a piece of bread. Of course no spoons or anything that I could stab him with.

Because I absolutely would stab the fucker.

I begged him to let me out, to bring me back, but he just laughed and turned away. Leaving me in the dungeon with shitty food and the bitter cold. I hear a heater kick on every now and then, but it's only just enough to keep it livable, not warm.

At this point, I would take the cage over this.

I'm freezing, dirty, hungry, and slowly feeling like I'm slipping from reality. My tongue licks my dry lips, but even my mouth is bone dry.

It feels like I've been here for months. But I don't think that's right. Then again, I don't know.

I cry, but there are no more tears to be shed. I sing sometimes, just above a whisper, to help try and take my mind to another place. It never works for long.

No one has found me.

I don't even know if anyone has even looked for me. I mean, I'm still here, so I'll take that as a big fat no. There's no possible way for anyone to find me. No one would even suspect Justin. He was my doctor for fuck's sake.

How did this even happen?

My uncle, who may actually be my real father, my entire family gone. What the fuck reality have I woken up to?

The cement floor has not been forgiving on my back. My bones ache, and I can't move very far with these restraints. I'm dying to be back in that cage.

Another shiver rolls through me as I hear the door unlock and I know who's coming. Though, a small part of me always hopes its one of the guys.

But it never is.

"There's my little birdie." Justin stands over me, a puffy coat wrapped around him. As he talks, I can see his breath from his mouth.

I stare up at him, my teeth chattering. My arms are wrapped around me as far as I can get them. "Please, cold." My voice is hoarse.

"I know, I see that. I'll tell you what, why don't I bring you inside, feed you, and you can sleep nice and warm tonight?" He bends down and brushes the hair out of my face.

His hands are warm, and I almost welcome the unwanted touch of his skin. Anything that makes me warmer than I am. I'm at war with my own mind. I want to pull away and yet I want his warmth. I'm so fucked in the head.

"P-please," I beg.

He stands there, over me for a moment, like he's thinking and mulling over his own proposal. He finally gives me a smile and nod, and instantly I'm grateful for the chance.

Justin removes the leg cuffs and then the wrist ones. He slowly wraps his arms around me, pulling him to me. His one arm under my leg and the other around my back. I push back a bit at the intrusion.

“Shh, you’re going to be a little weak. Let me help carry you into the house. Cling to me for warmth,” he says in a soft voice. Without even an ounce of fight in me, I throw my arms around him as he cradles me in his arms.

I just need to be warm.

When we leave the dungeon, the cold air immediately hits me, and my body shakes violently. Without even thinking, I curl into him. The walk back to the house seems like hours but is probably only thirty seconds.

I don’t even know anymore. Time doesn’t even exist for me.

When we cross through the sliding doors into the house, warmth immediately hits my face. My body still shivers from the cold that had seeped into my bones.

He walks me into the bathroom on the first floor, the one that I was on when I first got here. He sets me down on the toilet as he starts the water in the bathtub.

“W-what are you d-doing?” I ask him as my teeth clatter. My arms wrap around myself as I try to stop myself from shaking.

“You need a bath before you eat. One, you are extremely dirty. Two, you are cold, and I need to warm you up,” he says with his back turned towards me.

I don’t say anything else as I watch the steam rise from the tub. He turns and walks a couple steps towards me and helps me stand up. His hands go immediately to the hem of my shirt, and my arms try to push his away.

“W-what do you think you’re doing?”

“Helping you out of your clothes. I don’t need you falling and hitting your head. Plus, you have been in these clothes for a while. I need to get you in something else, wash these. I have a whole closet of clothes for you,” he says as he towers over me.

“No. I can do it myself.”

He stands there for a minute, pursing his lips. “Maybe we need a trip back to the workshop. I think we still have a bit of an attitude that we need to take care of.”

My eyes widen. I can’t go back there. I can’t go back to the dungeon. My body can’t deal with another night in the cold. “No, p-please.”

“See? It’s not that hard, Little Bird. Just let me help you. Let me take care of you. That’s all I have ever wanted to do.” His hands find the hem of my shirt again, and he pulls it up.

Everything in me is screaming. This isn’t right. So much of this isn’t right. I’m cold, I’m hungry, I just want sleep. But I don’t want him to touch me. My whole body is fighting me to recoil from him. He shouldn’t be touching me. This isn’t right.

Stop touching me.

But I can’t go back to that dungeon.

I can feel my breaths come in fast and shallow as he instructs me to lift my arms up over my head. I’m at war with myself.

Don’t touch me. Don’t fucking touch me.

But I just can’t go back there.

“There we go. See? That’s not so hard,” he chuckles. “Now, I’m going to take off the rest and then get you in there and cleaned up. Sounds good?”

I stare at him wide-eyed. My entire body frozen in place. I can’t move.

He’s going to have me naked.

I’m screaming no, but my lips aren’t moving. No sound is coming from my mouth. I want to beat the living shit out of him. I want to stab his eyes out, chop off each finger that’s touched me.

But I’m frozen in place by the fear of the dungeon. The isolation, the cold, the hard fucking cement floor.

Lost deep in my thoughts, I suddenly feel warmth around me, and I realize he has moved me into the tub. My

entire body is on display for him. I can't bring myself to look at him.

My mind focuses on the water in front of me. He pours water over my head. My mind is trying to shut everything off. I watch the ripples from the movements. Bubbles that form at the top of the water from the soap.

His fingers work shampoo through my hair, and I bite the inside of my cheek so hard I can taste blood. My skin feels like it's crawling with ants.

He is saying things to me, but my thoughts are screaming over him, drowning him out.

I have to get out of here.

His fingers glide over my bare skin intimately, and I fight the bile rising in my throat. I just need to make it through, until someone finds me, or I can find a way out. I focus on the tile and faucet. My body vibrates with fear from the unwanted touches.

"Beautiful." Justin's whisper breaks me out of my own mind. I can feel his hot breath on my cheek and his hand running over my breast.

Breathe, Nix, breathe.

I shiver, and he pulls back away from my face.

"Let's get you out and dressed so I can get you fed. Then we need to get you to bed. And I'll let you sleep in the bed tonight."

My head snaps to his, and my mouth drops in surprise.

Justin nods. "Yeah. I'm not such a bad guy. I just want you to understand this is the safest place you will be. With me. I can protect you. You can live a long life with me."

Tears start to well in my eyes, a scream lodged in my throat. I don't want to be here with him. I don't want a long life with this asshole. I want my old life back. My parents, my home, the life where I was oblivious to all of this bullshit.

Where the hell are my kings?

* * *

I was thankful that Justin let me dress alone and I did so in the farthest corner of the bedroom. I needed to get as far away from him as this house allowed me.

When he left, the first thing I looked at was the window, but that was a dead end. There were some sort of locks on the windows to keep them from opening that require a key. I could break the glass, but I doubt I would get out fast enough. And while he gave me clothes to wear, I have nothing for my feet. I wouldn't make it far with no shoes.

I feel like these walls are closing in on me. The more I try to search for a way to leave, the smaller the room gets. My stomach turns. The way his fingers touched me ...

Fuck, I want to puke.

Keep it together, Nix.

I have to keep from falling apart. I need some food in me. I need something to help fuel my brain. I'd be able to think better that way.

After dressing, I slowly walk across the very uninviting bedroom, past the cage he had me in, and out into the hall. With careful steps, I quietly make my way up the stairs. I have no idea where this assfuck is at, but I don't need him creeping up on me.

When I make it to the top of the stairs, I smell the tell-tale sign of food being cooked. The basil and tomato fill my nose, and I almost float my way to it. But my steps falter when I realize where I'm at.

Justin turns around and sees me standing in the living area next to the kitchen. "There you are. I was about to come see if you got lost or got yourself in trouble. I'd hate to have had to cook all this food for it to go to waste because you needed to go back in the workshop until you could behave again." He grins.

“Uh, no. I, um, just needed a few minutes longer to warm up more.” My voice comes out just above a whisper.

He looks at me for a moment and then turns back to what he’s doing. The steam from the pasta’s boiling water fogs up his black rimmed glasses, and he is muttering to himself as he adds spices to the sauce.

“Sit.” He tilts his head towards the table, and I take small steps towards it.

The table is a giant glass table, but only two chairs are at it. There is nowhere I can sit to get away from him. He is forcing me to be next to him.

I clear my throat and take a seat at the table. The fear inside me grows the longer I sit there. I feel so weak, and I’m not sure if it’s the lack of food or the fact that I’m held captive here with no way out.

Hopeless, I feel hopeless.

As I stare at the blank space in front of me, through the clear glass of the table down to the floor, I’m interrupted by a bowl placed in my view.

“Here you go. Homemade meatballs and gravy and some macaroni pasta. I, uh, would have made a penne or spaghetti, but I can’t trust you with anything other than a plastic spoon right now.” He nods to the paper bowl in front of me, and I look up at his ceramic one.

I look back down at my bowl and see that he has even cut up the meatballs so that I can eat them with the spoon. He places a plastic water bottle in front of me, and I immediately pick it up and drink down the cold water.

I can’t drink the water fast enough. The minute it hits the back of my throat, I realize how sore my throat is from being so dry. I pull back the bottle and place it down in front of me as I take a deep breath.

“Take it slow, or you are going to make yourself sick.”

You make me sick.

“Eat. You need some strength back. You are looking pale.”

Yes, strength to get the fuck out of dodge.

His expression grows wistful. “I had this home built years ago. I wanted to spend my life here with someone special.”

I’m going to burn this place to the ground.

“From the moment I saw you, I knew we would be happy here.”

I will be happy when you’re rotting in fucking hell.

“Eat. You are just sitting there.” I look up and see the stern look in his eyes.

I slowly pick up my plastic spoon and move the food around the bowl for a second before scooping some up. I cautiously bring it to my mouth as Justin stares at me. For all I know, the bastard may have poisoned this.

No, he seems to think we would live happily ever after. So definitely no poison.

The moment the food hits my tongue, the flavor explodes in my mouth. Don’t get me wrong, I want to hate it. I really do. And I’m not sure if it’s the lack of food or it really is this good.

We sit in silence for a moment, but my nerves are getting the better of me. “How long have I been here for?”

He puts his spoon down for a moment and wipes his mouth. “Doesn’t matter. You are here. That’s all that matters.”

I can feel the tears coming back. “Can you please tell me something? Just give me something?”

“Sure. But not that.”

I think for a moment. “Who was my dad? My biological father?”

“You’re a smart girl. I know you have already figured it out.” He places his elbows on the table and smiles at me. “Go on, tell me.”

I hesitate for a moment. In my head, I’m doing the math again, based on what he told me. “My supposed uncle.” The

words fall from my mouth.

He nods. “Very good.”

My stomach drops. “So, it’s true.”

“Yup. Your mother banged your uncle, well, your dad. I mean this shit is Jerry Springer type of shit if you ask me.” He chuckles.

“Why was he killed?”

He sighs and then looks at me with a dark stare. “He was a rat bastard.”

“A rat—what does that mean?” I look at him with confusion.

“You keep your mouth shut or it’s lights out. Never rat on family.” His lips form a thin line.

“Wait, he was part of your family?”

Justin shakes his head. “No. He was part of the family business.”

“He worked for the mob.” I come to the conclusion as Justin nods at me. “And what, he did something?”

“Not just something, Little Bird. He was going to turn us all over to the FBI. Keep it all for himself. But let us rot in prison. My family, other involved families, and even your precious Kings’ families.”

My mouth runs dry. “So, you had him killed because of that? But then what about my parents? My aunt?” My heart is beating wildly as I grip the sides of the tables.

“Well, they knew too much. See, it wasn’t just your biological dad, Phoenix. Trevor worked for Emerson and saw that there were issues with the accounting numbers. Now, when we have money, we need to launder or what have you, we don’t need any issues. Trevor was an issue. But he also suspected foul play and started digging with that cunt, Emerson’s wife.”

“Dax’s mom,” I whisper.

Justin nods. “Yeah. We had her stuff bugged. She had found some shit that led back to us. They were going to take what they had to the FBI and prove your dad was killed.”

I place a hand over my heart to try and calm myself down. “You killed them.” I wince at the pain slicing through me.

Justin doesn’t say anything; he just watches me. The gears in my head are turning as I try and take in all this information. “Then why my mom?”

“I think this is enough sharing for tonight.”

“No! Why my mother? Tell me! She wasn’t part of anything! Why?” My entire body trembles.

“Because.” He shrugs.

“But she cut her wrists.”

“Yeah. Because it was the only way she could save you.”

My heart stops. “What do you mean?”

“We told her if she killed herself, and we didn’t have to do anything, we would leave you alone.” He shrugs.

“So, she killed herself to save me?” Justin nods at my question. “But you didn’t leave me alone.”

“No, I didn’t,” he confirms.

“You lied.”

“Yeah, I did.”

The room starts to spin, and my mind is trying to process all this new information. My mom was forced to end her life. The box, the note. She made sure I would still have her. I reach up to my missing locket that I now realize I have not put on since homecoming.

“Why? Why did you set all that up? What could you possibly want?”

He lets out a deep laugh that sends chills to my bones. “To put the birdie back in her cage. You belong with me.”



Chapter Twenty-Four

PHOENIX

WE SAT in silence the rest of dinner. And I was almost grateful for that. However, the way he stared at me, his eyes roaming my face and body, the slight uptick in his mouth as he did, it had me extremely creeped the fuck out.

I wish I could've stabbed his face with the damn plastic spoon he gave me.

Death by plastic utensil would be a great story headline.

After dinner, he had me sit on the couch quietly while he read a book. I, of course, got nothing because he said I wasn't trustworthy yet.

He's probably right about that. I would have given his throat a million paper cuts, or however many it took to let him bleed out.

There's a battle brewing inside me. One side keeps telling me to fight and do anything, whatever the cost, to get the fuck out. The other side tells me to bide my time. To wait for an opportunity to escape.

But all of me is freaked the fuck out.

I have no idea what time it is. All the clocks are broken or not set here. I guess I'll have to go off of the sun coming up every morning just to tell me what part of the day it is. Justin still won't tell me how long I have been here.

I'm his captive.

Justin is stronger than me, even being as skinny as he is. I don't know if it would be safe to try and fight my way out. I may just end up back in the dungeon.

And I cannot go back there. I'll freeze to death.

My mind floats to the guys. My heart keeps trying to call them to me. Part of me still hopes they are looking for me. No stone left unturned or whatever.

And I hope it hasn't been so long that they have given up.

Please don't give up.

The longer I sit here, the antsier I become. Justin sits there, reading his stupid fucking book, like nothing is happening. Like he didn't kidnap me. Like he didn't just blow my whole world to smithereens with what he told me at dinner. Just sits there with his leg crossed over his knee, reading his fucking book.

In his mind, this was all supposed to happen. This was the end game. Justin thinks that I'll fall in love with him or something. That I should be thankful for all that he's doing. That he rescued me from some untimely death.

I'd take death over living out my life with a psycho killer.

And that's what he is. Justin is nothing more than a murderer.

I'm his captive.

Those words turn over again in my head. Like if I say it enough, I'll wake from this nightmare. Except this isn't a nightmare I can wake from.

In reality, I don't want death. I want to get the fuck out of here. Find myself back in the arms of the Kings. Be back in my own little world with them. In bed surrounded by my guys.

My guys.

Fuck, where are they? They should be coming in here, guns a-blazing. Ready to tear Justin to fucking pieces.

They don't know where you are, Nix.

"I think it's time for bed. You tired?" Justin closes his book and breaks me out of my thoughts.

"What time is it?" I ask hoping it he will actually tell me.

“Bedtime,” he deadpans.

Well, that didn’t fucking work. “I’m not that tired.”

“Look, I’m being nice by asking, but in reality, you don’t have a choice. So, let’s go.” He stands up and places the book on the coffee table in front of him. His eyes simmer as he looks at me and holds out a hand.

I don’t want to touch him. There is not a single part of me that wants this creep on me. Thinking about him next to me or touching me, my skin feels like its burning from the inside out. My stomach turns at the thought. God, I can feel dinner start to come back up with just the thought.

Standing without his help, I sidestep away from him and watch how he processes that I avoided taking his hand or being near him. I can’t tell if he’s pissed or not. His face gives away nothing.

“Let’s go,” he says as he cocks his head to the stairs that lead us below the living area. Guess my avoidance wasn’t that big of a deal.

Slowly, I make my way down the stairs and into the bedroom. I stand next to the cage, waiting for him to tell me to get in. Strangely, I would rather be in this cage than in the dungeon.

“Not tonight. I’m going to be generous and let you sleep on the bed.” He nods towards the giant bed next to the cage. His lips turn up in a creepy smile and I shiver.

“What’s the catch?” I narrow my eyes at him.

A cackle falls from his lips, and he points at me. “See? One of the many things I love about you, Little Birdie. Too smart for your own good.”

What. The. Fuck?

My skin instantly feels like it’s crawling with ants. This fucker can’t be serious. Loves about me? My eyes widen as he stares at me, my heart is racing, my hands clenched at my side.

I’d rather take the cage. Give me the cage.

He gives me a wide smile and then turns towards the bed and pulls down the covers. Justin holds out a hand, gesturing me to get in. My stomach starts to twist as I walk around the bed to the side nearest to the window.

Fuck, I want to push him through it. Maybe the glass will cut him enough that he will just lay there and bleed out. God, I want to fucking kill him.

“Get in.”

My body vibrates with fear and rage. Each step makes everything else around me darken. All I can see is what’s in front of me. My vision starting to blur with the tears I am holding back.

One foot in front of the other.

I walk around him, trying to avoid touching him, I climb into the bed. Instantly, my body relaxes into the mattress, like it’s wrapping me up in all of its softness. It is a sudden comfort in my shitty situation. After sleeping on the floor of the dungeon, this is fucking heaven. Of course, it’s a slice of Heaven inside of Hell.

Justin hovers over me and stares at me for a second before opening his vile mouth. “Give me your wrists.”

Immediately I pull them back and clutch them to my stomach. “No. Why do you need them?” My eyes widen with fear.

“Give me your fucking wrists, now.” His voice gets deeper with each word.

“Fuck off, Justin,” I bite back.

“Wrong answer.” Before I can even respond his hand is around my throat and he’s pushing the back of my head down into the pillow. My hands grab onto his hand, trying to pry him off me. His leg comes up and he is suddenly straddling me, pushing my head further down into the pillow.

My air is constricted, and black spots start to form around my vision. I struggle through each breath I take. With my eyes blinking back the darkness as I look up at him, pleading for

him to stop. I grunt as I feel my heart start to slow and my lungs screaming for air.

“Here’s the thing, Phoenix,” he says as his hands tighten again around my neck, “you’re mine now. I’ve waited, watched and been fucking patient. But now, you belong to me. You are going to give me everything I fucking want.”

I claw, desperate for a bit of air. My head is starting feel light, I’m fighting my eyes from closing. Then he slowly eases his grip on my throat, and I take a breath.

“As far as I see it, you have two choices. Do as I say, or be dismembered and stuffed into a fucking drum of lye. All I have to do is make a call, and it will be as if you never fucking existed.” His hand comes up, and his palm comes down against my cheek. The sting causes me to let out a gasp. My stomach turns and my heart feels like it’s ready to jump out of my body.

I fucking pushed his buttons to a breaking point.

His eyes are pure black, and he clenches his teeth as his breathing picks up. I swallow back the emotion rising up in my throat, trying to not let the tears fall from my eyes. Internally, I scream.

And then suddenly the darkness recedes a bit, and the redness in his face starts to fade.

“Now, be a good girl and give me your fucking hands,” he grits out between his teeth. Immediately, I hold up my hands towards him, afraid to push him anymore.

He reaches for something behind the bed and slaps them on my wrist. The coldness from the metal cuffs immediately sends goosebumps all over my skin. I’m chained to the damn bed.

“See? Was that so hard? I just want to make sure you don’t sprout any new wings and try to fly away.” He laughs. His sudden change in demeanor has me even more on edge than before.

He is fucking insane. But I knew this already.

With my hands secured above my head, he continues to straddle me. He suddenly lets out a groan, and my body tightens from the sound and the response his body is having against mine. My eyes meet his, and I begin shaking my head.

“No. Please no,” I beg, my voice barely above a whisper.

I want to recoil and sink into the bed. His body is heavy on mine. At this point, I would welcome losing consciousness over being present for this.

“Oh, you say no, but I know you want it. You give it up so freely to those three Kings, so I know how horny of a little bitch you are. Your constant teasing me when we were in a session. Fuck.” His fingers trace the side of my face, down to the hem of my shirt. His touch burns my skin, like acid. His rough fingers push my shirt up as he exposes me.

“Please stop,” I breathe out. My voice wavers, and I can feel my body start to shake in fear.

“All mine,” he says as his hands roughly grab my breasts.

I try to yank my arms down instinctively to push him off, but my binding has no give. I’m at this fucker’s mercy. His thumbs brush my nipples, and I turn my head to look out the window.

“Please stop.” *No. Please, no.*

He lets out a groan as I feel him shift on top of me, and I can feel his hardness move against me. “This is what you do to me. You know how many times I wanted to bend you over the couch and fuck you. Your perfect round ass up in the air as I slide my cock into you. Mmm, fuck.” Justin closes his eyes as his hips push forward against my body, his hands still kneading my breasts roughly.

“Please stop.” My voice barely registers. My vision starts to cloud, and tears freely flow down my face. I turn my head towards the window praying that something would swallow me up and take me away from here.

I’ll take death.

His weight suddenly shifts as he slides off my body and off the bed. I curl up as best I can on my side, turning away from him. He says nothing as he starts to move around the room. I continue to focus on the window, wishing for an escape. I try to hold back my cry, but little whimpers escape as I try to calm myself.

There's movement around the room, drawers being opened, but I don't look or move from my position. I feel the bed dip on the other side and arms wrap around me. My body heaves, and I start gagging the minute he touches me. My body tenses under his touch, and I know he can feel it.

"Relax, Little Birdie. We are just gonna sleep. For tonight. Besides, you either give me what I want, or you know what happens." He lets out a chuckle.

I let out a quiet cry as I feel his body press against mine. With everything in me, I am fighting to keep the bile down. My body feels like it's burning up and ready to combust into flames. And I'd happily let it burn if it meant I was free from this fucking freak.

I welcome the darkness.

As quietly as I can, I pull on the chains he has me cuffed to. But they don't budge. I need the fuck out of here. He is going to kill me. I just know it. He has already said I'm expendable. I'm only here because he wanted a toy to play with.

This man will kill me.

The tears fall freely from my eyes as my mind goes into overdrive. The longer I stay here, the deader I am.

This is the end for me.



Chapter Twenty-Five

MASON

WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE? It's been a whole week that she's been gone. A whole fucking week.

I lean in with my elbows on my desk and rub the heel of my hand into my eyes. Letting out a breath, I look over at her empty seat. It feels wrong being here without her.

Where the fuck is she?

Dax agrees that his father knows something or has something that could help us trace where she is, but he hasn't given it up yet. I offered that we corner the bastard and beat it out of him, but Dax pointed out that his security would stop it. Of course Daddy Emerson has security.

The Luciano family is a big time New York Mafia family. One wrong move and they won't hesitate to kill you. They are ruthless. Need to make sure the mob doesn't take you out.

There was a rumor that they killed a man because he looked at someone's wife wrong. It was one of their own, too. This piece of shit looked at a married woman wrong and ended up emasculated in a barbershop window. Mother fuckers straight cut that guy's dick right the fuck off. Then proceeded to gut him like a fish.

Straight savage.

Of course, the cops looked the other way. They are bought and paid for. Put all the people in the right places to get what you want and get away with all the crime you can. I mean, they have my father in their back pocket. It's why they want our families.

And our families are more than willing to give it to them. So are the Queens' families. They only see dollar signs. They don't see the blood these people have spilled.

Blood. Fuck. That's why this worries me. If the Lucianos are somehow tied to her disappearance, then the question remains, is her body going to turn up somewhere? Where is her blood spilled?

Is her body even going to turn up? Or is she going to be dumped somewhere off in the middle of the ocean?

My stomach churns at the thought. I feel like I'm going to fucking hurl.

Before the class even ends, I jump from my chair and head out of the classroom. The teacher, of course, doesn't bother to stop me, so it makes for an easy getaway. I run across the hall to the nearest bathroom and throw back the stall door. I dry heave and then empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

My eyes water with each push. My body shakes as it tries to expel everything. Not that there's much in there to begin with.

My entire world feels like it's falling apart around me. We need to find her.

I can't sleep, I can't eat. I haven't even been to the gym all week. I can't function without her. My heart feels like it's being crushed into dust.

Is this what she felt when we did what we did at homecoming? The pain, the neverending empty feeling? Did her heart hurt like this? Is this the hopelessness she felt? I rub my hand over my chest, where the pain from my heart becomes too much.

After I clean myself up, I head out of the bathroom and walk straight to the courtyard. It's December, and it's fucking cold, but I need some fresh air.

I sit down against the wall of the courtyard on the cement ground. I hiss at the freezing cold against my ass. But I don't give a single fuck.

My phone vibrates, and I immediately pick up, hoping and praying that it's something on Phoenix.

It's not.

DAX:

You okay? Rumor has it you bailed on history early.

ME:

No, I'm not. And yes, I did.

DAX:

Where are you?

ME:

Courtyard.

It's not long before both Daxon and Colton make their way out to the courtyard. I look up at them, and they move to sit on either side of me.

"We will find her," Dax assures me as he looks out across the courtyard.

"She's been missing for a week. And we have nothing to go on. No camera feeds, no witnesses, nothing. How the fuck do we find her from nothing, Dax? We aren't fucking magicians." I tilt my head back against the wall and look up at the grey cloudy skies above us.

Dread just settles over me. I can feel the emotion start to ball up in my throat. She's really gone.

Where the fuck is she?

"Actually, I was waiting to say something until I was sure, but I think I may have something," Colton interjects.

"What the fuck, Colt?" I scream at him. I punch his shoulder and stand up, towering over him. "Spill, now."

“Guess who didn’t show up at all last week? Who wouldn’t have known about her disappearance and wouldn’t know that they didn’t need to show up?” He stares up at me.

“Well, we already know the headmaster didn’t show.” I push my brows together, trying to figure out what he’s getting at.

“Not him.” He shakes his head. “Who else is an outsider? Someone else in her life. Someone that was suddenly part of this school and only for her. He was here on campus just for Phoenix.”

We sit silently for a moment before Dax jumps up. “Holy shit, the therapist!”

Colton nods. “He hasn’t even been in. I checked the logs, but he has been MIA. There’s something else, though.” He goes silent for a moment and pushes up his glasses. “Her aunt.”

“What about her aunt?” Dax steps closer to Colt.

“She’s dead.”

My heart starts beating faster. No, there’s no way. “Tell me that’s not true.”

Colt nods once. “It’s true. Went to her aunt’s house to see if she was hiding out there. Fucking thing is burnt to a crisp. I hadn’t seen anything on the news or anything, so I figured there weren’t any casualties. But after digging into the bodies dumped at the coroner, sure as shit, she’s there. Files were ‘trashed’, but I recovered them.”

“And you are sure that it was her?” I ask Colt.

“Positive. Dental matches, but like I said, someone trashed the notes and coroner findings. Locked them behind so much encryption, it was a bitch to pull out.”

“And you are sure that Parker hasn’t been in?” Dax runs his hand through his hair.

“Positive. I was going to check the recordings for the past few weeks. That’s when I saw he hadn’t come into the school. Now, I could be grasping at straws, maybe the school called

and told him she was gone. I don't know. But I need to listen to those recordings. Just to verify that he hasn't been in and if anything was said that may help us."

"Then let's go. We don't have fucking time to waste," I say as I turn and take off back towards the dorms.

* * *

Sitting in Colton's room with Dax and him, we each have our laptops with files that Colt has given us to listen too. They are recordings from Dr. Parker's office here at Darkwood. So far, it's been nothing special. I hear him typing against the classical music playing in the background. I didn't realize he spent this much time on campus.

I thought he came and went. Apparently, he hung around often after he met with Phoenix. Why wouldn't he be going back to his office and dealing with his other patients? I know he came here as a favor to Phoenix and her aunt, so she wouldn't have to leave campus for her sessions. But he spends a shit load of time here and not at his office.

I click on a file in front of me, it looks to be the most recent one saved.

"Thank you for working with my schedule. This week has been a little hectic."

"Sure, Doc. I mean, glad I could be flexible for you. Happy to give up my Friday morning."

"What's going on, Phoenix? You seem a little distressed."

She lets out a small groan. "Nothing I can't handle."

"Phoenix."

"The headmaster moved me. I now live in this decrepit fucking hole in the wall, inside a building that is used for storage. But that's not even the worst. Well, that's probably the catalyst. God only knows the motive, but fucking put me in the fucking crosshairs."

"What do you mean?"

I can hear shifting being picked up in the background. I sit up straighter as I listen to the distress in her voice. The sadness.

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is I’m out of the frying pan into the fire,” she sighs

“You know I can help, but you have to talk to me. Look, I know things are hard, and I’ve been doing all I can to help, but you have to talk to me,” Dr. Parker pleads.

There’s a long silence between the two, and I check to make sure the recording didn’t stop. But then she breaks the silence.

“He found me.”

“He? Who? Your biological dad?”

“No. I only wish it was. It’s him. The stalker.”

“Wait, what? Phoenix—”

“Stop. The Kings are taking care of it. There’s nothing you can do.”

“The authorities. We can get you moved back into a normal dorm. The hell there isn’t something I can do!” His voice rises, and he sounds very upset.

“Doc, just drop it. You worry about you, and I’ll worry about my bullshit.”

There’s the sound of shoes shuffling on the floor and someone taking a deep breath. “Phoenix, let someone worry about you. Let someone want the best for you. Let someone in. You have been dealing with so much over the last year. I have the ability to help. Let me.”

“I have someone I let in. Three someones. Who, strangely enough, I still let in, and look where that got me. I’ll be fine. They will protect me. I can’t even piss without one of them standing outside the door. I mean, when I open this door, Mason will be standing right outside. Waiting. I’m good, Doc. I’ll be fine.”

I pause the tape and remember that day. We got called away not too soon after that. Looking at the recording time, I see that there is still more to listen to, so I hit play.

“Hey, it’s me.” Dr. Parker must be talking into a phone. “How much longer do I have to wait? We had a deal, and I’m getting a little concerned that they are getting in the way.”

The silence is interrupted by a sigh. “She’s becoming unstable again. If that happens, who knows what she could do? She could try to off herself again. And that would be very problematic for us all.”

Okay, now I know for sure that whoever Dr. Parker is talking to, it’s about Phoenix.

“Guys, you two need to hear this.” I look at Dax and Colt, and they come over and sit on the bed. I disconnect the Bluetooth headset and press play.

“Those three are like three little lost fucking puppies when it comes to her. They are so fucking pussy-whipped. She snaps her fingers and they come running. You were supposed to fix that, Greg. You, Steven, and Daniel all assured me that the bullshit contract of an arranged marriage would get her away from them.”

I look up at the guys, and all three of our eyes go wide. “It was all bullshit. The whole thing was bullshit.”

“What the actual fuck?” Daxon’s eyes shift back and forth between us.

Unable to say anything, I look back down at the computer and press play again.

Silence stretches for a moment and then a loud noise breaks through the speakers.

“God fucking damnit, Emerson. Do you understand the severity of the situation? You have no idea what you are up against, mother fucker. I need her away from them. I need her vulnerable. I just need her.” Parker lets out a groan.

“I don’t give a rat’s fucking ass how you fucking handle it. If you want to continue breathing, you will make good on the

deal we had.” Another silence comes over the speakers. “Yeah, she’s already dealt with. I’ve already taken care of the paperwork. As far as anyone is concerned, she went missing and the body there in the morgue isn’t her. She did her job, so we didn’t need her anymore.” Dr. Parker sighs.

“Well, it went to Phoenix the minute she turned eighteen. And I’ll get her to sign it over. When I’m done with her, she won’t even remember who she was. Just a caged little bird,” he laughs.

“Holy fuck. Tell me you just heard that.” Dax jumps up, his eyes wild. “Tell me you just heard all that!”

“We’re sitting here too, Dax,” I point out.

“Who the fuck is he?” He looks to Colt, his face drained of any color. “Who the fuck is this Dr. Justin Parker? Because that doesn’t sound like what doctors should be talking about! And why the fuck was he talking to my father?! To our fathers?!” I can see the panicked look on his face. Dax is pacing around, ready to jump out of his skin.

“I’ll find out.” Colt scoots his chair back to his desk as he starts to type away at it. He works furiously while I turn my attention back to Dax.

Dax is usually the cool and collected one. The one that brings me down from my crazy, but right now, he’s unhinged. I need to do something to help center him.

“Hey, why don’t we go get some water or something? Let’s go take a walk to the kitchen.” I nudge Daxon’s shoulder, and he mumbles something but leaves Colton’s room. I spin around, and Colt gives me a nod. I know he won’t give up until he figures out who this Parker is.

About two hours later, a calmer Daxon and I are sitting on the couch in complete silence. At this point, the both of us are trying to process the information that we heard over the tapes.

Our engagements are fake. It was all a ruse to get Phoenix mad at us, torn away from us. And Parker’s obsession with Phoenix is loud and fucking clear. He has to have her. It has to be him. There is no one else.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't hear Colton walk up, standing in front of me and Dax. He has his hands on his hips, and he looks a little disturbed.

"Colt?" I stand.

"Doesn't exist. Fucker doesn't exist. Well, before a couple years ago. Right after Trivets died. Suddenly, Dr. Justin Parker jumps on scene." His face twists into a scowl.

"Go on," I encourage.

"Fuck. I should've looked deeper. That should have been the first thing I had done when I was gathering all that info on her. Mother fuck! I mean, I got everything and everyone else in her life—past, present, and future. Why the fuck didn't I check him?"

"Whoever he really is, he has an absolute obsession with her. He's been pining after her for a while. You heard him on the recording; he called her a little bird. He had access to her school schedule, and he could watch her from campus. She was served up on a silver platter here. What the fuck did our fathers do?" Daxon's eyes grow wide, and his face pales again. "Ugh, I'm gonna be sick."

"Then why try to get us to get her to leave?" I look between the two of them. "That doesn't make any sense. Why try to force her out, when she was right here under his watch?"

Colt shakes his head. "No idea."

I guess there is only one way to get some answers. "We need to go to one of the players in all this. Get one of them to tell us."

"Who?" Colt looks over to me.

"Who has the most to lose if this gets out? The one who won't be able to climb the ladder in his career because of scandals?" I ask them.

"Your dad," Dax responds.

"My dad." I stand up and grab my phone and head over to the dining table where my jacket is hanging on the back of the chair. "We've got a mayor to go destroy."

And I'll see to it that he pays for what he has done to Phoenix. Because if anything happens to her, I'll personally push him into the fiery pits of Hell.



Chapter Twenty-Six

DAXON

I CAN FEEL the muscles in my neck get tighter the closer we get to the mayor's mansion. My stomach turns, and my heart feels like it's being squeezed into dust.

Fuck. I rub the heel of my palm into my eye. My head is pounding, and my mouth hurts from me clenching my teeth. I'm on edge. I'm ready to fucking detonate.

"You ready?" Mason looks back at me from the rearview mirror.

Shit. I didn't even realize we had pulled in.

My mind is trying to make sense of everything. Make sense of what we heard. I'm trying to understand our roles in all this. And I come up completely empty with anything rational.

I nod. "Yeah. Let's go get some answers."

We jump out of the SUV, and I take a moment to stare up at the mansion in front of me. What a crock of bullshit that they peddle out of this place. Nothing but bullshit. Even more so, now that we know they are in it for themselves and the mob.

We walk through the front door, and the house is quiet and seemingly empty minus the guards and security stationed around the property. As we turn down the hall towards Mayor Shitfuck's office, we hear his voice. I clench my fists at the sound of it.

"Don't go in there swinging, Dax. We need answers," Mason whispers to me. "Just focus on getting the answers."

Once we have that, all bets are off.”

Mason steps in front of Colt and I. The tension and anger are rolling off of Colt in waves too. While he usually keeps his feelings concealed, right now, he’s a beacon of pissed off.

Mason steps through the open door, and we follow close behind him. “Why hello there, Daddy Mayor.”

“What the hell are you doing here, Mason? All three of you, what is going on?” Mayor Douchbag clicks something on his phone, which I can only guess was whoever he was talking to. He stands up and stares at us with hands on the desk.

“That’s a good question, Dad. What *is* going on?”

“What do you mean, Mase?” Mayor Turner’s eyes narrow at us.

“Dr. Justin Parker.” Colt responds as he goes and stand on the mayor’s left side. I quietly close and lock the office door so that no one can come in, not worried about bodyguards since they know who we are. Plus, this room is soundproof.

“Dr. Just—”

“Who’s he really, Dad?” Mason cuts him off.

For a moment, I swear I see a fear flash in his eyes. But he composes himself and shakes his head.

“That’s the therapist that comes to campus. For Ms. Hayes.” He shrugs. “So what?”

“See, now, why do I think you are keeping something from us?” I jump in. “Because I just have this, oh, I don’t know, sixth sense kinda feeling. And before you say another word, think long and hard about the answer you are going to give me. Don’t let it be the wrong one.”

Mayor James Turner gets a sparkle in his eye and suddenly breaks out in a fit of laughter. “Wow, did you boys grow some balls suddenly? This is refreshing. I thought for sure that little slut pussy-whipped you.” Colt lets out a loud growl at the words, causing the mayor to turn his head in surprise. “Control your guard dog, would you?” he says to me.

“Why are the marriage contracts bullshit?” Mason pulls his dad’s attention back to him.

“Who said they were?” He walks over to a bar behind his desk and pours an amber liquid into a glass.

“We know they are. So fucking spill.”

He turns back and looks at his son, letting loose a long sigh. “This is over your head. Why don’t you just go back and find some pussy to get your dick wet with and leave the important stuff to the men, okay?”

“Important stuff like death, lies, and kidnapping? I’m sure there’s some money laundering in there, too. Is that what the big boys play with? Other people’s lives? Oh, yeah, you do. Because you sold us out to some bullshit marriages and gave Phoenix to a complete fucking psychopath.” Mason steps forwards towards his father and gets right in his face. “Where is she?”

For a moment, he stands there, silent. His eyes flit back and forth between all three of us. “Look, I don’t know where she—”

“Bullshit!” Mason snatches the glass from his dad’s hand and sends it sailing into the wall. It shatters with a deafening clink. “Fucking lies. We heard the conversation, Dad. We know you had the deal worked out with this Parker guy. We know the contracts are nothing but bullshit. So, fill in the fucking blanks or my ‘guard dog’, as you so nicely put, will start biting.”

He rubs his forehead and closes his eyes before speaking again. “Yes, the contracts are bullshit. Who gives a flying fuck? But you have to understand the pressure we’re under. That all of our families, including your fiancés’ families, are under that pressure! We thought quite a few things when we drew up with the contract. For one, you would stop hanging around that Hayes girl. Two, that it would protect all our families.”

“From who?” Mason quietly asks.

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t want you any more involved than you already are right now. You need to shut up and just do as you are told! Take pictures with your fiancé and smile. Forget everything else! That’s why we had to get her out of the picture!” he yells.

“Phoenix,” I say.

“Yes.” He shrugs. “Look, this guy that has her, she has been on his radar for years. He’s a sick fuck.”

“And yet you gave her over on a silver platter. You didn’t think to protect an innocent?” Colton yells right next to his ear. “You gave her up to that ‘sick fuck’.”

“The marriages, null and fucking void,” I tell Mayor Turner. “They will not happen, ever. I don’t care who we piss off.”

He narrows his eyes. “You don’t want to do that.”

“Where is she?” Mason asks again, getting nose to nose with him.

“She’s gone. I have no idea where he has her. She’s as good as dead, Mase. I’m sorry. You need to accept that.” He shakes his head, looking away.

“How can we accept what we don’t understand is going on? All three of you keep hiding all these secrets from us and refuse to bring us into the fold. You know what, Dax, go ahead.” Mason nods to me.

The mayor turns to me with a confused look on his face as I take a couple steps up to him with my fist flying through the air and landing square on his face. Blood immediately squirts from his nose and the newfound cut on his upper lip.

“What the fuck, Daxon?” he cries, immediately cupping his nose.

“If you don’t want to fucking tell us freely, then we are going to be forced to beat it the fuck out of you. Now, where the fuck is she?” I hover over him, my fist wrapped around the front of his shirt.

He stays silent, just staring at me as blood covers his face. Fine. That's how we'll play. I grip him tighter as I bring my fist back again.

“Wait! Wait! Stop!” Mayor Tuner flinches and holds up his hands up. “Just stop, please.”

I drop him and my fist and let him collect himself. I shouldn't let him, but whatever. Colton hovers over him, I'm sure at this point ready to snap the guy's neck.

“Tell us, Dad.”

“Lucianos. The fucking Lucianos have her.”

My blood runs cold the minute he mentions that name. No. Fuck no. This can't be. “But Parker took her. Did he sell her off to them? Trade her? What the fuck is she doing with the Lucianos?”

He shakes his head, his face twisting in disgust. “You already know Parker's a fake. What do you think his real name is?” He doesn't say anything as he takes his pocket square out of the pocket of his jacket and wipes some blood of his face off.

I look at Mason, whose eyes are wide and wild, Colton's clenching his jaw. Then it hits me. “Parker's really a Luciano. He's mother fucking Mafia! You gave her to a fucking psychopath who is part of a fucking crime family?” I let out a breath and fist my hands so tight, I feel my fingernails digging into my skin.

“Not just any Luciano. The underboss. Anthony Luciano's brother.” He states like it means nothing that he gave her over to the number two in that family.

“You signed her death warrant. Holy fuck, she's as good as dead.” Mason's voice wavers as the realization hits him.

“Listen to me, right now.” The mayor's eyes meet mine as I emphasize each word with deadly clarity. “If anything happens to her, I don't give a fuck who the fuck you are, you're a dead man walking. You can tell my father that, too. I will gut you all if anything happens to her. I will rot in prison, I'll get taken out by the goddamn Luciano family, I don't give

a flying fuck. You sold her to the devil, and I'm going to send you straight to Hell for doing so.”

He says nothing, so I nod to the guys, and we head towards the door, unlocking it and heading out. No one any the wiser for what went on in that room. Thank fucking god for soundproof rooms. I'm sure security would have been all over us otherwise.

We get back into the SUV and head back towards campus. And once we get there, we all jump out and hurry up to our dorm. We need to find her—and fast.

“Colt, can you see if you can pull up any and all that you can find on the Luciano family? We need to know who he really is. Who we are dealing with,” I say as I pull out my phone.

“I'm going to listen to more of the tapes and see if I can get anything from that,” Mason retorts as he runs off in the direction of Colt's room.

I scroll through on my phone and click on the contact I need. The phone rings a couple times before they answer.

“Son, what the hell did you three do?”

“Ah, Father. What a way to greet your one and only son.”

“What were you thinking? Do you think this is a joke?” he growls through the phone.

“Do I think this is a joke? Oh, fuck no. This is very real, Dad. And I think you know what I'm thinking.” I pace the living room as I hold the phone to my ear.

“Daxon, please. They run this town. Hell, half the east coast! You can't go after her. She's gone. Fucking deal with it. I'm sorry to say.”

“See, I don't think you are. Because if you were a decent human being to begin with, this would have never happened. You would've never handed her over. But you three are so far into the shit, all you care about is getting ahead. Fuck your company, you can shove it up your fucking ass. Your money,

your company—hell, fuck this fucking school! I'll enroll in public! None of this means anything to me anymore!"

"Daxon, you are throwing away a prestigious life!"

"You threw away a human being! You fucking put her in the hands of someone who literally kills for a living! Fuck your prestigious life! I want nothing to do with you or anything you fucking own. Take it all, Dad. Go ahead and put me on the streets. Because if being prestigious means hurting people we love, I'd rather die alone in a fucking alley. I will find her and you better hope that when I do, she's alive and well. Or I will burn your fucking whole life to the fucking ground."

I hang up the phone as my entire body shakes from the realization that I just put my father on notice. He's a powerful man, and I'm hoping this won't backfire.

I need them all to be scared. All three of us were willing to do as we were told, go with what was laid out for us, but not anymore. They took the one thing that made the darkness in my chest burn brighter. The one person who made my dead fucking heart beat.

They took Phoenix, my Spitfire.

And I will not rest until we find her. And I'll burn this town down around me and send anyone in my way straight to Hell.

Burn, baby, burn.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

PHOENIX

EVERY NIGHT, every fucking night he places those handcuffs on me. I'm exhausted, my body is weak, and all I want is peaceful sleep. And I can't get any with him.

The night before last, his hands were all over my chest, and I wanted nothing more than to push his hands off me and break every bone in them. Except I couldn't. My hands were bound above my head. There was barely any give in the chain. My hands and arms went numb, and I had to lay there while I was being assaulted. I couldn't fight back, couldn't defend myself in the slightest.

Then last night made me want to rip every inch of my skin off. Everything in me tried to shut down, turn off. My entire body went cold, and I tried not to feel anything that was happening in that moment.

I was asleep, well the best I could be for the situation I was in. And then I felt him. His rough, scratchy fingertips finding the bottom of my shirt and running his fingers along my skin. It was like glass was being dragged along me, his touch cutting deep into me, leaving a burning feeling in his wake. I could taste the acid in my mouth as his hand gripped my hip.

I tried to shift to throw his hand off of me, but his hand only held me tighter. My mind raced as I tried to think of anything I could do to end the unwanted touching. But I was trapped.

When his hand slipped under the band of my pants, tears fell. I shook my head, and the voice inside my head screamed no. I bit the inside of my mouth so I could focus on that pain.

Everything stopped in that moment, and all I could do was pray that he would too.

My mind raced with anything to keep me out of the present situation. I thought about my mom, my dad, and the dad I never knew. How much I missed the Kings and that I wished that they would bust down that door and save me. Rescue me from the hell I am in. I wanted them to be my saviors, but they never come. Every day I'm reminded that there is no one out there who's going to rescue me from this psycho.

My body and my mind were in a fight, my body knowing I was being touched in places, and my mind needing to end that knowledge. I stared at the wall, the window, anything to focus on. My head still screaming for him to stop.

And then he finally did. His hands finally left my pants and rested on my leg. I hung my head over the bed as best I could and threw up. Tears ran down my face as I emptied everything that was in my stomach.

When I finished, the asshole immediately got up and forced me to clean it up. I had two choices, according to him. Clean it up or sleep in it. So, I had to clean up the mess I made, because of him.

Dax, please save me.

As I cleaned up, I imagined Dax being the one to rush in here to be my knight in shining armor. He would be the one to rescue me from this torture chamber. His touch would erase all the vile memories from my skin.

But my knight isn't coming.

This morning, Justin has been quiet, and it has me a bit on edge. He made me breakfast that consisted of eggs and toast. Thankfully it's easy to eat them with the spoon that he finally allowed me to have. So at least there is progress with being able to feed myself. Because, honestly, the creep factor of him getting his jollies feeding me is off the charts.

As of right now, he's sitting next to me reading another one of his books. I don't pay attention to him or the types of

books he's reading. I just let him do his thing. If he's reading, he's leaving me alone, and that's the time I revel in.

My eyes stare at a doorknob off the kitchen, and my mind blanks out. I'm itching to get the words out. Even though he turned out to be the psycho fraud that he is, the writing he made me do allowed me to find some peace. Instead of being able to write anything down on paper, I find myself suddenly writing in my journal in my mind.

Hey Nix,

So, this is a bit of a shitty situation. No, no, this is a fucked situation. Totally fucked.

I mean, you're talking to yourself in your own head. It's not ideal.

Let's face it. I don't think anyone's coming. It has to be over a week that I've been here. Maybe two weeks. But who's counting?

Oh, wait, I am.

Maybe they gave up. Maybe something happened to them. No, no, I can't think that. God, that would send me even more into a spiral than I am already in.

But I need to keep breathing. Keep living. Eventually, he will drop his guard, and I can get out. Find my escape.

And I hope that's sooner rather than later.

I don't want him touching me, and no matter how much I recoil from his touch, he still continues. He's left marks on my hips from where he squeezes me. I'm ready to tear every inch of skin from my body from everywhere he has touched me.

Maybe the dungeon would be better. I'd be away from him. Away from the devil. But that's probably not the best idea. I can see snow on the ground. I definitely wouldn't survive out there in this cold.

Mason, where are you? Colton? Daxon? Are you still out there? Please still be looking for me. Fuck. I'm so sorry for being so much trouble. I know that's what I am. God, you three have been through so much, and most of it is because of me.

I'm sorry. Maybe you did stop looking. I wouldn't blame you, I guess. One less problem.

And I know that's what I am.

I don't see a way out.

Did I deserve this?

God, I'm trying. Just anyone, someone, help.

Anyone ...

Please help me.

“Hey, to the room. I need to go out and get some supplies. Let's go, my little birdie.” My body cringes at his words that breaks me from my mind writing.

“Can I please just stay out here? You can handcuff me to the table or something. Please, not the bed. The room smells like vomit,” I beg.

He frowns at me. “And whose fault is that?”

Clenching my fists, I shake my head at him. Something inside me snaps. “It's yours! You fucking touched me! I didn't give you permission to touch me, asshole! You couldn't keep your creepy as fuck hands to yourself!”

He stands there silently for a moment before stalking towards me. His hand comes around my throat as he backs me into the hard counter on the kitchen island.

“Listen here, bitch. You are my pet. My toy. I don't need to ask for permission to play with my toys. You will appreciate the fact that I even want to touch you after those three defiled what was mine.” He spits in my face as he talks. “You owe me. You fucking owe me so fucking much. And I get what's owed to me.”

“Don't touch me! Keep your fucking hands off me! I don't want you to touch a single hair on my fucking head!” I scream at him. “You're disgusting if you ever think I will be okay with you touching me. Go fuck yourself!”

“Huh. It seems we still have some fight in us. Well, we need you more house broken. Let's go.” He grabs me by the

hair and starts to lead me out to the deck. I know exactly where we're going.

A chill runs down my spine, and a fear spikes in me.

"No! No, please! Please not there!" I try to push against him, but he continues pulling me along. My feet are ice-cold from the snow on the ground. I shiver, and I have no idea if that's from the cold or from the fear.

"Should've thought about that before acting like a little cunt. No, you get to have some thinking time."

I try to go limp, but he just drags me against the concrete floor to the bindings. Then I scream and kick at him, but it does nothing to keep him from securing the cuffs to me.

"Fuck you, you bastard!" There's a sudden sting on my cheek from him. Then a tightness wraps around my throat as he takes the hand he hit me with and chokes me.

"I think you need to be taught some manners, Little Birdie. You don't talk back to me. I feed you, I keep you safe. I show you love. I have shown restraint, tried to let you come around, but I'm done. So, fuck you." His hands go to my sweatpants as he begins to pull them down.

"No! Please! Stop!" I try and kick my legs, but with the chains, I can't get enough leverage and my pleas go unanswered.

He lowers himself on me, and his hand tightens around my throat. Through the screams leaving my mouth, I hear a belt being unbuckled, and I can feel his other hand working his pants down. My heart rate jumps with each passing second. Tears pour out of my eyes as my voice gets hoarse from the screaming. My arms are held back by the shackles, and I have no way to push against him.

God, please, no.

He shuffles on top of me and that's when my entire body goes limp. Everything in me ceases. My fight gone. There's nothing I can do to stop him.

My back and ass scrape violently against the concrete floor. I look away and stare at the wall next to me. There's nothing left of me.

Time stands still. My stomach tries so hard to keep the bile down. Part of me wants to die, while the other part wants me to keep breathing, keep my heart beating. My eyes try to focus on the smallest thing it can find along the wall. Anything to take my mind away.

His weight presses into me, and my lungs struggle to take in air. Grunts and heavy breathing keep me from fully disappearing from this nightmare. In my mind, I'm screaming. Screaming for him to stop, screaming 'no' over and over. I struggle as I try to take a breath, to keep the vomit down. Praying for the end.

And then it stops.

After a long groan, he pushes up off me, the cold air hitting my exposed skin. I take a deep breath as I lay there half naked and shackled to the floor. Turning to the side, I curl into myself, shivering.

The sound of him putting his belt buckle on sends me into a panic, and my breathing picks up. Is he going to beat me with it? Is this happening again? I cling tighter to the cement floor, wishing I could disappear into it.

Silence stretches over us.

"Wow. So, this is how I get you to comply. Noted." He chuckles. "Well, enjoy your punishment. I'll be back for you,"—he pauses for a moment—"when I want."

Footsteps echo out off the floor, and I lay there my body shaking violently. It hurts. I hurt. The soreness and pain scream at me, but I try to ignore their presence. The cold seeping into my bones. I have no idea where my pants are, but I'm too afraid to move to find them.

My stomach churns, my head is pounding, and my heart feels like it's going to explode from my chest. Bile rises again in my throat, but this time I don't try and keep it down. I turn

myself so I'm kneeling as the contents of my stomach purge itself.

Make it all go away.

When there's nothing left, and the dry heaving stops, I shift as much as I can away from my mess. God only knows if I'll get punished for that. Tears cloud my vision as the putrid smell of the vomit hits my nose.

I start to pull at my hair, my mouth opening, but the scream silent. My skin itches and burns. I still feel him touching me, the weight of him on top of me. My lungs still fight for air, his weight still keeping me from taking a breath. I need him off of me. Why do I still feel him on me?

My head shakes back and forth, but my eyes focus on what looks like a shovel hanging on a wall. My eyes stay locked on it. I won't survive this.

Why is this my life?

Why is this happening to me?

Why does everything feel like it's just spiraling more and more out of control?

He's going to kill me. When he's finally done with me, bored with me, I'll be dead.

But maybe that won't be such a bad thing. It has to be better than this. After all, maybe I'll be with my mom again.

Maybe that's what I need.

The darkness.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

PHOENIX

IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS, I think, since Justin brought me out of the dungeon. I think I've seen three sunrises through the window in the bedroom. But I can't be sure. Everything is a blur. Each day folds into the next. Light becomes dark and dark becomes light. My body feels like dead weight, and my mind is in a deep fog.

In the days since I've been allowed to emerge from the hell of the dungeon, he's put his hands on me even more. It's sickening, and my body dies a little every time he touches me. No matter how much I try to pull away from him, he drags me back. I've lost every ounce of fight in me.

He dresses me, bathes me, makes me sleep next to him naked. Except I don't sleep. Not fully. It's why I've seen the sun rise and the darkness that lives on in the night.

I'm tired. I'm lost. My hair is starting to fall out, and I'm not sure if that's from the stress or malnutrition. I can barely eat and drink anything without feeling like I'm about to throw it all up.

I'm becoming a shell of myself. Locked in my mind. It's safer if I turn off the world around me.

"Hey, you need to eat, Little Birdie." My stomach turns at the sound of his voice. I look up and see him hover over me. His hand comes up to my face as he cups my cheek. "Eat or I'll feed you," he says it as if it's a loving thing, but I can see the maliciousness in his eyes.

My fist curls around my spoon as I scoop a small amount of scrambled eggs and slowly bring it to my mouth. The smell

of the eggs instantly sours my stomach. But I swallow it down.

“There you go.” Justin pets my head as his phone rings.

I cringe at the touch, but he pulls away to pick up his phone off of the kitchen counter.

“Yeah?” Justin holds the phone to his ear, and I can see his face darken from whatever he is being told on the other end. “Goddamn it. Ricky, are you fucking kidding me? Fuck. When did the toys get in?” He turns towards the counter, gripping it. His back to me but I can see his shoulders tense. “Does Anthony know?”

Silence stretches for what seems like minutes. I shift some of the eggs on my plate around as I take in the situation unfolding around me.

Justin bangs his fist on the counter and screams into the phone, “You can guarantee there will be retaliation for this. You know exactly who they want.” He pauses for a moment and squeezes his eyes shut. “No. She hasn’t given anything up yet. Don’t worry, it’s as good as ours. What about Moretti?”

My body freezes at that name. I know that name. Where the fuck do I know that name from? *Moretti ... Moretti ...*

Damnit, my mind is completely in a haze.

“Fuck. This needs to get straightened out, and fast. Have Carmine meet me at the Lodge.” He slams his phone down on to the counter. Then he grumbles and grabs his keys and his phone he just slammed down and turns to me. “Let’s go. You are going to sit in the room while I’m gone.”

I slowly stand up from my chair and go to grab my plate, but he stops me. He grabs my arm and yanks me towards him.

“Let’s go. I don’t have time for your mopey shit.” His grip tightens around my arm as he drags me across the kitchen and living room towards the stairs.

As we descend the stairs, his phone starts to ring again.

“Mother fuckers. Can’t just handle shit,” he mutters before answering. “What now?”

We reach the room, and he practically throws me in there and slams the door shut. “I don’t give a flying fuck! There are protocols. They were broken.” His voice still booms as he walks away. I hear his feet pound up the stairs as he continues to yell through the phone. “He did *what?* Who the fuck gave him permission to move that equipment? No, goddamn it. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I’ll be there in an hour.”

A door slams somewhere in the house, and I hear the faint sound of an engine. My eyes go wide, and I look around the room. He didn’t chain me up. Whenever he leaves, he always chains me up, but he didn’t this time.

My body starts to vibrate with excitement. For the first time since being here, I have an odd sense of freedom. While I’m confined to the room, I’m not bound by a cage, or cuffs. I can walk, stare out the window. I can sit on the bed, wait no, don’t want to do that. Fucker sleeps there.

I move towards the window and look out. There’s nothing but trees which seems to stretch for miles. A thick, what I presume, forest that surround us. Right at this very moment, I wish I had something to break the window.

But I have no shoes, nothing to protect my feet. The pair of sweatpants and the t-shirt will never keep me warm long enough. I will die of hypothermia before ever finding someone to help me.

Help.

Internally, I laugh. No one is coming to help me. I’m on my own. I would’ve been rescued by now. Someone would have found me. The school is littered with cameras that Colton’s family put in. They would have seen me being taken, being kidnapped. But yet again, I’m foolish to think that they cared. I was a problem they had, and it solved itself.

Everyone abandons me.

I will forever just live an existence of loneliness. And I am okay with that. No one’s going to want me anyway with how broken I am. I’m damaged goods. And that’s even if I make it out of this place alive.

If I even want to make it out of here alive.

Because right now, all I want to do is disappear into nothing. If I could just not exist anymore, then I would be okay. I wouldn't have to feel his disgusting hands on me. His hot breath on my skin or feel him do things to me that I didn't give him permission to. Things he takes from me that he thinks he has a right to.

I'm not sure how long I stand at the window, but a thought crosses my mind. He walked right out. He didn't lock the door. He left in such a hurry that I don't think he remembered to lock the door.

Holy fuck.

Slowly and with trepidation, I walk over to the door and place my hand on the handle. Even though he isn't here, I still have this weird sense of needing to be quiet. Ever so carefully, I slowly turn the knob.

The door isn't locked. Oh my god.

Holy shit. I need to see if there's a way I can get out of here. Alive and not frozen. I quickly run up the stairs to the front door but notice that there's a keypad on it. No knob to turn the top lock. I'm filled with a sudden rush of disappointment. Fuck. I'd need a pin to open the front door.

My heart starts to break and my chance at freedom slips away until I remember the back door. He's pulled me out of there so many times.

I run to the back door off the kitchen and look around the door. It looks relatively normal until I spot the sensor above it along the door jamb. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

If the door has sensors, the windows probably do too. I sprint to the window in the living room, and I'm unfortunately right. The windows have them. I'm fucking locked in.

For a moment, I stand there and think. He's gone. How far can I get in the woods while the sensors are going off? How fast will he make it back? Does he have anyone else watching the house?

I look down at my feet. There is no hope. I'd freeze out there.

Staring at the outside, it looks quiet. Almost peaceful. Well, it is peaceful outside, its hell in here. I watch the trees blow in the wind, and all I want is to run through them and find my freedom.

Disappear, never to be found. Where Justin can't find me and neither can the Kings.

I'm better off alone.

It will only ever end in heartbreak. I can never be with them. They can never be mine. And it's apparent they don't want me. They left me here. They never came. However long it's been, it's been too long. My Kings never came to rescue me.

I back away from the window, heading towards the kitchen. Afraid the cabinets are booby trapped, I slowly pull them open, one by one.

But nothing happens.

I let out a sigh of relief. I start looking through them, but they are mostly empty. A couple boxes of pasta and some crackers.

I leave the kitchen and head down a hall that's off of it. It's an area that I haven't ever been down. The first door I come up to is cracked open, and I take a peek inside, finding a washer and dryer. On the walls next to the door are built in shelves that have clothes folded in them and hung on the rods in the spaces next to it.

I take a closer look and see that not only are they so expertly folded, but they are also organized by color and sleeve length.

Justin's a fucking neat freak.

So just to be the bitch I am, I take one of his black short sleeve shirts and place it on top of his pile of black pants. It's not much, but it still makes me a smidge happy.

I leave the laundry room and set the door like it was when I found it. I quietly listen around me to hear if I hear anything that would give me the indication that he's home. Silence greets me.

I move down the hall to a closed door. Biting my lip and shuffling from foot to foot, I wonder if it's a good idea to open up the closed door.

Of course it's not, Nix. Have you not seen horror movies?

My life is a fucking horror movie at this point. I guess I'll take that risk. My hand slowly turns the cold knob, and the door creaks open. My mouth drops at the sight before me.

As I step over the threshold, I'm greeted by the creepiest form of flattery ever. My face is plastered on every surface of every wall in this room. It's an office of some sort. A desk sits against the wall, a chair pushed under the desk. A lazyboy sits in the corner of the room, but that's all the furniture in this room. My face takes up every other inch.

What the fuckity-fuck?

As slowly as I can, I start making my way around the room, taking in the pictures that he has of me. Some were shot from far away, while some look like they were taken right outside my home. Walking over to the desk, I notice a picture framed. It's me at my dad's funeral. The photo had to be taken from a distance; it's blurry and zoomed in.

Looking up at the photos above the wall, what I see makes me sick to my stomach.

Me. Younger me. Teenager me. Me now.

How long has this sick fuck been stalking me? There are pictures from my sixth-grade talent show. Ones of my mother and I shopping. One of me sitting outside of my school.

The anger in me starts to rise, I can feel the heat in my neck start to creep up. I clench my fists at my sides.

He's dead.

I want to kill this fucker. I'm going to kill him.

I'm staring at pictures of me when I couldn't be more than twelve or thirteen. Pictures of me. Why does he have them? Who the fuck took them? Did he have me followed?

How long has this been going on?

Looking in front of me, I take in the neat desk with only the pictures on it. No computer, no paper or pens. It looks barely used. I start opening up the drawers, looking for something, anything to get me out of this hell. I pull open the middle drawer of the desk, finding it's nothing but more paper and pens. Some paperclips and tacks. Assuming those are so he can add more pictures to this sicko-art exhibit.

Yanking the drawer open to the left of it, a bottle of something rolls around. I pick it up and see that it's chloroform. That's what the asshole knocked me out with. Holding it in my hand, my mind drifts to thoughts of pouring this shit down his fucking throat and watching his body wither and die.

Yeah. Dark, I know. But I have no fucks to give anymore. He's taken so much from me.

As I lay the chloroform back in the desk, it clanks against another bottle. I reach for the other glass bottle. The front of the bottle says GHB with the words, Liquid Ecstasy, underneath.

What the fuck? How many women has he kidnapped and —

No, I can't even finish that sentence. The thought of his hands on me make my stomach turn. I wouldn't put it past him to have hurt other women as well. My body starts to shake, while a sour taste coats my mouth, and I have to try to focus on something else before I hurl right here on the floor.

This is coming with me. I slip the bottle in my pocket and shut the drawer. I let out a sigh and wipe my sweaty hands on the front of my sweatpants. My heart is still racing, but I continue my search.

I crouch down and pull on the silver handle of the bigger drawer below. Everything stops the moment I see what's

inside.

The box my mom gave me.

What the hell is he doing with this? I immediately pick it up and open it. I sort through, and it looks like everything is here. As I put some of the papers back, a picture of my mom and me falls out of the pile in my hands.

I slowly pick it up, and the tears immediately flood my eyes. Wiping them away, I let out a strangled cry. God, how I miss her. None of this is fair. She was taken from me. They all were. I'm trapped in some sick fucking reality. A twisted version of a life I never signed up for.

A tear drops on to the picture, and I wipe it away. This isn't what she would want from me. She wouldn't expect me to roll over and be a shell of myself.

My mother would never want me to wait for someone else to be my savior. Up until the end, she held the pieces of our life together, by a single thread, but that thread was fucking strong.

She'd never want me to just give up. She'd want me to survive, fight to live another day. Fight to get out of here.

I can't give up.

As I place the photo back in the mix, I pick up more of the pile and sniffle. A small white envelope falls out. My name is written on the front.

Quickly, I put down the stuff in my hands and pick up the envelope I have not seen before. With an urgency, I take a deep breath and open it.

To my dearest Phoenix,

There are times in our lives that we wish things were different. That things played out different. You, however, will never be that wish.

You are the best thing to have ever happened to me. I'd go through the hell I lived all over again just to have you in my arms. Watch your first breath, give you

your first kiss, see your first smile, and watch you grow and spread your wings.

You will always be the greatest love in my life.

Things don't always work out the way we want them to. I wish you got to know your real dad. I loved him so much.

Now, don't get me wrong, I love Trevor. Him and I have an amazing marriage. But it's not the love that your father and I had.

And I was wrong for it. At the time, your aunt was dating Ron when him and I fell in love. And we were going to run away together, start a life elsewhere. But your aunt got pregnant, so she and him married as quickly as they could.

It wasn't too long after that I found out I was carrying you. For a while, I kept it quiet. But then I had to come clean.

Trevor was heartbroken, but like the good person he was, he stuck by me. We decided we were going to tell Ron about the baby. And I regret that mistake every day of my life.

I'll never forget the look in my sister's eyes when she walked in on me telling Ron that I was pregnant with his baby. I tried to tell them that Trevor and I didn't want anything and that we were going to raise you, but my sister didn't see it that way.

She said I was after Ron's money. That I tricked him into sleeping with me and getting knocked up. She had no idea how in love we really were.

It was shortly after that, she miscarried.

And I know that I caused that. I was the reason she lost her baby. She never forgave me, and I never forgave myself.

But remember I said sometimes we wish things were different? There's only one thing I would have

done differently. I never would have said anything. Ron would've never known about you.

Then maybe my sister wouldn't hate me as much as she does. She would still have her baby and we would go on ignoring all of it just to continue living our lives.

But if it meant never having you, then I don't want it. Because you are all I care about and love in this world.

This is a cruel world, Phoenix. Life has a way of sometimes turning everything upside down, leaving us to cling to dear life.

Just remember, through all those ups and downs, hold strong. Hold on for dear life and fight. Because at the end of it all, you will realize all of the pain was all worth it.

I love you, Phoenix. Burn bright, my little bird, burn bright.

Love,

Mom

Holy shit.

Holy fucking shit.

My mom had me, but she lost her baby. I'm just a constant reminder of what she lost that day she miscarried.

Fuck.

I don't know how to even process this right now. My aunt was going to have a kid. With my dad.

But she's right. I need to fight. No matter what, I need to fucking fight to survive this nightmare. To find a way out of this fucking darkness.

I shove the box back into the drawer, figuring if Justin sees it gone, he'll know I was snooping. I shiver, not wanting to know the trouble I'll get in if he finds out. But I'll be back for it.

Taking one last look at the ‘creep factor: one hundred’ room around me, I bolt out of it and head down to the bedroom to stash the liquid E. Except I have no clue where to hide it where he won’t see it. Shit.

Think, Nix, think.

I head into the bathroom and open up the cabinet under the sink. He has a pink container under the sink filled with pads and tampons for me.

How fucking considerate of the sicko.

I open it up and shift some of the pads and tampons around. I quickly throw it under them and shift it all over it to hide its presence.

Placing it back under the cabinet, I stand back up and catch my reflection in the mirror. It halts me in my tracks. I run my hand over my face and through my hair. My skin is dry and pale. My hair doesn’t seem as vibrant anymore.

I don’t know who I’m looking at. He’s taken so much from me, the things he’s done to me. It’s completely changed who I am, physically.

Hold on for dear life and fight.

Mentally, I’m torn between giving up and fighting with everything I got. My mom’s words echo in my head. I grab hold of the sink and silently scream.

Get ready, Mom, because if I don’t make it out of this, I’m coming home to you.

Out of the dark, I will rise and burn this mother fucker to ground.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

PHOENIX

FOR THE LAST FEW DAYS, Justin has been coming and going. Leaving in fits of anger and coming home completely raged from whatever he has had to deal with. Whatever has been going on, it has him on a whole new level of occupied.

He's gone for random amounts of time, so I haven't had more time to snoop around or figure out how I'm escaping. But he's on edge.

"What the fuck are you doing? Eat!" Justin slams his hand down on the table.

I flinch at the sound. My gaze darts up to him, trying to study him for his next move. My body hurts. The torture he has put me through when he gets home has been unbearable. I've been violated and used as a punching bag. My throat hurts from the constant choking he seems to enjoy doing to me. I've been his toy to use for his anger management issues.

Letting out a quiet whimper, my hands shake as I try to pick up the sandwich that he made me. I hold it close to my mouth, but I can't bring myself to eat.

"You gonna just sit there and starve? Fine. Starve." He stands up and swipes my sandwich and plate from me, tossing it in the garbage under the sink.

Folding my hands in my lap, I keep my head down. Any reaction will just set him off. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from making any noises that might upset him. Except, it doesn't work.

The footsteps towards me immediately have me tensing. A sudden burning pain from my scalp causes my hands to fly to his as he pulls me up by my hair. He turns me to face him and pulls even harder on my hair, but I don't dare scream.

“What do I need to do to get you to talk? Huh? Do I have to beat it out of you? Fuck it out of you? Tell me. Use your words.” He breathes as his face is an inch from mine.

He pulls back and his hand comes down hard against my already swollen and sore cheek.

“Scream! Yell! Make a fucking sound! I don't like that my little bird is broken.”

I'm not your anything, asshole. And you broke me.

He doesn't get it. He's taken my family, my life. He's taken and used my body. He doesn't get my voice. He doesn't get the satisfaction of hearing me scream or talk. He doesn't get to hear my cries. It's the only thing I have left that I have control over. And that is locked up tight.

It's the only fight I have left.

“Goddamnit!” He pushes me to the ground, and I land on my ass. He growls as he hovers over me. “I'm keeping you alive! Isn't that what you want? Do you want to be killed? Do you have any idea what I have done for you?”

Spit from his mouth flies out and I instinctually start pushing back on the floor. His face is red hot, and he looks like he's about to combust with the anger inside of him. He stands there watching me try to get away from him.

As fast as I can I jump up and sprint into the living room. But I don't get very far before the force of his arms come up and grab me from behind as he throws me onto the couch. I try to get up, but I'm suddenly pinned down by his strong arm against my back.

“Where are you gonna go? Huh? Your whole family is dead. Even dear daddy you didn't know anything about. The world isn't looking for you, Phoenix. They think you died with your aunt. What, do you think your little boyfriends are going to come and save you? Newsflash, they have better, more

expensive pussy to occupy their time. I'm it. You just need to give me what I want. I'm not asking for much."

I hear the clank of his belt coming off, and my eyes widen in fear.

No, no, please no.

My body freezes, and my mind is screaming at me to move, but the rest of me isn't get the signal. He pulls down my sweats and the underwear I'm wearing, exposing my ass to him. My fists are clenched, and my eyes stare off into the distance. Terror seeps into my body, and in my mind, I start to count. Something to take me away from this living nightmare.

A whack sounds against my skin. I'm suddenly thrown back to where I'm at by the immense pain against my ass. I open my mouth and let out a silent scream.

"Maybe, just maybe, this can get you to say something. I'll beat it the fuck out of you. I mean, it's this or I torture you like I do the people I'm getting ready to kill." He lets out an evil laugh.

Another crack against my skin has tears forming in my eyes. The sting hurts. It feels like my skin is being torn apart.

Whack.

Internally, I scream to the heavens to make it stop. My head shakes from side to side as I bite the inside of my cheek. I bite so hard I can taste blood.

"If I knew you were going to be this much of a problem, I would have just had them kill you. Well, after I had tortured you enough to sign everything over," Justin growls. "You are almost not worth the effort. But fuck, your pussy is really nice."

With his last word, my stomach turns and what little food I had in me, is now all over the couch.

"Oh Jesus, fuck!" Justin exclaims behind me. I hear the belt fall to the floor. "You're cleaning that. Get your fucking ass up and clean that shit up now. Do you know how expensive this fucking couch is? Are you fucking serious?"

As the dry heaving slows, I hear the front door open. “This better be cleaned by the time I get back.” The slam of the door makes me jump.

I fall off the couch onto the floor and let the tears fall. I don’t know how much more of this I can survive. My body hurts, my head constantly feels like my skull wants to split into two. Everything in me is ready to just give up.

What if he’s right? What if no one is looking for me? No one cares that I’m gone? Maybe they looked on the first day, hell, maybe even the second. But by now the guys have probably given up looking for me. I’ve been nothing but trouble since I got to Darkwood Academy. What’s the point continuing to hold on?

Hold on for dear life and fight.

But why? Why would I want to fight for this life? For who? Who am I fighting for? Everyone is gone.

And yet again, I find myself at a crossroads. Do I fight to live or just let go?

Hold on for dear life and fight.

My mother wouldn’t want me to give up. She’d want me to keep fighting. I may be killed through all this, but if I die, at least I can say I fought.

Hold on for dear life and fight.

So, until the moment he decides to end my life, I’ll keep fighting for a slim chance to escape this hell.

I push myself up and head into the kitchen. Every step I take, my skin on my ass feels like it’s on fire. I reach back to touch it and clench my teeth the minute my finger feels the hot skin. I bring my hand forward and see the blood from where I touched, which means the skin’s broken.

Wiping the blood on my shirt, I slowly make my way into the kitchen to find something to clean my mess with. One by one, I open the drawers and cabinets but halt when I find a candle lighter sitting in one of the drawers.

I take it out and wrap my finger around the trigger. The click sounds, and a flame appears at the end of the lighter. I stand there for a moment, lost in the reds and oranges. The way it's blue at the bottom. It's so small and beautiful.

Like a moth, I'm drawn to it. The way it comes to life. The destruction this little flame promises to do if it's let free.

Blinking, I take myself out of the trance and put the lighter back in the drawer. I find some towels and grab a spray bottle with soapy water in it and clean my mess.

When I finish, I head down to the bathroom and face the person in the mirror.

Hold on for dear life and fight.

Running my hands over my face that's still damp from crying, I rub over the bruise that's forming on my cheek. I hiss at the sting of the pain. As I tilt my head up, I notice a handprint bruise around my neck. My bottom lip is split open, and under my eyes are all swollen and puffy.

I don't even look like me anymore.

My entire body is weak and sore. In my head, I'm repeating that I need to hold on and fight.

Fight. Fight. Fight.

I've been fucking fighting since you died, Mom. No, fuck that shit. I've been fighting since Trevor did. Everything they did had a domino effect on my life. And this is where it landed me.

Bending down, I open the cabinet below the sink and grab the box of woman shit that creepy fuck bought me. I root around and find that the liquid E is still where I left it.

I hold it in my hand and close my fingers around it.

Hold on for dear life and fight.

This is my only shot. If I do this, I only get one shot.

I put the glass bottle away and close everything up. This ends. All of this ends.

Or I never take another breath again.

* * *

I wake up in the bed and find that he never joined me last night. I let out a sigh of relief. It's probably why I actually slept until morning. Thank fucking god.

Quietly, I shift out of bed and listen to the rest of the house. It's silent. So quiet you could hear a pin drop. I creep out of the room and head to the bathroom. I close the door and lock it. I quietly reach under the cabinet and grab the bottle, shoving it in my pocket of my sweatpants.

After I do my business, I flush and wash up. I take one last look in the mirror and try to steady my breaths. My hands are shaking, and I can feel my heart racing.

Fuck this sick mother fucker.

Hold on for dear life and fight.

To my death.

I head up the stairs and see him sitting on the couch with his head against the back of it. His eyes are closed and glasses on the coffee table. Internally, I chuckle. From here, he almost looks like he would be a decent person. You know, if he wasn't such a sick fuck.

"Have anything to say to me?" His voice stops me dead in my tracks. "No? Hm." He shakes his head as I stand there. He sits forward and runs his hand over his face, letting out a yawn. "Well, if you are going to be a fucking mute, at least you could be a useful one. Go fucking make me some coffee. Two sugars and just a drop of creamer." He waves me off.

There's a sudden excitement in me that I have to hide. This could be the door I need to get the fuck out of here. I start the coffee maker and get his creamer out of the refrigerator while grabbing his favorite mug.

Yes, this asshole has a favorite mug.

I start the coffee and wait for it to brew, the liquid E burning a hole in my pocket. The weight of this small container feels like a boulder.

Once the coffee finishes, I slowly take the liquid E out and while keeping an eye on him, open the top to it. I look over at the living room and see him typing away on his phone. So, I slowly pour some into the mug.

I have no idea how much is enough; I could be killing him with this dose. But that's kinda what I want to do, so the more the better.

Pouring the coffee, I watch the clear liquid disappear. Finishing with the sugar and the creamer, I stir it and close my eyes for a moment to collect myself.

"Let's go, Little Birdie. I don't have all day!" he yells from the living room.

I clench my teeth together. I really hope I put enough in to off him with the first sip.

Dropping the cup in front of him, I watch him pick it up and take a small sip and then another longer pull of the coffee.

"Did good. Seems you can follow some instructions." He takes another long swig. "Even if you are going to be stubborn and not talk."

I sit on the other end of the couch and just pray it's enough to at least knock him out. I have no idea what my next move is, but I just need him incapacitated long enough for me to figure it out.

After about twenty minutes I see him shake his head. He clears his throat and blinks a few times. "Fuck. Why do I feel so out of it?" He looks at his hands for a moment and then to me. "What did you do? What the fuck did you do, you stupid cunt?"

I jump up off the couch and move away from him. He goes to get up but falls back instead. His head hits against the wall with a thud.

And then silence.

I can see his chest rising slowly, so the fucker is still breathing. Shit, what am I going to do? I need to end this. This has to end now. If I leave, he will come find me. I need to make sure he can't ever hurt me or anyone else.

This ends today.

I start looking around me and my eyes fall back to the kitchen. I run to the drawer and pull out the lighter and a smile breaks out along my face for the first time in god only knows.

This fucker is gonna burn.

The workshop.

As quickly as I can, I throw on a jacket hanging near the front door. Immediately I gag, the smell of his cologne fills my nose and turns my stomach. I slip on his boots, my feet swimming in them from the sheer size. Reaching into the pocket to look for gloves, I discover something else. Car keys. Fuck yes! Burn this mother fucker down and get the fuck out of dodge.

I run to the back door and pull it open, praying no alarms sound. I hear nothing, so I bolt down the stairs towards the dungeon. When I get there, the sun illuminates the space enough that I can see in. I start to root around till I find what I'm looking for.

A gas can. A perfect companion to my new friend, the lighter.

I grab a very full can and run back into the house. Carefully, I creep through the door. I let out a sigh of relief when I see Justin's still in the same spot that I left him in.

I walk over to the couch and look down at the can of gas. Time stops for a moment. I can only hear my heart beat in my chest. This is it. My endgame.

Holding out the can, I start pouring, dousing him and the couch that he has raped me and beat me on. I focus on his shriveled diseased sloth dick. I make sure to soak the fuck out of it in the gasoline. I get every inch of the couch and soak his shirt. I create a small trail in front of me where I stand now, about ten feet back.

I toss the can towards the back doors and turn towards my kidnapper. The gasoline stench hits my nose, and I close my eyes for a moment. This is it.

I pull out the lighter, and the sound of the click pulls my eyes to the flame.

Hold on for dear life and fight.

It's now or never. Slowly I lower the lighter to where I drew a line with the gas and light it.

The instant it hits, blue hues mixed with red and orange seek more of the gasoline out. Spreading to the couch where Justin sits completely drugged out of his mind. My eyes watch as the flames surround him, the heat on my skin causing me to take a step back.

In an instant, he is on fire. No sounds come from his unconscious body as his skin burns and the couch around him goes up in crackling, roaring flames. A smile comes over me, a sudden weight lifted off my shoulders.

Smoke billows from the couch. Flames grow with the added punch it needs from the gas. A darkness fills the room as the smoke starts to spread. The smoke alarms start to go off, and I can feel the heaviness in my chest. I start to cough and gasp for air.

Shit! The box!

I run down the hallway to his creep room and over to the desk. I yank the drawer open and grab hold of the box. A sense of relief comes over me as I finally have it back in my hands. I hold it close to my chest as I walk back out into the hall that is now heavily filled with smoke.

I drop to the ground coughing and crawl towards the front door as best I can with the box in my hands. I need to get out of here, fast. There is so much smoke, I am having a hard time breathing through it all. I should've grabbed the box before lighting the asshole on fire.

Way to go on the planning, Nix.

Quickly I turn on my hands and knees and crawl to the back door, but I can't see where it is. The flames have taken over the kitchen, and the smoke is making it hard to see. There is no way out up here. I start to wheeze, and my skin starts to feel like it's burning from the heat. I need to get downstairs. Maybe I can find a way out that way.

My lungs are burning—I need to move fast. I feel along the wall and floor until I get to the stairs. I slide down the stairs and run to the doors on that floor looking for a way out. I drop the box and take a labored breath.

The door I have never been in is locked. I try shoving my body against it, but it doesn't budge.

Fuck!

The smoke down here is starting to thicken, and I know there is no way out of this hell hole from the bathroom. Shit, I'm starting to get light-headed. My lungs are starting to struggle to take in oxygen. I need to get the fuck out of here.

My body feels sluggish, and I'm so tired. I'm hot and sweaty. I muster up what energy I have and drag myself to the bedroom door. Pushing the door open, I immediately shut it behind me, sealing me inside the room. I cough, my lungs feel like they are being torn apart with each breath I try to take.

My head hurts. I feel so dizzy. I need to get out. I look at the big bay window. That's my way out. But I need to just catch my breath for a moment. I need to breathe some clean air.

But the moment my body starts to move, I feel it give out.

And my world goes dark.



Chapter Thirty

DAXON

IT'S BEEN WEEKS. Almost four weeks, to be exact. But it feels like months. Every day drags on, and the darkness of night doesn't seem to end quickly enough. And when it does, it brings on another day without her.

Where the fuck is she?

I'm standing in the courtyard watching students run through the last-minute study sessions as they walk to their final exam. They laugh and joke around. Some students have their heads crammed into their books, while others are making out with their latest hookup. They are going about their lives.

And no one cares.

No one is asking about her, no one is putting up flyers.

No one cares that she's gone.

Except us three.

Everyone's going about their business. They don't even ask about her in her classes. Teachers go through their lessons; they don't call out her name or ask when she's coming back.

She's dropped off the face of the earth, and yet the earth is still turning for everyone.

Everyone, but us.

I run my hand over my face and let out a loud breath. I'm tired. My body is sluggish, my mind is slow, every part of me is ready to sleep for a week straight. But I can't.

We're still trying to track down Justin Luciano. Problem is, he's nowhere to be found. Completely off the grid. We have

staked out at the normal hangouts of the Luciano family. Or at least the places we know of. We haven't seen him once. Wherever he is, he's hidden well.

Everything we do, we have to be careful we are not seen. Mafia and all. They will skin us alive. I've seen what they do to those who cross them, I don't really want to be on the end of that. And I doubt our fathers will do anything to stop it at this point after the fight we are putting up.

Honestly, I keep hoping that we will see Phoenix turn up somewhere. Walk into class. Come up to our dorm. Crawl into my bed. Just show up out of nowhere.

It hurts so very fucking much.

Not being able to know if she's alive, if she's hurt, it's killing me inside. I rub my head; the pounding headache has been a constant reminder of my failures. This is all my fault.

I was so hell-bent on following my father's orders to get her out of the school that I started the ball rolling on all this. This is all because of me. I fucked up and now the best thing that has ever happened to all three of us could be somewhere dead. In a vat of acid. Gone forever.

Because of me.

"Dax!" Mason screams as he comes running up. "I think we found her. I think we fucking found her!"

My mouth opens to speak but nothing comes out. I stand there for a moment completely stunned and unsure if I'm hearing correctly.

His hands grab on to my shoulders and he shakes me. "Dax! Tell me you heard me!"

"Is she okay? How? Where?" My mind is running through every possible scenario for us finding her and what condition she's in.

Please let her be okay.

"Let's go back to the dorm and talk about it there." He looks around, and I turn my head and see some students

staring back at us. Nodding to him, we both take off towards the dorms.

Students part for us as they see us coming. We probably look like we are in a hurry, and we are. Both of us running to get back to the dorm. That is until a blonde roadblock stops us dead in our tracks.

“Daxy!” In an instant, the sound of her voice makes my balls shrivel up and crawl back up inside of me. “Daxy, baby! I’ve missed you!” She jumps towards me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I peel her arms off me and push her back. “Bianca, please fuck off. I’m not in the mood for your shit.” I narrow my eyes at her.

She gasps, “Daxon! How could you say that to me! I am your fiancé.”

“Cut the horse shit. You know the engagement was bullshit. So go on with your day and find a new dick to milk dry. Oh shit, did I say dick? I meant trust fund because no one would want their dick anywhere near your putrid pussy.”

“That shit would make any dick shrivel up and die. Actually, I’m pretty sure being near you right now is doing that. Let me check.” Mason extends the waist band of his pants and takes a look inside. “Yup. Just as I expected. Help Dax! She’s making my dick all wilted and shit.”

“Real cute, Mason. I still have the ring.” She turns back to me. “And I’m not telling anyone that the engagement is off. Because when I find a way to make sure I marry you, you will pay for ever having been this way towards me.”

“Not gonna happen, Bianca.” I start to walk past her.

“It was never the contract. That was all smoke and mirrors. Try all you want, but you have no idea who you’re fucking with when it comes to this arrangement. And I can guarantee when you find out, you will have no choice but to accept your fate, Dax. Same goes to you Mason.” She turns on her heels, her blonde hair fanning out as she walks away.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Mason comes up next to me.

I shake my head. “No idea. But let’s take this shit one problem at a time. Right now, getting to and finding Phoenix is our first priority. We can deal with the thundercunt later.”

As we walk through the door, Colt comes running out of his room. There’s a wild look in his eyes, his hair is messy, and I think he is wearing the same clothes he was yesterday.

“We need to go. It’s a drive.” He quickly turns and runs back into his room, and I follow right behind him. When I get to the threshold of his room, I see him packing up his laptop and other tech shit.

Slowly, I make my way inside. “Wait, hold up. Where is she?” I turn to Mason, who is watching Colt lose his mind over what he’s packing.

“What? Oh. She’s at some location. Maybe a warehouse. I’m guessing it might be a safe house. Not sure.” He stops for a moment and takes a breath. “It’s under the name Trivits.” He continues to pack at a furious pace. “Okay, I think I got everything. We need to move. It’s a good two-hour drive from here, at least.”

“Wait, Trivits? As in Ronald Trivits?” Mason looks at me confused.

Colt nods. “Yep. The one and only.”

“Wait, why is he at a house of Ronald Trivits’?” Mason questions.

“No idea. I didn’t have time to try to figure out the connection. I figured finding her would be more important.”

“Yeah, it is. But that’s just weird. I mean it’s her uncle’s house.” Colt continues to pack, while Mason tries to process the information we were just given.

“Why are you bringing all of that?” I question him.

“If Justin’s there it’s going to be jacked up with security. I need to see if I can hack it. While I’m not a betting man, who do you think might have done the security for it?”

“Langford Tech,” Mason responds.

Colton nods. “It’s at least what I’m hoping. If it is us, it gives me a better chance at bringing it down to get her out. But look, we are going to have to be fast. From the intel I have, he has been leaving for a little bit here and there, so we don’t want to have him come back and find us.”

“How did you get this?” I ask.

“He slipped up. Used his cell phone. He must have had it off or in a Faraday Bag because I’ve been trying to track it. But he did something because he turned it on and used it. He wasn’t where we’re currently going, but he forgot it was on. Or he kept it on for a reason. I don’t know.”

“And you think it’s now where she’s at?” Mason asks.

“It’s ended up at the same place each time. So, yeah. That’s what I’m hoping. It’s the best lead we have had. One I’m willing to risk everything on.”

“Then what are we waiting for. Let’s go.” I run into my room and immediately start stripping out of my uniform. I throw on a black t-shirt and a pair of black tactical pants.

Moving deeper into my closet, I pull my Desert Eagle out of the gun case and grab some ammo and clips. I take out my thigh rig and strap it around my leg and slide the gun into its holster. Wrapping my magazine holster around my ankle, I throw a couple of the magazines in it. I grab my pocketknife and slip that into the pocket.

I lace up my boots and head back towards Colton’s room. I find Mason ready to go as well and Colton just strapping on his waist holster, sliding his Glock G17 into it. All three of us stand there silently for a moment, realizing the possibility that we may find her.

We have no idea what’s waiting for us or if we will make it out alive. But fuck that. Phoenix comes home today. And fuck, I am not the praying type, but I am praying she’s there.

“Let’s go get our girl,” Mason breaks the silence.

Hang on, Phoenix. We’re coming for you.

* * *

We're a few minutes out from the last known place for Justin's phone, the house that Ronald Trivits owned. I'm honestly still trying to understand that connection and why he would bring her to a house her dead uncle owned.

The entire ride has been us going over possible scenarios for us getting her out of wherever she's at. We have no idea what this place is. It could be a warehouse, a house—fuck, it could be a goddamn shed.

My stomach tightens with each passing minute. My heart is getting ready to beat right out of my chest, and my adrenaline is at an all-time high. I'm hyperaware of everything at this point.

And I need to be.

We need to make ourselves aware of our surroundings very quickly. Somehow do it fast and calm, even as ready as I am to just run in there and start shooting. We need to assess everything in order to get Phoenix out of there.

Fuck, please let her be alive. I need her. Please.

I drop my head and close my eyes. Tears are threatening to spill, and I press my fists into my forehead.

"You okay, Dax?" Mason looks over at me as he hauls ass down the highway.

"Yeah, just really hoping she's there."

"Me too, brother. Me too," Mason confesses.

"Hey, so I dug through the records at Langford. I can't find anything for this place we are going to. Nothing. We may not have done the security for this place." Colton types away furiously on his laptop.

"Wait, so can we get in?" I turn back and study him.

"I mean, I don't know. I can hack our systems because I know them. I helped write the programing. This is new

territory for me. I have no idea what I will be setting off if I need to break into their system.” He looks up at me. “This may get hairier than we thought. I mean, I can try, but it may take us considerably longer to turn everything off or see inside.”

“Uh, guys. Is that smoke?” Mason points to black smoke that is billowing into the sky.

“Yeah. That is.” My stomach instantly ties in knots. A foreboding that something isn’t right. “Step on it, Mase.” I look at him, and I can see his eyes widen in fear. He senses it, too.

We pull off the highway to a single lane road, the tires screeching as we follow the signal. As we drive down the road, the black smoke becomes darker and closer to us.

“There’s a dirt road up ahead on your left. Take it,” Colt calls from the back.

Mason whips the car left as the opening comes upon us. I grab hold of the ‘oh shit’ handle and grab the dash in front of me. We fly down the dirt and gravel road taking the turns.

Through the trees I can see the smoke getting closer to us. And I don’t like what I’m thinking.

When we pull up, we find a house burning in the middle of nowhere. No gates, no security, just miles of forest and trees around it. The only clearing is around the house itself. You would never see this from the main road.

All three of us jump out of the SUV and run towards the building. Flames shoot out of the roof, windows are broken, and the smoke is thick and black.

“Call 9-1-1. Get them here fast. Mason, I’m going in to get her. Stay here with Colt in case they find her before I do.”

“No man, I can’t let you go in there alone,” Mason protests.

“Mase.” I grab him by the shoulders. “No. This is happening. Stay here. Please.”

I can see the fight in him, and then the realization that he won’t win this. “Fine. But you better make it out with her.”

I nod and start towards the front door. The heat radiating off this is too much. The handle is so hot to the touch that I burn the back of my hand. I run around and down a hill on the side of the house and find some stairs up to a deck at the back of the house.

Taking two stairs at a time, I run up them as fast as I can and find some sliding doors. I look inside and can see the smoke and flames taking over the rooms. The sliding door isn't shut, and some of the smoke from the fire escapes through the opening. I pull the door open and cover my face with my shirt and arm.

Immediately, the smoke hits me, and I start to cough. I drop lower to the ground and call out her name.

“Phoenix! Where are you? Can you hear me? Are you in here?” Shit. I pull back and step back out to the deck. I can't go in there unless I know she's inside. There's no way to breathe through that.

I run down the stairs and start looking through the windows of the first floor. I reach a window that has its blinds closed. There's a small set of windows above next to the closed off ones, which could possibly be part of a bathroom. And there's no way I can get up there or through them.

The fire pops and sizzles on the floor above, and the heat is causing me to sweat even with the cold in the air. I look up at the deck above me, seeing the fire hasn't reach it yet. And I'm hoping if she can, she can make it out that way.

I grab my chest as I start coughing. The smell of the burning wood, the smoke, still surround me. I run to the next window under the deck. And that's when my heart stops.

Phoenix.

She's laying there, her body not moving on the bed. I bang on the window trying to wake her up. My heart starts to twist, and a pain shoots through it.

“Phoenix! Baby! Wake up! Come on, sweetheart! I need you to wake up!” I bang harder on the window. Fuck! I look around me for something to break it with. There's nothing

around where I'm standing. I glance up and notice another building next to the house with the doors open.

Immediately, I run across the yard and inside the building. The minute I step inside, I come to a halt. Bile rises in my throat at the visual in front of me. There are chains on the floor, what looks like blood stains in some spots. Torn clothing sits near the chains and there's empty plates with a bucket in the corner.

Oh my God, was Phoenix in here? Please tell me she wasn't in this room. My eyes try to blink the images away, but they don't go anywhere.

Fuck.

I clutch my stomach and try to shake the thoughts of her in this room. Focus. I need to focus. Looking around, I look for anything that can help me break the window. Spotting a shovel, I grab that from the hook and take off running towards the window I saw her at.

She still hasn't moved and everything in me is filled with the fear that she's not alive.

Please be alive, sweetheart.

I swing the shovel towards the corner of the window, and it breaks easily. I start working the rest of the glass and smashing it away to clear us a path to get out of here.

Clearing the shards from the bottom and around the sides, I have a pretty good size hole to get us out of here. I throw the shovel down to the ground and slowly climb through the window, trying carefully not to cut myself.

Once through, I immediately run to her limp figure on the bed. I check her pulse, finding it's weak, but she's still breathing. Her skin is covered in soot. She was probably up top when it broke out.

"Phoenix, sweetheart. Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes for me? Come on, Spitfire. Open your eyes for me," I beg.

She doesn't move. No response at all from her. She has completely blacked out. My guess would be from all the smoke and lack of oxygen. Even just being around the smoke, my lungs burn and hurt. The house around me starts to creak and pop. I slide my arm under her head and then my other under her legs.

She's lighter than before. I can feel her bones against mine. She's lost weight, a lot of it. As I take a closer look, I can see bruises on her pale skin. Marks on her cheek, on her neck. Cuts on her lips, a black circle around her eyes.

What the fuck did he do to her?

He's a dead man. A fucking dead man.

My thoughts are interrupted by a loud boom and sudden tearing coming from above the windows. Without a second thought, I instinctively turn us away from the window.

Glass shards spray around us as I use my body to shield her fragile one from it all. Once the glass settles, I slowly turn and find our way out is no longer an option. Fuck me.

The boom must have been from the floor above and it looks like whatever fell from that, fell onto the deck above us, crashing it down. The debris not only broke the window, but it blocked us in.

My mind goes into overdrive, I need to find us another way out. I place her in the corner far away from the window and prop her against the wall.

I kiss her forehead. "I'm sorry. So fucking sorry."

I run over to the door and touch the back of my hand to the handle. It's cool. I get low to the ground as I slowly open it. My stomach sinks at the scene in front of me.

The hallway is filled with smoke, and I can see the fire raging above us. We are fucking trapped. Fuck. How the fuck am I getting her out? I quickly shut the door and run to the bed and pull off the sheet and roll it up and shove it against the gap in the door to hopefully keep the smoke from outside getting in. But then I remember what I'm up against.

Of course, that debris outside the window isn't going to make things any better. Shit, shit, shit. There's no way to stop the smoke filling the room from the window.

I pick up my phone and call Mase.

"Dude where the fuck are you?" Mason yells as soon as he picks us up. "Tell me she's not in that!"

"Good news and bad news, brother."

"Now's not the time for games, Dax. What the fuck?"

"I have her. She's in a room on the first floor towards the back. But I'm also here. And our way out is completely blocked. We're trapped, man. And I don't think I can get her out of here." My voice wavers for a moment. Emotion stuck in my throat as I come to the realization of our fates at this moment. I let out a succession of coughs, my throat starting to dry up.

"Figure out a way to get out, Dax!" he screams into the phone.

"Mase, we're trapped. I tried. We are literally backed into a corner. We can't get out. The deck collapsed." I run my hand through my hair. My heart starts to beat wildly as panic starts to set in.

The room suddenly seems so much smaller. My chest tightens at the realization that we may not make it out alive.

"Dax! Dax! Fuck! Daxon!" Mason screams through the phone snapping me out of my haze.

"Mase," is all I can respond with. I start coughing again.

"Just hang on. You need to hang on!"

"I don't know how to get out. They won't get here in time," I choke out. "I failed her again."

"No! No! Just hang on. We are going to get you out! We will get you out! They're coming! You just need to hang on! Please!"

"Love you, Mase. You and Colt are my brothers. I'm sorry I couldn't save her for you guys. I'm so sorry this is all

happening.”

“Dax, No! Wait—” I hang up on him and turn to Phoenix, who is still unconscious.

I position her so that she’s laying down on the floor. I slowly sit and then lay down next to her. Pulling her close to me, I wrap my body as much as I can around her. I need to touch her. I need to feel her.

My hand covers her heart, and I feel it beating under my hand. I close my eyes and send up a silent prayer that someone will save her. I couldn’t give a shit about me, but she doesn’t deserve any of this. She doesn’t deserve this life she was given. She deserves happiness, love, a life full of amazing things.

I definitely don’t deserve her. After everything I’ve done. The pain I’ve caused her. I deserve death. Not her.

My hand slides up, and I cup her face. Bending my head towards her, my lips meet hers.

Slowly, I pull back. “Phoenix, sweetheart, I need you to know something.”

My voice gets hoarse. I feel a lump in my throat that is barely containing the emotion that wants to pour out of me.

“I love you. Fuck, sweetheart, I burn for you. My heart came alive the minute you stepped into my life. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I’m sorry I didn’t protect you. This is all my fault. I’m sorry we might not get our forever. I love you, Phoenix. Until my last breath, I will fucking love you.”

Tears spill from my eyes as I watch over her. The house pops and cracks around us as we breathe what could be our last breaths.

Smoke is still pouring in through the window that’s broken. The pit in my stomach tells me we don’t have much time. No one will make it in time to save us.

Placing my head against her chest, I listen to her heartbeat. As long as it’s beating, she’s still here.

Thump, thump, thump.

“To anyone listening, please take me first. I don’t think I could live a second knowing she’s not on this earth with me anymore. Just take me, spare her. Let Mason and Colton love her. Just don’t let me live without her.”

Thump, thump, thump.

With my eyes closed and my head on her chest, I pull myself as close as I can to her. Her heartbeat drowning out the noise around me of the inferno that blazes around us.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you, Phoenix. I let you down again. I love you. God, I wish you could hear me tell you. I fucking love you.”

The smoke starts to get thicker in the room, and I begin to cough more. I pull her shirt up over her nose and mouth and caress her face.

“We aren’t gonna make it, baby. I’m so sorry. I love you. Fuck, I’m so sorry.” I take one last look at her. Memorizing everything about her. I lean in and kiss her forehead.

Her eyes flutter open and lock on to mine.

“Phoenix!” I pull the shirt down off her face and kiss her lips. The house continues to pop around us, the room is continuing to fill up with smoke.

Her eyes slowly close and she lets out a long breath.

“No. No! Don’t you dare go. Listen to me. I’m right here. You need to hang on. Fight, Phoenix. Fucking fight!” My lungs burn and I start to cough, it’s getting harder to breath. “Come on, sweetheart. Wake up for me.”

I lower my head down to her chest. Tears continue to pour from my eyes, they burn from the smoke. My head is spinning, the lack of oxygen starting to make me feel light headed.

My vision starts to tunnel, and I close my eyes. And as I start to feel the darkness pull me under, I swear I hear the voice of an angel next to me.

“Dax...”

A note from Lynn

So, yeah. Left it on another cliffhanger. I know, I know. I am so sorry. But it had to be done.

Two years ago, when I had this series floating in my mind, I knew how *From the Ashes* and *From the Darkness* would end. I always knew it would be a three book series. I love these characters. They have been engrained in my head for years now, and I am so happy I finally get to tell their story.

But what took me by surprise is the love you all have for them as well. I have received so many messages from you, the readers, with nothing but love and excitement for this series. I cannot thank you enough, you have no idea how much it means to me.

I promise that *From the Flames* is the final book in the series and I will not leave that on a cliffhanger. I know the book is on the Zon with a September release date. Please know, it will be out much sooner than that. I just needed to give myself enough time to wrap the series up and make sure I leave no stone unturned. These characters deserve a great ending to their story, and I intend on giving it to them.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for joining me on this wild ride and for the outpouring of love. None of this would be possible without you.

-Lynn Rhys



From the Flames

And just as the Phoenix rose from the ashes, she too will rise. Returning from the flames, clothed in nothing but her strength, more beautiful than ever before.

SHANNEN HEARTZ

[Pre-order From the Flames](#)

To get up to date information and teasers on this release, make sure to stalk me!
Join:

[Lynn Rhys' Dungeon of Darkness](#)



Time to Review

“You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.” - Wayne Gretzky

(also Michael Scott - The Office... ha!)

So using the wisdom of Gretzky and Scott, please leave me a review!

[Amazon](#)

[Goodreads](#)

Want to talk about Daxon, Mason, and Colton some more?
Join my facebook group: [Lynn Rhys' Dungeon of Darkness](#)



Acknowledgments

To my street and ARC teams: Thank you. Thank you for supporting me and rooting for me. Thank you for taking the time to read this series and share your love for Phoenix and the Kings of Darkwood. Thank you for being my cheerleaders.

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My family and friends: Thank you for continuing to support my dream. It means the world to me. I love you all.

My readers: Simply put, thank you. I love reading messages from you, hearing how much you love the books and characters. Your continued support drives

me to keep bringing you these worlds to get lost in. Love you all.

My PA, Chanel Johnson: My smut slut, I don't know what I would do without you. You are fucking amazing. And I don't know how I would have survived all this without you. And I'm not just talking books. Thank you for being that support I need, whenever I need it. But also, let me give you a warning: You can never get rid of me now. Ha! Thank you for everything, Chanel. I love you.

My editor, Ashley Olivier: Every time I send you a book, I know it's in good hands. I know you love my book baby as if it's your own. Your support, feedback, and friendship is something I value more than I can ever explain. You get my writing, you get my characters, and you understand me. Thank you so much for all the hard work you do on my books. I couldn't have asked for a better partner to help me bring my stories to the book world.

About Lynn

I dislike writing about myself. I prefer to write about my characters in their own little world. It's much easier to write about them, then it is me.

You know in school when the teacher has you introduce yourself to everyone and tell little fun factoids about you? Yeah, this little section is just that for me. There is nothing that exciting about me.

Well, except that I love karaoke and Fireball. Oh, and Bloody Marys.

Also maybe that I love reading. Living in Las Vegas has it's advantages too.

I am a complete introvert, unless Fireball is in the mix and then I become a very extroverted introvert.

I love writing. Which, I would think this would be fairly well known by now. I mean, my books give that little tidbit away.

Here's another fun fact: I majored in Architecture. I was so hell bent on being coming an architect. Guess what, I am one of those statistics that did not use her degree. Though to be fair, I graduated after the recession, so really it was just bad timing.

But I guess everything happens for a reason. (Another fact: That is one of my favorite sayings.) If it wasn't for the recession, I wouldn't be where I am now. It led me down a different path, and that allowed me to get to the point of being able to write my first book.

There is something about bringing to life the characters and stories that live in the mind.

Well, as I said. There is nothing that exciting about me. I am just a little Indie Author who lives in Las Vegas and talks to her characters.

Follow me on the socials!



Also by Lynn Rhys

From the Ashes

Dear Mom,

Why wasn't I enough? Why did you and Dad forget you had me to take care of and love? I miss you.

Do you even know where I ended up? Let me tell you.

At the gates of Hell.

And I wish I was being dramatic, but Darkwood Academy is just that. A literal Hell for me.

I'm constantly bullied and tormented by the students here. And they're relentless in their pursuit to get rid of me. All because they take directions from the Kings of Darkwood.

Yeah, I laughed too. Who calls themselves that?

But Daxon, Mason, and Colton are three guys who have made it their mission to make my life hell. They run this school, and I seem to be in their way. Why not get everyone to gang up on me?

I just wish you were here. I have no one to turn to, no one to talk to. You selfishly left me. Left me to live this life alone.

And that's what I am, Mom. Alone.

I hope you're watching over me from above. I know I'm looking up to you.

Because now more than ever, I need a guardian angel.

Love,

Phoenix.

Trigger warning: This book ends in a cliffhanger and is part of a Why Choose series. Please be advised that this book contains strong subject matter that may not be suitable for all readers. This book contains scenes that may depict, mention, or discuss: anxiety, blood, bullying, death, depression, emotional abuse, self-harm, slut shaming, stalking, suicide, and violence. There is profanity and sexual situations. Reader discretion is advised.

Scars on My Heart

For my entire life, my weight and looks have been a hot topic of conversation with my family. I've never felt perfect, never felt like I was enough or even worthy of love. That all changed when I met my husband, Scott. I finally had someone that saw me for who I was, not a number on a scale.

Or so I thought. But then my husband left me for someone more beautiful, someone skinnier. It broke me.

Newly divorced and ready to find myself, I venture out into my single life.

And everything was fine. Until, I met Dr. Nathaniel Bennett. *Of course* I was attracted to him, but he would never see anything in me. I was the big girl. I had flaws. Nothing could ever happen between us.

Oh, and he's also my boss.

Trigger warning: This book contains strong subject matter that may not be suitable for all readers. This book contains scenes that may depict, mention, or discuss bullying, cheating, childbirth, divorce, emotional abuse, infertility, pregnancy, and suicide. There is profanity and sexual situations. Reader discretion is advised.

[Safe With Me](#)

I ran from a monster. A monster I thought was gentle and kind. A monster I thought loved me. I was wrong. So very wrong.

I took a bus out west and landed in a small town in Wyoming. Ryker, the town's sheriff, has been helping me to settle in. But I can't get that comfortable, even if things seem quiet around here.

I'll keep looking over my shoulder, no matter how safe Ryker thinks he can keep me. I know the monster is waiting in the shadows.

Trigger warning: This book contains strong subject matter that may not be suitable for all readers. The topics in this book involve domestic violence, abuse, sexual abuse, profanity and sexual situations. Reader discretion is advised.

[Neighbors](#)

Long ago I learned not to trust people. They are cruel and thrive off hurting others. I was one of those other people. Always the outsider, always the loner. So, I've just learned to keep it that way. I became a recluse, an introvert. If I'm alone, I don't have to worry about getting hurt again.

But then Bryce, who turns out to be my neighbor, came into my life. He flipped my entire world upside down. Every part of me is screaming to turn tail and run. Find a corner to hide in because people can't be trusted.

So why am I not? What is it that draws me to him? What makes him different?

After all the pain and torment I've been through in my life, I'm risking everything I have left in my soul by letting him in. As I bring down my walls, I pray I'll be able to survive the inevitable fallout.

Trigger warning: May contain triggering content for some readers. Neighbors is a friends to lovers romance book. 80,000+ words. This is a standalone novel with a HEA.

[What Led Me to You](#)

After graduation, I thought I would have the life I had always dreamed of. But like everything else, it was taken away from me. The people I trusted the most, betrayed me. So, I took the pieces of my broken heart and left Las Vegas. New state, new surroundings, new beginnings.

I was always told, when one door closes, another one opens. Taking the job as a nanny for Alex and his daughter was my new beginning. A fresh start and the closure I desperately needed. Except, just when I think I can move on and enjoy life, my past comes knocking. It's ready to take everything away from me, again.

I thought I was safe and I thought I could start my life over.

I was wrong.

[The Christmas Bet](#)

Allison

This is my favorite time of year. The holiday season is upon us, and I can't wait to celebrate it. After a recent breakup with yet another guy that I just couldn't see my forever with, I plan on just focusing on getting through the holiday with those around me.

Well that was the plan, until a cocky yet very handsome man came into the picture.

Conner is arrogant and pushy. He cornered me into a date with him, even convincing my best friend, Lacy, that it was a good idea.

But behind his very egotistical attitude, is actually a very sweet guy. There's something different about him. Something I didn't see in the other men I dated, a future.

Could Conner be my forever? Is he 'the one'?

Conner

Some call me a bachelor, and some call me a playboy, but really, my life is just too complicated to be tied down. Then I walked into the bar and saw her sitting there. The beautiful blonde captivated me. But I don't do relationships and I don't fall in love. I'd never be able to give her the attention she'd deserve. I'm not the settling down type.

Well, until my friends bet me that I couldn't get a woman to fall in love with me before Christmas. Of course, I had to prove them wrong.

So now I have to get her to fall in love with me—and never find out about the bet.

The Christmas Bet is a holiday romance novella with some adult situations. Reader discretion is advised.